

# THE REAL, OR NON-REAL PURPOSE OF OUR EXISTENCE

BRAND SMIT



**The real, or non-real  
purpose of our  
existence**

BRAND SMIT

© 2018 Barend J. L. Smit

All rights reserved  
First edition 2018

Cover: *The Fight Between Carnival and Lent*, by Pieter  
Bruegel the Elder (1559)

# CONTENTS

<a href="#"><u>INTRODUCTION</u></a>	6
<a href="#"><u>Blonde meditation</u></a>	9
<a href="#"><u>Convinced of a specific reason for your existence – or not</u></a>	15
<a href="#"><u>The purpose of my life</u></a>	17
<a href="#"><u>Just another piece of writing</u></a>	37
<a href="#"><u>[THE BIG UNTITLED]</u></a>	43
<a href="#"><u>Results of a life</u></a>	59
<a href="#"><u>Identity, the SELF, and the result of everything</u></a>	61
<a href="#"><u>The formula that leads to result</u></a>	65
<a href="#"><u>Concoction full of thoughts</u></a>	66
<a href="#"><u>Lose yourself, or apply yourself</u></a>	67
<a href="#"><u>Some afterthoughts to “Lose yourself or apply yourself”</u></a>	70
<a href="#"><u>Lose yourself, or be yourself ...</u></a>	72
<a href="#"><u>Desert or city   A principle</u></a>	74
<a href="#"><u>To APPEAR or to DISAPPEAR</u></a>	75
<a href="#"><u>Purpose of existence, three sets of comments</u></a>	77
<a href="#"><u>In case anyone has forgotten</u></a>	80
<a href="#"><u>Planet filled with purpose and reason</u></a>	81
<a href="#"><u>Ability to serve a purpose   Totalitarian state</u></a>	83
<a href="#"><u>The purpose of existence 310305.doc</u></a>	84
<a href="#"><u>Everything revolves around the POINT</u></a>	88
<a href="#"><u>Value for only a few other people</u></a>	90
<a href="#"><u>Worthy of existence   Teleology   Reasonable philosophy</u></a>	91
<a href="#"><u>Value in the Greater View of Things</u></a>	94
<a href="#"><u>Not everyone is important</u></a>	96
<a href="#"><u>The kind of adults we become</u></a>	97
<a href="#"><u>Statements and questions   Four goals</u></a>	101
<a href="#"><u>To leave something behind</u></a>	103
<a href="#"><u>A life that serves a purpose   Intelligent, creative agent – or agents</u></a>	105

<u>A shameful, embarrassing approach to life</u>	109
<u>Purpose and reason – at least three possibilities</u>	111
<u>I decide the purpose of my existence</u>	112
<u>Three broad possibilities for how you can live your life</u>	113
<u>Drenched with specific purpose and function</u>	115
<u>Result, Process, Identity and Happiness</u>	117
<u>Much to be learned from a cat (and a cat doesn't even try to teach you anything)</u>	119
<u>What you live for, and what you die for – a few short notes</u>	121
<u>Old ghosts, or sleeping dogs</u>	123
<u>The real or not real purpose of our existence</u>	124
<u>Everybody wants to reach a point</u>	127
<u>Point, and what makes my life worthwhile</u>	128

# INTRODUCTION

## **Who is the writer?**

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

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

Worked in Johannesburg for six months in 1998.

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

## **What is this collection of notes about?**

NOVEMBER 2001

I am consumed with questions: What are we? Why do we do what we do? Why do we live the way we do? What is “happiness”? What does it mean to be “unhappy”? What do people do to be “satisfied”? Are there noticeable universal patterns? What does it mean to live a “meaningful life”? How do we live meaningful lives? What is the nature of a human being? Needs, desires, goals ... I can’t devote my life to making money while being consumed by these questions. I am driven to find answers. I can’t ignore them.

Despite my obsession I have to continue playing by the rules. I have to buy food and groceries, pay rent and water and electricity, and so on. I can’t fulfil my needs by living in a cave, and by going hunting, or maybe by cultivating my own patch of land – not in the world in which I live, anyway.

I have long since learned that what I need is available, as long as I have something to exchange for the food I want to eat, and the clothes I want to wear. What I need is credit. How do you get credit? By either producing a product for a market,

or by delivering a service. That's why I get up at 6:45 every morning – so I can provide a service to obtain credit in the form of cash, which can then be exchanged for what I need. Whether I enjoy my service is of secondary importance – I have to do it.

But still I am consumed with what I don't know or understand. Can something like a purpose be attributed to human life? Maybe, maybe not. All I know is that if there is a purpose but you fail to fulfil it, the regret you'll experience later in life would feel like a ton of bricks on your shoulders.

AUGUST 1999

Life is a struggle for a higher existence. Your daily life is a series of actions and choices that result in you either advancing to an improved existence, or where you go backwards. The concrete meaning of this higher existence varies from person to person. The process of defining your specific Higher Existence is part of your struggle.

\* \* \*

A man sits on his porch smoking a cigarette. He's contemplating life and asks himself The Question. He has abandoned the doctrines of his youth, and now looks at his own life experiences and all the knowledge he has gained so far to see if that can offer him any answers. He will find it: in his own experience, the knowledge he has acquired, in himself, and in other people. For just as he searches, from the essence of his nature and driven by his instincts, so others are searching, as well.

No one possesses perfect knowledge, but listen to a hundred people, and you will receive a hundred pieces of information that form part of the whole. Many pieces of knowledge will overlap, and there are many people who simply recite what they have been taught. Then there are libraries filled with books written by people generations or

centuries ago who had some degree of knowledge of the Truth, even though this knowledge has become obscure or has even been lost and forgotten.

Sometimes you'll find someone – through a personal encounter, or by reading a story or an article or a news bulletin, or by watching a movie or listening to someone's music – who has contemplated his or her own experiences for long enough to have obtained what can be called More Profound Knowledge. In the same way, if he is sincere in his search, the man on the porch will also find peace about the meaning of his particular life.

OCTOBER 1999

I like to say that I want to be an expert on something. But an expert on what? History? Philosophy? Psychology? Simple fact is that I'd have to read what I can on all these subjects. That is the only way to answer a question that I have been obsessed with my entire adult life: What makes life worth living for the average person in the modern world?



## Blonde meditation

January 2000

The whole episode started Saturday morning when I received a call from W., a local businesswoman who had helped me find a job when I arrived in Taiwan. She had just returned from a trip to South Africa, she said, with a South African woman who was now working for a partner of hers in a neighbouring city. But the woman had a few problems, and could I please go with her and her husband to talk to the woman. I was obviously excited. I always thought it would be nice if there were a few more South Africans in the area. And W. mentioned the woman was blonde ...

So I went along to meet the woman.

The moment I saw her, I knew something was wrong. Her hands were shaking, she was pale, and she was clearly overjoyed to see someone who could possibly help her. She explained that she was unhappy with her work situation, and that she wasn't keen on staying in the same house with her boss and his family. And these and those promises were made that haven't been met.

Other people might have seen dollar symbols flash before their eyes (a lot of money can be made if you introduce a foreign teacher to a school looking for one). While she was talking, I saw the Rider in Black. I fantasised how my mouth turned into a well-oiled revolver, how I fired a few arguments in the direction of the villains, and how by sunset the blonde woman and I would be on the train back to Fengshan.

After spending an entire afternoon arguing back and forth, we came to the point where W.'s partner, "Honest" Jimmy, made a suggestion: If I guaranteed they would not lose the money they had paid to get the woman to Taiwan, they would "release" her in my care.

By that point I had been speaking on behalf of the woman for hours, and I realised if I did not agree, my whole effort to

help her would appear as ridiculous as an empty Colt in a shootout. So I agreed: I guaranteed that, if she ended up not working for them, I would personally make sure that they get back the NT\$40,000 they had already spent on her.

The blonde woman packed her bags, and a few minutes later we left.

Back in Fengshan I phoned my friend O., the only other South African I knew at that point in Taiwan, and informed him of the growing number of compatriots in our town. Fifteen minutes later he was standing in my living room, and while still shaking hands, he almost surpassed my own heroism by agreeing to lend her the NT\$40,000 and to help her find a new job.

The blonde woman was on the verge of shedding tears of joy. Two heroes! In one day!

On Sunday we made a few calls, and I criss-crossed the city with her on the back of my scooter to organise an alternative position for her. By nightfall, we had made some appointments with schools that she would visit on Monday. We also paid O. a visit. He collected the promised amount of cash from his drawer and handed it over.

Monday lunchtime I took the woman to W. to inform her that we had managed to find some other work for my compatriot, and, as I understand it, for her to hand W. and her partners the forty thousand. W.'s husband, who doesn't speak a word of English, listened carefully to what we were saying, and to W. as she translated. When he reckoned we had finished talking, he got up from his chair and started screaming at us with a fury I had not known he possessed.

I turned pale, and the woman turned pale, and in the few moments of silence that followed the eruption I tried my best to work out what we had done wrong. W. explained it was not what they had expected of me. Because they had asked me to go along, I was supposed to be on their side. And they had done so much for me, and they were my friends, and I don't even know the woman, and how could I have betrayed them like that.

As I came to understand it, I was supposed to use the Sunday to persuade the woman that W. and her partners were good people, and that working for them would be the right thing to do. And Mr S., W.'s husband, was angry at me because I had given my support to the wrong side.

The situation took an even worse turn. I was informed that I couldn't expect any more assistance from them in my application to renew my work permit and residence visa. That they would go even further and would obstruct my application in any way they could.

I wanted to tell them if it were about the money, the woman could repay them on the spot. But she herself said nothing. Only later did she inform me she was "keeping her options open". (Her plan seemed to have been to borrow NT\$40,000 from a school where she hoped to get a job and then return the money to O.)

The next few days were stressful. I had to replace certain documents, and the only people who could help me were the very people I had alienated – W. and her husband, the screaming Mr S. refused to provide any assistance, as per their threat.

The blonde woman had since moved in with O., as she was of the opinion that the atmosphere in my apartment had become "negative". Both O. and I had by then become aware that she had a bit of an esoteric outlook on life. She regularly studied the alignment of the stars, unpacked her Tarot cards on her bed to see how the situation would work out, and often sat on her pillow to try to make contact with the Silence That Reveals The Truth. The atmosphere in my apartment was therefore more than the expected result of a tense situation; it was negative in ways an ordinary mortal would not understand.

By the following week, I had had enough. I called her and told her that she had to hand over the forty thousand to W. and her husband, so I could replace the documents I needed. She casually responded that she had no intention of giving them

the money before they gave her the return ticket they had bought for her in South Africa.

I explained that I had helped her to get out of a bad situation, and the least she could do for me was to resolve her business with them. She replied that she was not going to harm herself because of me, and that she had in fact not asked for my assistance. And to illustrate that she was done talking, she hung up before I could continue debating the point with her.

By the end of that week, O. flew to South Africa for a holiday, hoping of course that the woman would find a job in the meantime so he could get his money back.

Less than a week later she was also on a plane back to South Africa – with a ticket she had bought with the forty thousand.

He later told me she had gotten in contact with him in Cape Town. She gave him a cheque for the money she had borrowed from him, and immediately asked whether she could borrow the money again so she could go back to Taiwan. He kindly refused the request.

I have only heard from her once since her escape. In a bizarre, cryptic email she expressed her surprise about how things had worked out.

\* \* \*

The episode reminded me of a few things. You meet someone in need. Your first instinct is to help the person. Noble, right? Complicated as the situation is, it causes trouble for you with other people. Three days later your nerves are shot. You decide to take steps to improve your own situation, and the person you tried to help sticks her finger in your eye. She's surprised that you expect anything from her. And to rub salt in the wound, she reminds you that it was after all your choice to get involved. And then she hangs up on you.

All you can do is to sit on your chair and flick through fifty TV channels looking for something else to think about.

So it came that I found myself on my own meditation cushion, ready to be filled with Insight That Is Revealed To One Who Pities Himself. Legs crossed, hands in my hair, I wondered: Why am I on my own?

It is certainly true that to a large extent we are responsible for our own situations. Was it not, after all, my choice to get involved in the blonde woman's predicament? The conclusion should then be that I am responsible for my own isolation, my own loneliness.

Like everyone else I meet new people every now and then. But it is as if a higher power only causes people to come into my life who cannot or do not bring comfort to this seemingly eternal fate. And this higher power knows with what I was confronted again this week: my own vulnerability – how weak and helpless I truly am.

I have managed to work out a few things in my life. If I have to make preliminary conclusions, the bigger picture is not exactly rosy. It seems as though the divine judge of my father and mother's religion is not really involved in the world he created (according to legend). Is it everyone for themselves, then? On this point there is also no clarity.

So here I sit, trapped in a paradox: on the face of it no justice, but don't dare do what you want, because "Karma's gonna get you." And if it's not karma, then some or other form of justice to even out the scales.

I am tired of this puzzle where none of the pieces fit. For years now I've been sitting with a hammer under my table. Because no matter what I do, the pieces just won't fit like puzzles are supposed to. And I tell people my ambitious effort to make sense of everything on my own is making good progress. I cut my pieces carefully, and my puzzle is not as big as it was when I believed like a child, but it's coming on. And this time it is my puzzle.

But every time I return to the table with my puzzle, the pieces have pushed themselves apart! That's when I bring out the hammer. Because if it isn't *these* pieces in *this* way, then how? For god only knows I can't do without a puzzle! I must

make sense of the world outside my window. But I'm tired of rhetoric and argument! I'm tired of theology and philosophy, and fancy explanations!

Just give me a little comfort, for once! Like the waitress in the diner on the Roger Waters CD who asks if the guy wants coffee, and who then apologises because she woke him up, or talked too loud.

I'm working on plans that could possibly give me an okay life two or three years from now. That speaks of hope, doesn't it?

Or are things like they've always been? You get older, you learn more about life, maybe in a few years' time you can buy something you don't even know about now, and life goes on. And it's never as good as you constantly tell yourself. And yet, we continue rowing like fools until a wave smashes us against the coast, or until we float to the middle of a vast ocean.

Perhaps Nero had the right idea. Instead of trying to save Rome, he played the violin. Maybe we need to dance more, and make more music. Maybe we should spend even more time thinking about things. Maybe we should keep meditating until we imagine an entire table filled with a puzzle where all the pieces fit. "What a nice, colourful picture that is!" we'll eventually mutter. A bottle-blonde answer to the drabness of our reality.

I finally fell asleep on my meditation cushion, and dreamed of a blonde woman standing on the street corner selling second-hand violins. And I dreamed I borrowed money from "Honest" Jimmy, bought myself one of the violins, and played a tune to W. and her husband while O. chased them down the street with burning plane tickets in his hand.

## **Convinced of a specific reason for your existence – or not**

March 2000

I get the feeling, when I look back over the last months I spent in Korea and what I wrote and believed then, that I am still missing the point. I said then I was idling, that I was waiting for the light to turn green. (I kept myself occupied with reading and watching videos. Now I just keep myself busy more productively.)

Last Friday my scooter's brakes failed. It could have happened at any time during that morning, and in 80% of the cases it would have had serious consequences. But at the specific time and place where it happened, I was in virtually no danger. And since this was not the first time that something bad could have happened to me but didn't, I wondered: Why?

That made me think again of the idea of a calling ... or more specifically, the idea or feeling that *I* have some special calling, that there's something that I have to do – a reason for being.

I sometimes spend the best hours of my days and nights thinking – about the world, about life, about the meaning of things, the meaning of my own life, the mystery of why I am like I am and why I do what I do, and why I've made the choices that have brought me where I am today. It's like I'm a detective who's constantly looking for clues, whether I am aware of it or not. Sometimes it's just a word that gets stuck in my mind. Sometimes it's a monologue at the end of a movie. Sometimes it is something that someone doesn't say. Other times something happens, or I do something that has no apparent value, and there it is again – another clue, another part of the puzzle, as if I need to understand.

I have often daydreamed about my ideal life, and usually it starts with money – to be financially independent, to be able to do what I want to do, where I want to do it, for as long as I

want to do it. Perhaps having more than enough money is an essential part of the process, so you can devote your daily life to whatever might be the reason you are still alive, without depending on others for the fulfilment of your daily needs and without being forced to degrade yourself to honouring petty conventions to be accepted by a particular community.

Still I wonder if this is as good as it gets. Or am I still waiting for a sign, a word to which I would respond that I now understand, to then dedicate the rest of my life to what I will see as my true calling?

All this implies belief in a Supreme Being. If you don't believe in the existence of such a being ... well, then it boils down to you keeping yourself occupied in such a way that you develop and maintain an awareness of well-being. And to think of other motivations for what you do – perhaps to be remembered when everything is over, or to have no regrets in your last minutes about what you did or did not do.

If you therefore believe in a reason for your existence, what would this reason be? And if you are not convinced of any specific reason for your existence, how does this affect your choices and outlook on life?



# The purpose of my life

February 2001

An Honest Attempt At Solving A Nasty Problem/A Preliminary Investigation Into The Purpose And Meaning Of Life, And What We Have To Do To Lead Fulfilling And Happy Lives

## PART ONE

~ An Ode to the Movies ~

“Real life is not like in the movies where you get a realisation and your life changes the next day. In real life, you get a realisation, and your life changes a month later.” ~ From *Postcards from the Edge*

A few days ago, at a quarter past one in the morning, I gave myself a deadline: at half-past one, I had to have an answer to the question of what I want to do with my life. I took up position on the porch, and smoked a cigarette. Half-past one came and half-past one went, as expected, with no progress in my investigation. Help, or inspiration, would have been welcomed with an open mind.

A film I had seen a few months ago came to mind as a possible indication of how to look for an answer. The film is about a bunch of software engineers, and how they struggle with the question of the value of their lives. (As it happened, one character is a little more obsessive about the topic.) During one conversation, they discuss the difference between what they are doing with their lives, and what everyone would consider being more ideal for them. In other words, if they don't have to while away at least eight hours per day, five days per week in office cubicles for an income, what would they do with their time? One character mentions that a teacher once

asked them what they would do with a million dollars. The answer, in theory, would have given them an indication of what career they should follow. For example, if one had said he would fix old cars then that was supposed to mean he should become a mechanic. (Don't you get the impression sometimes that life is a white elephant? Someone gave you this thing we call "life", but you're not sure what to do with it and throwing it away is not an option.)

Inspired by this bit of advice, I asked myself the following question: If I had a million dollars, how would I spend my days and nights?

Now, this happens to be a cloud upon which I often fall asleep at night, and preliminary answers are always the same – buy my parents a large house and give them enough money so they can retire, give my two sisters enough money so they'd never have to worry about money again, buy myself an old building, travel for at least six months, see all the places I've always wanted to see, build up an international network of lovers ... and then I usually fall asleep.

After an hour or so of considering what I would do with a million dollars, I could not come up with a better answer than the usual line-up. I knew these are all short-term goals. If I'm done buying houses and giving away boatloads of money, the goals are no longer valid.

So let's say my parents and my sisters are comfortable for the rest of their lives, I've seen the world, and I've built up an international reputation, how will I keep myself busy? Or maybe I should go further and ask, what shall I do to give meaning to my life?

I then thought of another movie where some suburban fellows from a big city reckon it will do them good to chase cattle across the plains. During this adventure, they meet an old cowboy. One of the city folk, who is also contemplating the Big Question, thinks an old cattle man ought to know the answer. The latter ponders for a moment, then raises a single finger in the air. "One thing," he says. The city guy waits with bated breath for the rest of the answer. When the rancher fails

to finish his sentence, he asks him what the one thing is. “You’ve got to figure that out for yourself,” the old man replies.

My own views made me comfortable with the idea, so my sights have increasingly been set on identifying a single thing. In fact, the One Thing Theory has become an almost dogmatic part of my thought processes on the Higher Questions of Life. I was convinced that, whatever the answer, it can only be one thing.

By the time I went to bed (at about half-past four), I had an idea: to start a business that sells documentaries, music videos, travel programs and films on DVD, maybe a mail order business so I don’t have to sit in a store every day of the week. This would cover my interests in history, music, movies and current affairs. I also thought if I had to tell people this is my ambition, the goal I want to pursue, they would find it acceptable; it would sound like the kind of response they would want to give if anyone asked them about their goals and ambitions. We all know people who go on endlessly about a restaurant they want to open, or a coffee shop or a bookstore, even a shoe store. Few of us are in the habit of laughing in the faces of people with such ambitions, and we rarely think their dreams are ridiculous. Such ambitions make sense. They will have something to keep them busy most of the time, and they will probably enjoy being in an industry that serves good food, or they will find it pleasing to stay up to date on the most commercially successful books of the day. And everyone knows this kind of ambition, if successful, will generate income for the owners and their families.

The notion of sufficient capital to fund whatever you want to do had thus brought a preliminary answer. Hoping that the answer would hold until brunch, I drifted off, dreaming of shelves filled with documentaries, music videos, and other interesting items.

The next day (or later the same day) I awoke with a slight suspicion of a point that had recently been reached. The

moment I remembered what it was, it was as if someone had knocked me on the head. A shop?! Me, a store owner? How on earth did I stumble on that as a reason for my existence?

The light of a new afternoon had indeed brought clarity. I had to start from scratch.

In a systematic fashion, I decided to look at the possible reasons why I had initially regarded the idea as worthy of consideration, in order to proceed with the next step in the process. People find satisfaction in their jobs, right? And not everyone has a job that others envy! I know people who are happy in jobs others will find incredibly dull. On the other hand, should salaried work necessarily get the credit for happiness in one's life? Put differently, must you necessarily find a job that makes you happy?

But I'm trying to smuggle in an idea that is entitled to at least a provisional theory: happiness, and why it is so interwoven in our quest to find purpose and meaning in our lives (at least at this time of world history, if not necessarily always the case in bygone eras).

Elementary psychology and common sense teach us that we have certain basic needs. Whether or not the satisfaction of these needs occurs in hierarchical order, we know that they must be satisfied to a reasonable extent to ensure physical survival and to more or less keep your sanity. It also follows from common sense more than anything else, that if our needs are met, we experience a sensation that we usually call "happiness". If we have enough to eat, we're relatively healthy, we get six to eight hours of decent sleep every night, we have a suitable hiding place (either in a rented room or a mansion), we love and are loved (in both physical and emotional terms), we have a reasonable understanding of how everything fits together, and we give expression to our creative needs, then we usually feel that life is all right, to say the least.

If any of our basic needs – physical or otherwise – is not met, we experience a sensation of a different nature. Depending on the degree of want and the type of need, we

usually announce that we are “unhappy”, or “not feeling well”. In the case of serious emergency or deprivation – or just to be more specific – we give the unpleasant sensations names like “hunger”, “cold”, “fear” or “loneliness”.

But how does the fulfilment of needs fit in our discussion of employment (or unemployment, whatever the case may be)? It works as follows: the paid labour we provide, determines the extent to which most of our needs are met. Enough money means enough food (unless the money is blown on other needs that are less important in relation to the needs that must be met to ensure our physical survival). Heaps of money, again in theory, can provide a million dollar shelter for you and your intimate circle, and first class satisfaction of your other needs. Alternatively: no money, no food; no food, poor health, and eventual death due to complications caused by inadequate satisfaction of basic needs. Between these two extremes lies a spectrum with a thousand points of difference in degree of need fulfilment. All this confirms the basic truth that the income you earn stands in direct relation to the extent to which your needs are met as well as the quality of need satisfaction.

“Masters of simplicity,” is what the historian Alan Bullock called two of the bloodiest dictators of the twentieth century. According to him, Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin refused to be overwhelmed by the complexity of problems they faced. I tend to be exactly the opposite. Not only do I feel overwhelmed by questions about the purpose and meaning of life, at times I suffer acute anxiety about it! The reason is the large number of possible answers to the questions. During the last few decades, many established religions have had to compete for fans (and monetary donations) with hundreds of sects, movements and quasi-religions. Ministers, high priests, low priests, popes, rabbis, holy men, ungodly men, holy women, even the local bartender, all have their answers to the questions we ask. To this list you can add ancient philosophers, pseudo-philosophers, psychologists, self-

improvement gurus, actors-turned writers, authors-turned-singers. The list is endless. If you add friends and family as well, you'll start to feel like a toy robot whose wires have become crossed. You even start running into the furniture, and you hit your head against the walls. And it's not even always intentional.

A few weeks ago, my mother added another ingredient to the simmering brew. She thought it would be prudent to share with me one of the basic facts of the real (read: middle-class) life, namely that a man must have made his mark by the 35th anniversary of his arrival on this planet. He must, to be sure, already start kicking in his heels by his mid-twenties, but if he's at least heading in the right direction by the age of thirty he can still put in the final push by his mid-thirties. After 35, according to my mother, it becomes increasingly difficult for a man to find his place in the world. (This of course applies to women, as well. I have two sisters, and I was not raised to believe that just because I was a boy, I needed to feel inferior to the girls in the family. Or the other way around, as I later discovered the tendency to be in the broader community.)

I thanked my mother wholeheartedly for her advice (which to some extent does make sense). The idea is to focus on something for a number of years, to master some skill or ability, or to obtain a qualification in order to pursue a specific career. I also realised that the motivation behind this advice as well as the age to which it is linked, possibly has something to do with the fact that one's parents don't want you to move in with them again at a point in their lives when they're not too enthusiastic about staring you in the face every morning – even more so if you're unemployed.

The other reason why it makes sense for you to be financially comfortable at 35 is because you might consider producing some offspring. We all know the associations: more mouths to feed, more groceries, new shoes and clothing, school fees, a bigger house, a bigger car, more expensive mortgage, 35 going on 60. I could see where this was going. The ideal of a typical middle-class life has never been my

main motivation for getting up in the morning (or in the early afternoon, as the case is nowadays). But to offer that as a reason not to do what people have been doing from long before the most ancient philosopher formulated the first “Why?” theory is not good enough.

Why does it seem that (almost) everyone (almost) always tend to do the same thing, in good times and bad, whether they’re beautiful or ugly, rich or poor, idiot or genius? A person reaches a certain age, he or she starts acting differently than before, and when they open their eyes one morning they are not eating breakfast alone anymore. This same tendency repeats itself through every era of world history, through every generation across all boundaries – regardless of race, religion, ideology, education, background, class or status. Why does it seem that people are always drifting towards each other – with two happily walking into the sunset every now and then? Why does it seem to make people happy to interact with individuals with whom they have something in common?

It’s simple, you might answer: People need each other. Like animals, we have a need for the protection and support of a group. We are also born with a strong desire to reproduce, thus the intimate contact between (usually) two people at a time.

A further explanation for this tendency among humans can be found in a superficial consideration of the opposite to relationships and association, namely the phenomenon of loneliness – to be on your own when you don’t necessarily want to be. A character in another movie once mentioned that according to Native American folklore, the worst punishment that can be imposed on a man is to force him to roam the earth alone. It is also incidentally the worst (official) punishment a prisoner can be imposed in a prison. “Throw him in the hole for two weeks,” a prison chief often hollers in a movie, and then the other prisoners stare at the floor in a mild panic. It’s not just the absence of sunlight that will bring the man to the verge of a nervous breakdown – people need other people. Wisdom from Africa complements that of the Native

Americans with the concept of “ubuntu” – a person is a person through other people.

Universal phenomenon, wisdom from Africa and North America, the prison boss in the movie, and my mother, all confirm the same thing: I need a dog. Is that not one of the main reasons why people keep pets? To compensate themselves for the lack of human companionship! Or if they’re lucky enough to share their daily life with others, to have something to talk to when the usual party is not in the mood, or temporarily unavailable.

But a pet has more value than to merely have something bark back when you speak, and has a more significant effect on the human psyche than the little entertainment it provides when it performs a well-practised trick. Having a pet is to experience how it feels when another creature needs you – when something or someone else needs you to be alive. It gives us a sense of value. It makes us feel like there’s a purpose in life, a reason for our existence. (The idea that you must stay alive to give Bruno that bowl of kibble twice daily will undoubtedly be put in a new perspective the moment you remind yourself that he will probably trot down the street to find food elsewhere if you continue to talk philosophy with him.)

We need other people – as I’ve already pointed out, and even more than we need pets – for obvious reasons: We need to feel we belong somewhere, we need companionship, and in the case of usually more intimate relationships, we feel the need to reproduce. In a recent movie about a wedding singer, the main character comes to a point where he says to his friend, from that moment on both of them are going to be “free and happy”. His friend empties his shot of whiskey in one gulp and replies, “I’m not happy. I’m miserable.” He continues to explain that, despite his reputation as a single roving male, he just needs someone to hold him, someone who can comfort him by saying that everything is going to be all right. Throw in the concept of “us” that defines a relationship, and you



become increasingly convinced of the fact that you belong somewhere if you're in a meaningful relationship with another person. A French madam who made comfort (and sometimes love) her business in another movie, summarises the reasons for an intimate relationship between two people as "romance, companionship and devotion". A relationship of this nature has the added benefit that you have someone to talk to if your pet is busy elsewhere. And to add a little spice to the brew, you'll have someone with whom you can refine the art of reproduction.

To be important to someone else, to have someone in your life who regard you as an indispensable part of his or her life, gives meaning to your existence. It's a simple agreement, but it works: I will give meaning to your life if you give meaning to mine.

Have I solved the One Finger Thing? Is love, as many suspect, the answer? Do "romance, companionship and devotion" give meaning to our lives, and a reason to live? It may sound cynical, but I'm not entirely satisfied.

It is true that we need love, and that it enables us to answer the Big Question to a satisfactory degree. However, I have come to the conclusion that we need at least two other things to complete the puzzle. First, we must find a way to ensure the continuous satisfaction of our material needs – including food on a daily basis and protection from the elements (already touched upon a few paragraphs back). In the language of modern times, this means one thing: money. Unless we've won some kind of lottery, it also implies that we need to work to obtain this money on a regular basis. In the second place – or besides love and money, the third piece of the puzzle – we need something we enjoy doing. Some call this activity a hobby; I prefer to call it the Third Thing.

Allow me to explain the significant impact the Third Thing has on the possibility of happiness and fulfilment in our lives. This thing – whether an activity, or the mastery of any ability, or just collecting things – is what many of us would

have spent most of our time on if we did not need to spend it earning a monthly salary. The reasons why we pursue these Third Things range from recreation to the challenge they present to the sense of self-worth that results from it. The underlying principle is that we enjoy doing these things.

Some would argue that they enjoy collecting stamps, but they don't necessarily want to busy themselves with it full time. They may argue further that they enjoy doing what they have chosen to make money with (if it's not collecting rare stamps to sell at a profit). This, in a sense, confirms the principle that we need something that some call a hobby – what matters is that it is something we enjoy.

Realistically speaking, the work we choose to earn our proverbial bread and butter with should be something we're more or less interested in, something we enjoy doing to a reasonable degree. A professional photographer is a good example of someone who generates an income in an area he or she is interested in. It might even lessen the need for a Third Thing because the way they earn money already provides the necessary fulfilment for which the third part of the formula is normally needed. If you haven't been so blessed with the ability to make smart career choices, or if you don't enjoy your salaried position because of other reasons, you need a separate interest or activity for the formula to work.

Balance is another factor that should be taken into consideration. A partner fulfils a whole range of needs, just as you (hopefully) do the same for him or her. But everyone knows that love does not pay the rent (if a character in a movie hasn't mentioned it, I bet your mother has). You or your partner, or both of you, need an income with which the rent or mortgage can be paid, with which food and clothing can be purchased, and like most people in the developed world have discovered since the Industrial Revolution, to acquire many more items than you can truly afford and/or need. If the work you do for an income provides you with a degree of pleasure and satisfaction, you will already have started to satisfy the

need normally covered by “what people do in their spare time for fun” (as the dictionary defines “hobby”).

So now you have enough food in your stomach to keep you for a few hours, and your imperfect nakedness is protected from the weather. You have a decent roof over your head, a reasonably solid understanding of the universe, romance and intimacy are part of your daily life, and you mow the lawn every second Saturday for fun and entertainment while you think about your stamp collection. But still you feel a gnawing discomfort in your belly. And no matter how hard you try, you cannot remember the question we contemplated when this whole discussion started.

## (SORT OF) PART TWO

The search for answers to the questions that have haunted people since the awakening of intellectual curiosity usually produces several possibilities. But just when you start getting confident about your philosophical abilities, you realise that you never managed to properly formulate the question. What is it that we want to know? Do we want to know why we were born? Do we want to know whether or not we have a purpose we must fulfil? Do we want to be convinced that our lives have meaning and value? Do we want to know what we should do to live happy and fulfilling lives? Why do we want to live happy and fulfilling lives?

Most of us have certain expectations of ourselves, things we would like to achieve. Growing up we look at what other people do, and we identify – consciously or not – certain individuals as examples. We imagine what it would be like to do the same things these people do or have done, and to achieve similar results. But why do we want to pursue these goals? Why do we want to realise our expectations? Why do we have expectations of ourselves to begin with?

The Greek philosopher Plato argued that because we fear disappearing into the nothingness, we want to achieve

immortality. We look at the animal kingdom, and we hope that our lives are more valuable than that of a rat or a giraffe. We know how fragile our lives can be, but we are also aware of some unique qualities and abilities that other animals do not possess.

The notion that we should achieve more in our lifetime than a wild beast would achieve in his seems to be a natural result of our superior intellectual abilities. If we do not need to do more with our lives than the average animal, then why do we possess abilities that are much more advanced than our primate cousins to whom we are most closely related? We start formulating questions that can bring us closer to what it means to be “human”. We wonder about the “meaning of life”, whether or not there’s a specific reason why we were born, whether or not there’s a purpose to our existence.

I suspect that these questions are not merely different versions of the same basic inquiry, and it is therefore necessary to consider different answers to each question. I would also suggest that one initially focuses on one question, namely the one about what makes you happy. (Many will protest that personal happiness is selfish. “Should we not strive for something nobler?” they would ask. The latter is an issue that will be raised again later; the reader will also find that a nobler pursuit is not inconsistent with the primary emotion we call “happiness”. The possibility of happiness also plays a key role in the conviction that life is worth the effort, however people choose to define what makes them happy – whether it is endless entertainment, or commitment to a good cause.)

Is there an answer to what makes a person happy with which a majority of people can agree? I believe there is.

Now, at this point, some readers might expect a life-changing revelation. They may see in their mind’s eye how I clear my throat, take hold of the microphone and start speaking, slowly, carefully weighing my words. After hearing my magical utterances, they may imagine pulling back and muttering in awe: “Wow! So that’s what a man comes up if

he spends years in solitary isolation in an attempt to find an answer! I am so relieved that you have given me these magnificent words! It's now clear that I would never have been able to work it out on my own ...”

The truth is, fortunately for all of us, much less dramatic (even though it did take me years of possibly unnecessary semi-solitary confinement to work it out). What you need is the three things that have already been discussed. For those who didn't quite notice the pattern, here it is again: You need love, and you need money, and then you need something you enjoy doing – on your own, it might be wise to add. (Good health can be added to the mix, now that I think of it). If these elements are part of your life to a satisfactory degree, you are at least on your way to a state of existence that can be called “personal happiness”, and you might just be convinced that life is worth the pain and disappointment that are sometimes unavoidable ingredients of our existence.

An extra word of advice here would not be inappropriate: Balance must be maintained. If the balance is disturbed, it will be like a magic formula that doesn't work because the words were uttered in the wrong order, or because you have left something out. If you spend too much time making money, and you harm your relationship with the person (or people) you love, it will break the spell. On the other hand, if you warm up the bed all day with your lover, it won't do if you tell the bank manager that love is more important than money when he wants to know where the mortgage payment is. The third thing is also essential to complete the first two and balance the whole story out. Relationships are not always simple, and sometimes a colleague or superior at work makes your attempts at earning an income even more gut-wrenching than it's supposed to be. At such times, it helps if you know you can go fishing later, or spend a few hours plucking away at your guitar strings on the back porch.

There you have it, as you surely have always suspected: love, money, and something you do for pure enjoyment. It's up to

you to decide which one is more important, or which one is most deserved of your time. Personally, I think we can all do with a guitar, but not even Jimi Hendrix could survive without love or money. And remember, the *thought* that bread can quiet your hunger pains is not sufficient to fill your belly. You have to go out and find what you need; otherwise you'll end up a lonely and hungry fool, no matter how much you know or understand.

This brings us to the end of this part of the discussion. If, however, you find yourself among a small group of people who are not satisfied with enough money, true love and a decent hobby, I encourage you to continue reading the third and final part of this piece.

### THIRD AND FINAL PART

“Like [the Scottish moral philosopher] Adam Smith and others, [the German intellectual] Von Humboldt felt that at the root of human nature is the need for free, creative work under one's own control.” ~ Noam Chomsky, *Secrets, Lies and Democracy*

I earn money, to afford a few of the basic needs that we have discussed so far, by teaching English to Taiwanese children. My weekly schedule consists of a patchwork of classes at different schools – a few hours here, some there, and so on. To qualify for the documents to legally reside in Taiwan, I only have to teach eleven hours per week at the school that sponsors my work permit application every year (I'm actually only doing eight hours per week at this institution). Every hour I spend in a classroom more than the eleven hours per week I legally have to teach increases my income. However, I am always aware of the fact that I am not obliged to spend those extra hours in a classroom. To not teach any extra classes will, of course, have a negative impact on my cash flow, and there is a line that's best not to cross.

Every hour I don't spend in a classroom to increase my income is an extra hour I have to spend on things that interest me. During the last few months, I've been busy rearranging and reviewing my teaching schedule. The main motivation is to give myself more time for what Chomsky calls "free and creative work under one's own control".

I have also formulated a simple theory that explains that people can only experience lasting and sustainable happiness and fulfilment if they are creators. (The consumer culture, according to this theory, is considered to be the lowest form of creativity. It works like this: people need to create, but instead of being creative in a proper way, they go shopping, make choices, and then buy clothes, jewellery and other articles with which they can give expression to their creative nature. This satisfies their creative needs to an extent, although in a lower degree of creative process than, for example, painting or composing music.)

Before you arrive at the creative phase of your life, you need to face the most critical challenge, namely the struggle for basic survival. For many people on this planet, physical survival is a daily struggle. They take nothing for granted - not food or water, nor shelter, or anything else that many people in the middle and upper strata of modern society deems as just another item on the monthly budget. Their daily lives consist of a struggle for survival. (Yet, not even these people can ignore the basic human need to create. They write or draw on walls or carve images representative of their lives from wood or stone.)

Most people in the modern industrialised world, especially in the middle and higher strata, have managed to overcome the struggle for basic survival. They live in houses or apartments with running water and electricity, and it's not uncommon to see shelves filled with food supplies in refrigerators and kitchen cabinets (and sometimes conveniently close to the TV). Many have access to money in a bank account, or they have credit cards with which they can go to nearby places to buy the food they need to keep

themselves alive. They also have access to people who are specially trained to look after them when they are sick or injured. A crude, daily struggle for physical survival is no longer part of modern society – for most of the citizens of modern societies, anyway. To be economically active, both as workers and as consumers, has replaced the basic struggle that was our ancestors' fate in more primitive times.

When the ancient Greeks and Romans contemplated the meaning of life, ideas about good and bad, and the necessity of happiness, their societies had also progressed to a large extent beyond the primitive struggle for physical survival. They could indeed afford the luxury of philosophy. If Socrates or Plato had to grab a spear every day to go chase after a wild boar in the forests to keep themselves and their families alive, they would not have had time to sit around in masterpieces of architecture, discussing the finer points of human existence. The same can be said of Michelangelo or Leonardo da Vinci, and the times and environments in which they had lived and worked. If they had to hunt every day, or gather food in the forest, or cultivate small patches of land so that they and their masters could have grain for bread, they would surely not have had time to paint cathedral ceilings, or portraits of the wives of rich merchants.

Certainly it can be said that Socrates & Company did not only contemplate philosophical issues until well into the afternoon because they liked the sound of their own voices. They did so because they needed to ask certain questions; that the creative, intelligent process of considering possible answers gave them a degree of satisfaction, can probably also be taken for granted. Same with Da Vinci and his colleagues in the world of the creative arts; they probably did not just paint because they liked the sight of paint spots on their faces, or because they thought art was an okay way to earn a few silver coins. Their work was, I believe, driven by an innate desire to create.

A thinker of Socrates' calibre is not easily encountered in your average modern university or academic institution, and



few painters are in the class of Da Vinci. But because we all share the same basic “design”, I believe the needs that found expression in the works of ancient philosophers and the masters of the Renaissance, are the same needs that also drive us in the 21st century in our creative endeavours (even though we experience these needs in different ways and in varying degrees of intensity).

Do we all experience the need to create or produce art or music or philosophical works? No. It is true that many of us consider ourselves lucky to just be able to go to work every day, come home in the evening, have supper, and yell at either the dog or the TV (depending on which one annoys us first). However, few of us are satisfied with a life limited to these things. We arrange the decor of our homes, plant the garden full of flowers, buy nice things for the house, and produce and raise children. In many cases, we’re not even aware that these things are fundamentally creative. We see it as a natural result of marriage to have kids, and yet the process of raising children is one of the most creative of all creative processes – to be involved in the creation of a new person.

It has already been mentioned that the Battle for Survival is not the same as a few centuries or millennia ago. But the idea that *struggle* is part of the distant past, is far from the truth. Although we no longer need to wrestle lions or bears out of their caves, our struggle continues in other ways. And in many cases it’s not much less scary than running away from a wounded bison or wildebeest.

Our struggle today, to a large extent, is no longer physical. The intriguing thing is that sometimes we still admire physical strength more than intellectual strength, and courage in a situation that is considered a physical threat more than magnificent talent in art or music. Many still respect the abilities that would have kept them alive 5000 years ago, despite the lack of opportunity for application of these abilities in their actual daily lives in a much more sophisticated world.

We are born with the instinct to fight and to get the upper hand on what threatens our existence. But what happens to these instincts if our world becomes safe enough and we are no longer able to sharpen our fighting abilities on the giant teeth of a mammoth bull?

The life energy and the instincts with which we are born are the same as the life energy and instincts with which our ancestors were born. The latter lived in much more primitive and much more dangerous environments. Today we argue and fight amongst ourselves, and only occasionally are these arguments worthy of being remembered. We moan and we complain, and we criticise every person and every thing that just slightly irritates our sensitive natures ...

-----

[And that's as far as I got with this ambitious piece.

My question at the end was this: What do we do with our fighting spirit in a world that differs in so many ways from the primitive world of our ancestors? Some people search, consciously and in a calculated manner, or without thinking, for opportunities to continue to utilise this instinct. Examples range from professional athletes (boxers would be the best example), to soldiers, young gangsters who spend time in environments where conflict is always a promising possibility, to people always looking for an argument.

Is there an alternative? The idea that I wanted to propose with ardent enthusiasm at the end (before I was distracted) is that we should use these instincts with which we are born as *creative* energy if we no longer have to use them on a daily basis for physical battle for the sake of basic survival; otherwise we'll end up wasting it on frivolous arguments, useless wailing, and all kinds of no-good ventures. Certainly it's also true that there are still areas where this instinct in its more primary form can be applied to good purpose – fire-fighting, first aid and police services are excellent examples.

Have I answered the original question about the purpose of my life? Not yet. Did I get more clarity on what I want to do with my life or what would give meaning to my existence? Have I worked out a possible reason for my existence? Have I succeeded in declaring what makes a person happy? Well, a few questions have been formulated, and some possible answers tested. The process continues.]

\* \* \* \* \*

“Work, marriage? Hmm ... one needs money, true. One needs companionship, and children sometimes compensate people for not having anything else to give meaning to their lives. All these things have been time-tested, and seem to be universal truths.

Nevertheless, there is more than one way to satisfy the need for money other than a life-sucking job; more than one way to satisfy the need for companionship other than marriage; and more than one way to satisfy the need to experience meaning in your life other than having children.

Take me for example, I’m trying to make it as a Sermoner, and although it doesn’t pay the rent, I do get a kick out of preaching to other people. As for companionship and children, well ... it’s not a perfect world. McDonald’s sell a decent breakfast, though. Have you tried that?”

~ From an email to a friend (9 March 2001)

\* \* \* \* \*

## **Just another piece of writing**

[Thursday to Sunday, end of November 2003]

This year has yielded a few good things. Among others, I realised none of my plans is ever going to work out and that I'm probably going to be trapped in an "Exile" essay for the rest of my life. I've also learned a few things about life and have written some pieces about it. However, the development that has led to this particular piece of writing is that I have started playing tennis again. This delightful hark back to the days of my youth was due to my friend O. – always on the lookout for someone who can join him in some athletic undertaking.

So it happened that my energetic friend and I were chasing old tennis balls last Thursday afternoon. In the middle of a double fault, I took notice of the people on the court next to us. Anyone who has ever played tennis anywhere in the world would have recognised the spectacle – a coach, and a teenage boy who was sending one perfectly executed forearm after another over the net.

The forearm action was not what impressed me the most. The youngster was dressed in the most perfect tennis attire that one could desire from any tennis magazine. Expensive tennis shoes. Expensive, proper tennis socks. Shorts that were a proper fit, and an expensive, high quality T-shirt with some or other sporting logo. The young tennis player looked good. He would have been able to attract the attention of any teenage girl in the district as much for his impressive forearm action as for the fact that he was a paragon of success: attractive build, athletic abilities, and of course financially successful parents – who else could afford such a perfectly assembled tennis kit?

This young man looked the way I wanted to appear to the world 10, 15 years ago on the courts of tennis clubs in Stellenbosch and in suburban Pretoria. Then it mattered,

because at that age you're eager to compare yourself with others in the area competing for the same spots in the sun. And if you weighed yourself up and found yourself to be a little light in the pants, you usually chucked your hairless tennis balls in your plastic shopping bag, straightened your racquet's strings, and headed home.

However, there I stood, ten years later, on court number four of the Yang Ming Tennis Club in Kaohsiung. I had on a pair of shorts two numbers too big for me, a white T-shirt with a dragon motif in black, and on my feet a pair of old school socks and a pair of running shoes with worn-out soles. As I was smashing another ball into the net, I thought how gratifying it was that it no longer mattered that I looked the way I did, while the guy on the other court looked like a fledgling Pete Sampras.

Why does it not matter anymore? Because I have something now I had thought a decade ago the best tennis outfit would have given me: I feel good about myself. Why? Because I have found what I like to do; something which I figure I'm at least not worse at than playing tennis. I'm a writer, who runs around on a tennis court for an hour or so once a week with a friend. I'm not a tennis player who at the age of thirty wish I had gone to a foreign country instead, to write essays about the meaning of life. I feel good about myself, and I don't need expensive tennis shoes and a professional coach anymore to give that to me.

And that's where this piece would have ended if I could have it my way. But just as I was finally sending the ball with a beautiful backhand down the right line, the internal argument hit:

“So you feel good about yourself because, supposedly, you're a writer?”

“Well, yes. I write, and I know I don't write short stories or material for any well-known magazines, but I write.”

“Is it important to actually produce decent literature in order for you to feel good about yourself?”

“I suppose for the formula to work one must certainly not be too lousy at it. You have to be honest. And your identity must be rooted in credible external reality. So, yes. I think if you call yourself a writer, your material should at least be adequate.”

“And your material is adequate?”

“I’m not the best writer of my generation. I’m not even terribly original. I don’t necessarily say what others are not saying. But I say what I want to say, in the way I want to say it. And if I’m going to fail as a writer ... well, then it’s something that still has to happen.”

“So you would agree the fact that you feel good about yourself nowadays is possibly based on your own misconceptions and illusions?”

“It’s possible. But life is a struggle, and I’m still standing. So I can’t be doing too badly.”

My friend O. and I finished our game. We wiped the few grains of salt off our brows, finished our sodas and walked away. On the way to our modes of transport I shared with him my thought about how a certain class of tennis player always looks the same, doesn’t matter whether you’re in Taiwan or South Africa.

We laughed about the children of rich people, solo tennis with wooden paddles and hairless tennis balls and how you eventually shake off the feelings of dissatisfaction about yourself after years of torture comparing yourself with people who look so much better in the sun than you.

I mentioned how it sometimes appears as if we spend years constructing our own worlds in such a way that we can eventually feel good about ourselves, so that we don’t have to feel ashamed anymore about the things we couldn’t have had better in our younger days. And, O. added, to be able to laugh about the things we were once so embarrassed about.

But I have never been satisfied with an unfinished argument, and I know the standard for a “good point” is high. After all, I can still get away with a debatable point if my opponent was of flesh and blood, but my differences of opinion these days are mostly with the Internal Man of Steel. He does not tolerate partially assembled arguments, and he does not rest before an issue has been resolved.

“What does it mean to feel good about yourself?” the Man makes his reappearance as I’m starting to pedal home. (“Damn this!” I wanted to shout.)

“Among other things, it comes down to you going through a process by which you identify what is not important to you,” I replied to my own question. “Or you go through a process by which you come to understand that some things are not as important as you once considered them to be. So, you distance yourself from things that don’t matter so much anymore, and the end result is that you feel better about yourself.”

“You mean things like expensive tennis shoes and flawless forearm shots to your professional coach?”

“Yes, to name one example. The process also involves that you identify the things in which you are truly interested, things which are important to you ... your talents, your strengths; things you can use to make a success of yourself. The idea is you go through this process, and you emerge at the other end with a better idea of who you are and what you should do to be happy. To eventually ...”

“... feel good about yourself.”

“Yes.”

“But what does it matter if you feel good about yourself?”

Dear reader, it’s quite possible that you consider this material to be boring. You may think I constantly harp on the same points. You may think I’m keeping this project artificially alive because I am too much of a coward to confront a more ruthless world in my own country. You may even feel like putting this material down to watch TV instead or maybe



going outside to hit a tennis ball hairless yourself against a brick wall.

However, I politely implore you to do me a favour: Imagine what it must feel like to be me.

I cannot take anything for granted. I have to question everything, and at least make an attempt to understand everything. And not even to slide in behind my computer at home to write an essay about it. I must understand in order to function – in this world, in this particular period of the history of human existence, on this planet!

By now I have actually managed to develop an adequate understanding of the world and historical period in which I live. (Don't have much of a choice: We all know what happens to people who fail to function properly in Polite Society.) I will even be so presumptuous these days as to claim over a cup of tea that I know what the "meaning of life" is, that I even deserve to know, or that I have spent enough years pondering the question to have at least a reasonable idea by now. Other people my age have houses and cars and credit cards and children. I should, after all, have something to say at a social occasion! ("Hello, I'm Brand. I don't have a house, a car, a credit card or a child, but I do know what the 'meaning of life' is ...")

Of course, it's always possible that everyone knows what the "meaning of life" is, that I'm simply far behind everyone else, like being late for a party and blaming the traffic. And as friends and family share glances I know everyone had to deal with the same traffic to be on time. It was only me who had to stop at every corner to take a smoke break, to survey the landscape and take everything in. And just maybe the so-called meaning of life was never such a big secret from the beginning.

However, why on earth do I ask these questions? And I know I'm not the only one! It does sometimes feel like I'm on a solo mission when I stare out my kitchen window night after night, but I know everyone wonders about these things – or maybe I just hope they do.

Have people always asked these questions? And I'm not talking now of the Greek masters and writers of ancient Rome and Confucius and the Buddha. I'm talking about the peasants and innkeepers and market women and maids and sailors and soldiers from a few centuries ago. Did they know the answers to the important questions of life? Did they wonder about it? How about miners and factory workers in the present day and age, and mothers with curlers in their hair and a baby on the hip, and street sweepers, teachers, tradesmen, lawyers and engineers, and professional tennis players and their coaches?

If serious questions challenge us, how many of us are ready to recite an answer in which we truly believe?

## [THE BIG UNTITLED]

Tuesday, 24 February 2004

16:50

We all are born in a certain era, in a society governed according to certain rules, in a culture with certain values, conventions, and ideas of what a good life looks like. It is always an open question how each individual will respond to the world in which he or she was born and grew up. Will he accept the rules and play by them most of the time? Will she accept some rules and reject others? Will he reject so many of the rules that he will be in constant conflict with everything and everyone around him in a short, miserable existence? Will he or she largely accept traditional values and conventions, and ideas about what a good life is and build their own lives accordingly? If not, what are the alternatives?

I find myself hanging between a tree branch and the soft green grass below. I don't want a "good" job – a so-called full-time position. I know I have to make money, but I believe there are many ways to go about doing it. I also attach importance to the noble ambition of a life devoted to study, charity and creative works. On the other hand, I hope that I can end up in a three-bedroom house in a quiet suburb or a large town, with a small garden, a car, and maybe a dog or two. I also hope that I can find a woman who will love me and accept me as I am; whom I will love, and in partnership with whom I can perhaps produce and raise some offspring.

Sometimes I think that my version of a good life is too idealistic. It is not.

I also sometimes reckon that especially the middle class part of the story might not be my destiny. But perhaps such a line of thinking is only the result of some personal experiences, and a suspicion that this, too, will not make me happy.

What is the alternative to my version of a good life?

The alternative is a cheap point-and-shoot camera, a notebook, a few pens and a ruler (something must be done in a neat, orderly fashion); no possessions, no home, no intimate relationships. I would travel from place to place – in my own country, because to go abroad costs money, and you need a passport and visas. I will spend time here, overnight there, and finally celebrate my fortieth birthday on a bus or a train on my way who knows where.

No place of my own, committed to nothing and no one except a wanderer's existence.

17:32

Will a nomadic existence make me happy?

Not according to my own beliefs.

I have been striving for years to attain the most perfect life I can find in order to devote myself to it. (A *ronin*, incidentally, is a masterless samurai, one whose master had died. Have I been a wandering *ronin* for the past more than ten years, looking for a new master to serve?) What would a perfect life look like? I've managed to squeeze a little time off in the pursuit of daily survival to consider this matter, and so far, I have come up with three possibilities (already mentioned): commitment to others – family, charitable endeavours; freedom to pursue creative expression; and the time, opportunity and resources to devote yourself to a life of study.

During the past fifteen years, I have dedicated myself to a great extent to the latter two. My family has always been important to me, but charity is a matter which I have so far avoided as far as possible. Why? I don't know. But I do believe that a life of voluntary, unselfish service to others is one of the noblest ways to spend your existence, and to lose your own life so that others can live, is the highest expression of this commitment.

This leaves me with a question: The life that I have tried for years now to avoid, namely that of the “regular guy” who marries, has children and goes to work every day, is this not in the end a beautiful manifestation of devotion to others?

Perhaps the man or woman enjoys the work they do, perhaps not. But they know joy in the workplace is not what really matters; for the working, married man or woman at the end of the day it is their marriage and children. They are therefore willing to sometimes sacrifice bigger ambitions for the sake of devotion to what “really” matters – namely their relationships with each other and with their children.

This is clearly an oversimplified picture. In reality, there is ambition that keeps married men and women from spending time with their families; there are extramarital relationships and divorce; men and women who leave a conventional family life after a few years to pursue other things – or the same things, but with someone else.

Let us for the moment return to a more uncomplicated picture of devotion to spouse and children, and income-generating activities enjoyed at least to some extent. In principle, this seems to be a good life, right? The principle is that the adult man or woman’s life is, at the end of the day, dedicated to the next generation – their sons and/or daughters.

Should this be accepted, and the matter left alone?

Maybe an additional question should be asked: What sort of life is made possible through dedication to the next generation?

I would venture to say that most adult men and women do not squeeze enough time off in their daily lives to consider this matter. And even if they do, what answers do they come up with? Are the lives of one generation after another sacrificed for a life that everyone postpones for the next generation to define? Do too many people desperately hold on to the old slogans, “We just do the best we can” and “Everything will work out as it should”?

22:47

Or does no one know any better, so everyone looks around them and do what most other people of their time and culture do? Is it good enough to say, “I don’t have time to think about such things, because I’m too busy at work (or at home) keeping everything going and staying afloat”?

Most adult men and women who marry and have children devote their lives to the possibility that their sons and daughters may one day lead a vague “better” life, or if not better, that they will at least as adults be able to keep their own heads above water, and perhaps experience some degree of happiness from time to time.

Is this sufficient? For many people of my time and culture, it is.

Can it be enough for me?

I have never experienced in my gut what it feels like to be committed to the next generation of my own blood. So, can I really answer the question? What value will my response have anyway? After five years of such a life, I may ask myself one Saturday morning if it has been “worth it”. Maybe I answer in the affirmative. If things can be that simple, it will settle the case for the moment. If I ask myself the same question again ten or twenty years later, and I give the same response ... then it must surely be “worth” it. Suppose I answer in the negative this time, how much weight will this response carry? Maybe something had happened that had damaged my faith and made me bitter towards my earlier conviction. Even in this case, the answer will be valid only for me.

I throw a bunch of ingredients in the pot, but something still does not taste right. The simmering stew is edible, but an essential ingredient is still missing. *I* am writing these words. *I* am thinking these thoughts. *I* am asking these questions. Me, not the mosquito that bit me a moment ago or the dog that wanted to rip my bicycle’s rear tyre to pieces an hour ago.

Why am *I* thinking about these things and why am *I* writing these words? Because there is something that is not in place; because there is an answer that remains elusive to me.

\* \* \*

Says the man on the bicycle on the way back from the Carrefour (Wednesday, 25 February, noon): “Write up what you can, and leave. To think that you too could lead a normal, happy life is absurd. Serve your purpose, and leave the show with your dignity intact. To try and gain more out of life is to lose your life.”

Why does it feel so right?

Intelligent partners in dialogue might ask: “How can you be so sure about what your purpose is? Perhaps it will only be revealed to you ten years from now! And what do you mean by ‘leave the show’?”

I sometimes think about giving up. I guess I will bite the dust within a year, and seeing that it will happen, it might as well be in my own country. Available funds and handouts from family and friends (before their patience runs out) will keep me going for a few months. After that it would be parks and streets to the end. Notebooks and printed material will be left with a trusted friend.

It always hits me in the ribcage when I think about it. It is indeed my fate if I quit trying. The fact that I did not fall asleep in a park last night on an empty stomach is because I did not cease to try, say nine months ago.

Nevertheless, how does one go about doing it, in practical terms? How do you give up?

You stop washing. You stop shaving. You stop working. You stretch your funds to the last penny, and then you go stand hands cupped in front of friends and family until they close the door, ever so politely, in your dirty, bearded face. Then you’re left to the elements, criminal characters, disease, and a rapidly deteriorating physical condition. You should be able

to leave the show in possibly not much longer than twelve to eighteen months – unless, of course, you run out of determination with your giving up, or you regain courage for life.

(New notebook)

We get up every morning, go through the usual routine, and if we are lucky we make it back home at the end of the day. Sleep to sleep. Most of us honestly do not know why. We cling to vague ideas about a “good life”, “happiness” and “trust and believe”.

I do it as well: Get up every morning, put water on the gas stove, rinse out my two ashtrays, pour a teaspoon of instant coffee in my yellow mug, mix my four breakfast cereals ... and the next morning I do exactly the same.

Maybe it's not so easy to give up. Maybe the value system with which we grow up keeps us from taking decisive steps to give up. There might be noises from our subconscious that discourage us, or perhaps that encourage us to continue with our existence. There is suicide ... but that is immediate, with no chance of rehabilitation – as in the case of a person who had given up at one stage, but then after months (or years) starts putting in renewed effort to stay alive.

The German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer said, “Death is the true result and to that extent the purpose of life.” George Orwell said, “Keep the aspidistra flying.”

I believe both are right. Between these two statements lie boxed in human existence. The truth is that everyone's life will end in physical death, and it could happen at any moment. Until then, you must get up every day, wash your face, perhaps shave, boil water, make breakfast, and hope for a decent night's rest at the end of another long day. If you are smart, you will employ measures like buying a house and saving money, and you may get a full-time job to ensure that this process can continue for as long as possible. If you're less



lucky, your only hope is to survive each day. The alternative is to give up, long way or shortcut.

Thursday, 26 February 2004

12:06

I know the truth, but my daily life consists of employing measures to avoid it. I do not have any faith. Ironically, lack of faith is commonly understood in the context of faith in God, but it is not necessarily the case with me. My problem is that I do not have faith in the world. I can still believe that God loves me. The world, on the other hand, does not care much whether I live or die. And I understand this, in the same breath as I criticise it. I am part of the world that does not care too much. I am both a perpetrator of this crime, and to some extent a victim.

I have no faith in humanity. In my opinion, a large percentage of the people on this planet are nothing more than animals in clothes. Now, I have nothing against animals, it's just that I believe that human beings – in principle, if not always in practice – are more developed than other species. But what does this mean? What makes me more than an alley cat, or the rat that scrambles away from the cat? Among other things, my intelligence, my ability to manipulate the environment (much more than any animal is able to do), and free will to either create or destroy (although “free will” is sometimes pushed in one direction and other times inhibited from going in another direction by instincts and fears).

Nevertheless, I view the world with suspicion, and I have little faith in my fellow human being.

\* \* \*

I keep myself busy these days contemplating alternatives. One is to shave my hair, buy an orange dress and stand at traffic

lights with my breakfast bowl in my hands. Alternatively, I can join a Buddhist sect.

Apart from these options, there are two others that present themselves sporadically as some of the few possibilities that are truly worth considering: 1) to be a bearded, solo travelling full-time writer; and 2) to make enough money to convince a woman to spend her days in comfort as my companion.

12:46

If unrefined bits of wisdom and wit could be exchanged for money, I might be a rich man. If a certain weariness for the world could have compelled women to spread flattering rumours about a man and for other men to nod their heads respectfully for him in public, I would probably have had more reason to smile. But now I have this strong suspicion that I am either going to spend the rest of my days in increasing poverty and loneliness, or that I will alternatively “pull myself together”, figure out one plus one is two, and hope that two will be good enough for a few years of happiness.

I think too much and do too little. I suspect too much and believe too little. War is one thing; peace is another matter all together. Oh, and I am a coward who don't employ enough measures to ensure my life continues for as long as possible, but simultaneously I fear death just a tad more than middle class happiness.

16:32

You know, if you had a dog, say for two or three years, and you know the dog, you know what makes it angry, where its irritation threshold lies. Then one day you say something to the dog, or you do something, and suddenly it growls at you. Maybe you'll feel a little hurt, perhaps indignant. “I thought I knew the dog,” you'll say.

\* \* \*

People who do not give up have something to live for. What do I have to live for? Financial stability with a wife and children? And that's if I throw the dice at just the right angle and I have luck on my side! Alternatives exist for this future scenario ... as compensations and as measures to keep existential anxiety under control.

"You reject things before you even know how happy they will make you," someone might say.

"You're right," I'll reply. "But what are you saying? Financial stability plus marriage plus children equals happiness? Then life is mathematics and science! Then my current condition is simply the result of absent people and irregular cash flow."

"You allow present circumstances to smother your faith and hope," the person will strike back. Then he'll tip the cigarette against the rim of the ashtray.

"Present circumstances have simply shed light on certain issues," I will respond, and then I'll take a drag on the cigarette.

Then I will make a simple request. "It's Thursday, 26 February at 4:49 in the afternoon. Tell me now, at this moment, what the truth is."

"I do not know," my companion will say. "Or maybe I know, but I can't remember. Or maybe I can remember, but I don't want to say."

And the cigarette is snuffed out.

Friday, 27 February 2004, twelve minutes past midnight.

I have known the truth now for more than four and a half hours. It was revealed to me while I was sitting on the carpet of a room in a daycare/language centre, teaching a couple of six-year-old Taiwanese twins a few English sentences. The small faces, the innocence, the restlessness, the warmth of little hands grabbing my finger as I point to another flash

card ... almost forced me to bellow out: “This, to raise your own children, to see them grow up every day, to experience their unconditional love and to love them unconditionally, this must make everything worthwhile!”

And then it hit me: That’s all we are looking for, possibly the best that we can ever hope for! Love, art, entertainment, sex, money, vacations, creative freedom, study, togetherness and companionship – all things that we pursue to make life worth it!

We all know how vulnerable we are, how death crawls around everywhere like a thousand pests in a thousand different manifestations. And even if we have managed to avoid it for twenty or thirty or eighty years, it will get us!

But it was only death that we feared, it would be one thing. Between birth and death awaits pain, sorrow, hunger, disease, poverty, suffering, unfulfilled desires, longings, humiliation, aches, and age that causes hair to fall out, previously nimble fingers to warp, eyes to fade, ears to go deaf and hearts to pack up.

If it could be possible to freeze time for a moment and collect all the data of every person who lives at that moment, to take all the pain, suffering, hunger, desire, humiliation, and all other emotional and physical discomfort, and then also to take all the joy, happiness, love, all the beautiful and wonderful things in life, if you could give a specific weight to all these things, the conclusion will be that the average human life on planet Earth is filled with more pain than love, with more misery and longing and hunger than happiness and contentment.

Any person can protest the validity of this point, or declare that they believe the beauty and happiness are worth the pain and sorrow that people sometimes experience, even if you only experience the beauty and happiness for a moment or a single day. Maybe I’ll agree, maybe not. But even such a person would find that they also confirm the Truth – that the beautiful and good things make the pain and suffering (sometimes) worth it (if the person wants to go further he can

even add, “for some” – because many other people go through their entire lives deeply convinced of exactly the opposite).

Everything we do is a conscious or subconscious attempt to “make the best” of our lives – as if we know, deep down, that the story usually does not end well.

Animals – some pets excluded – usually live an existence filled with danger, food, fun, and death due to illness, accident, old age, or at the jaw of another, stronger animal.

People, on the other hand, are born, they learn how to survive in the environments from where their existence had sprung forth, and they start to take actions and employ measures from an early age to get as much happiness out of life as possible.

Most adults reach a point where they realise people sometimes die more easily than flies, and that people sometimes spend many years’ worth of time and energy to create something that can be swept away in the blink of an eye. Most know and acknowledge that the end of (physical) life is death.

Those among us with good observation skills also realise that holding out on this planet for as long as possible, ends, if we are lucky, in a nursing home or a guest room with family, or – in less fortunate circumstances – in a hospital room, with tubes in your nose, your skin all wrinkled up, and your sight and hearing a fraction of what it used to be.

We easily label those who remind us of these truths as pessimists, prophets of doom and all-round dampeners of a good mood. But whether you think about it or not, the chances are slim that you can say you are not even a little uneasy about the possibility that your life can be over three days from now. And who can say they can’t wait to hit sixty or seventy or eighty? Can anyone ultimately deny the value that happiness holds for the majority of the inhabitants of this planet as a consolation for the unpleasant truths of life?

Where does God fit into this truth? I do not know, but I do know that atheists, pantheists, monotheists, Christians, agnostics, Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists all get sick, all feel pain and all die. The Truth is valid for everyone. It is universal.

Five hundred years ago all but a few eccentrics believed the earth was flat. The fact that people vehemently protested against the idea that the earth was round did not flatten the earth by a single millimetre.

DENY IT OR ACCEPT IT – WHILST BLOOD FLOW IN OUR VEINS, WE DO EVERYTHING WE DO IN ORDER TO MAKE OUR LIVES WORTH THE EFFORT.

What does this say about my criticism of the middle class I am so fond of reciting? A middle class life is then nothing more than an honest attempt to make life worth living! What does it say about my preference for a life dedicated to creativity and learning? This is also just an attempt to say: Keep trying, it can be worth it ...

(It's Friday, 27 February 2004, eight minutes past one in the early morning.)

\* \* \*

If the above is true, then what is the difference between a “good life” and a “noble existence”?

A Good Life is one where life is worth the effort for the person concerned, and if they can make a contribution to making life worth living for people who make their life worth living, then so much better.

The pursuit of a Noble Existence can be defined as active participation in a struggle to make life worth living not only for yourself and your loved ones, but also for others with whom you have no personal connection.

When your life is dedicated to (among other things) the improvement of the quality of other people's lives, you give

more value to your own life than would be the case if you were simply another single organism concerned with your own preservation.

To take actions that will be conducive for you and even a select group of significant others to be convinced that life is worth the effort, but that will deprive other people of a belief that their lives are worth living, or that compromise this belief to a serious degree, is to ... limit the value of your life to only yourself and a select group of significant others.

The actions of a person who sporadically and in varying degrees rob other people of the conviction that life for them is worth living, make the permanent or temporary isolation of this person concerned and the termination (in a legal manner) of his destructive activities a noble quest for people who pursue the cause of not only making life worth living for themselves and for their significant others, but who also want to facilitate a belief among members of the broader community that life is worth living.

Life is a struggle? Yes, it's a struggle for survival and a struggle to make life worth living. A Good Life is to succeed in this struggle. An Exceptionally Good Life is relative to what makes your life worth living. (If travelling to unfamiliar places is something that makes your life worth living, then to travel frequently and perhaps for extended periods of time would be something that makes your life exceptionally good – for you). A Noble Existence is to assist other individuals – even strangers – in their struggle; also to be active in promoting the notion that life is worth living, or that it can be. To lose your life so that others may live, is

Saturday, 28 February 2004

It can thus be said that I do not only ask about the meaning of my life anymore. The question that must first be answered is, “Why should my life have meaning?”

The answer is if you believe your life means something, you will have reason to live; if you have reason to live, it is probably because you believe your life has meaning.

None of us chose to be here. Most of us know too well that life is not always easy, and at times it can be downright miserable. Most people are also aware of several ways to end their lives. It will not be inappropriate at this point to state that it is of the utmost importance to find reasons

WHY  
YOU  
WANT  
TO  
LIVE.

Incidentally, the last sentence I started writing yesterday (“To lose your life so that others may live ...”) is still incomplete because everyone can think of their own nouns or phrases with which to complete the sentence. Possibilities include, “... is to be a hero”, “... is to be a giver of life”, and so on. People who have reasons why they want to live, but who still on the spur of the moment or after long deliberation decide to take the risk to possibly lose their own lives for the sake of allowing others to live, deserve to be honoured and remembered.

I also left the sentence incomplete last night because I was tired of thinking along those lines.

I can think of many reasons why I want to live: being with family and friends, love, possibly my own family someday, to be creative, to learn and understand more of the world. Currently some of these things give me reason on a daily basis to continue my existence. I am also compelled to do other things that do not, on a daily basis, provide reasons on their own to continue with my existence, but that will with the passage of time hopefully make possible a new environment and existential condition which, so I currently believe, will give me even more reason to live.



\* \* \*

To summarise and wrap things up:

Each one of us is born in a certain era and in a society with established rules and possibly a particular dominant culture, with a variety of resources with which to satisfy our needs, but also varying quantities and degrees of access. By the time we have reached a certain physical and mental maturity, we will have learned a few things about life: it's sometimes hard, and sometimes exciting; it's sometimes horrible and other times it's wonderful. Sometimes the most beautiful things come our way, and sometimes the opposite happens. We also become aware of the fact that everyone eventually dies, but also that it is easy enough to expedite our own death. Deep under the influence of all the aforementioned things we decide over the course of time WHAT we want to do with our lives, WHERE and possibly WITH WHOM. It is also quite a common occurrence that we contemplate the meaning of our lives, and a possible purpose for our existence.

While we are trying to work out answers to these questions, or perhaps after we have formulated a few satisfactory answers, or sometimes even before we consider any possibilities, we must know whether we WANT to live. (I say "know" rather than saying we should "contemplate" because although it is certainly a common phenomenon that people think about issues such as what you want to do with your life, where and with whom, I don't think too many people go and sit under a tree or on a rock to consider whether they actually want to live. Sometimes people reach a point when they become aware of a lack of enthusiasm to continue their existence. However, until someone reaches this point, they probably take it for granted that they want to live, seeing that it is already the existing reality and because they experience what can be regarded as an acceptable minimum degree of enthusiasm for the continuance of their own existence.)

If you are aware of a degree of willingness to give life a chance, or even a degree of enthusiasm, it follows that you will consider reasons why you would want to continue an existence that had started without you having had a choice about the date, place and other details that play a vital role in who and what you are.

Do you, therefore, want to continue with your life?

If so, why?

If you do not want to continue with your life and you would prefer to end it sooner rather than later, are you willing to accept responsibility – while you are still aware of it – for the consequences that your decision will have for the significant others in your life?

\* \* \*

In the end we only have ourselves, our relationships with other people, and what we believe in. The hope is always that we will find something to hold on to, something that will convince us that life is, at the end of the day, worth living. The hope is further that these good things will block our way to the abyss, should we seriously consider giving up.

## Results of a life

Friday, 11 June 2004

The question remains, what is the difference between “me, now” and “me, ten years ago”? What difference does it make that my knowledge about myself is more advanced now, or that I have defined myself more clearly?

Also, what’s the difference between me and anyone else whose knowledge about his or her SELF is not so advanced or someone who has not managed to define his or her SELF as clearly? Does it make me happier? More satisfied with myself? Does it enable me to more easily find peace with other people with whom I share a living environment?

Am I missing a great truth? How important is RESULT? [See notes in the piece, “The SELF is born” from Thursday, 8 April 2004.] Is this what distinguishes the artist from the salaried worker (if both have children, who can count as results of your life, or neither have any children)? Is it what distinguishes the person who sacrifices time and money for a good cause from the person who lives for him- or herself for the most part of their daily lives?

We come from Nothing, and we go back to Nothing. What we leave behind is what we have done with our lives – our handiwork, that which gives value to our lives while we are still living. (By the way, it’s strange that some people consider the “Nothing” reference as atheistic, and yet the line “You are dust and to dust you shall return” is central to the Christian funeral rite.)

Another question: How does the level of ENLIGHTENMENT an INDIVIDUAL reaches during their lifetime influence the RESULTS they leave behind?

\* \* \*

On Friday, 11 June 2004 (23:15) I consider the following two questions as two of the most vital questions that any person can ask themselves:

1. WHAT MAKES YOUR LIFE WORTH LIVING?
2. WHAT RESULTS OF YOUR LIFE ARE YOU LEAVING BEHIND (AT THE PRESENT MOMENT)?

# Identity, the SELF, and the result of everything

Wednesday, 23 June 2004

Four years ago, I also thought of myself as a writer, but on a daily basis, from getting up in the morning to going to bed at night, I was, for all practical purposes, my income-generating profession. What was this income-generating profession? I was an English teacher who, in all honesty, mostly failed in the job I was hired to do, five days a week. I thought of myself as a writer, and I did write (the entire “Personal Agenda: Book One” is proof), but I did not have the confidence in myself and my identity that I have now. I was, to a large extent, an unfulfilled, frustrated person, because I was unfulfilled and frustrated in my job.

Five hundred years ago in Europe – during the pre-industrial era, the position of the family in the feudal hierarchy was one of the key determinants of personal identity, at least as far as the community was concerned in whose midst the person found him- or herself. The *economic role* a person had to fulfil (if it were necessary at all for him or her to perform any kind of labour) was also linked, to a significant degree, to birth.

It can therefore be said that identity in Europe 500 years ago was largely dictated by *chance* – where the person was born, and the position of his or her family in the feudal hierarchy, and also by the *needs of the community* – which, together with parentage, determined the person’s economic role.

Since the voyages of discovery and the subsequent economic, political, scientific and industrial revolutions, *profession* has entered the arena as an additional and crucial determinant of identity. People who live out their lives in the industrialised world have, to some extent, a choice of *what role* they want to play in the community, *which specific needs*

of the community they want to fulfil, and even *where* they want to play this role and fulfil these needs, or in *what community*. Financial ability can also be mentioned as a further factor affecting people's view of themselves and how they define their identity. Money is also a great equaliser – stories of people who were born in the gutter and end up in palaces are still rare, but they do occur.

When it comes to the question of *who you are*, most people still look at the cards they were dealt that determine status and role in society – place of birth, gender, appearance and talents, socio-economic status of the family, and specifically in the case of adults, profession.

Most of these thoughts have already been noted in this literary project. What is the point of mentioning them again?

It was until recently a private pleasure for me to believe I expose the “truth” to people who have perhaps believed that a good job and lots of money are the best they can ever hope to strive for in life. I wanted to beckon such people closer, unlock a small antique box, and inside they would see a Greater Truth: “You do not know your TRUE self! What you are at this stage of your life is just a result of fate, your environment, and events that differentiate your life from that of the next person. You live under the illusion that you know who you are; an illusion that nevertheless enables you to function as an Individual in This Time and Place.”

The implication was that only when you look into your own soul and identify your “true self” can you finally claim full humanity, can you declare that you (finally) know who you “really” are. I thought that to discover – or to define – your “true self” was the Grand Prize at the end of a long and intensely personal journey.

However, new insights have started to undermine these views. (These fresh insights have also already been mentioned, but seeing that this touches on the topic of the value of a single human life, I reckon it is okay to revisit the issue.) What then, would I regard as more important than the

discovery and defining of the “true self”? The answer:  
**RESULTS OF YOUR LIFE.**

We all arrive as small bundles of flesh and blood on this planet, we scream out our humanity to anyone who wants to hear, get older and bigger and eventually the day arrives when we leave the show. The question, at the final count, should not be whether you existed and functioned as your own True Self, but what results you leave behind from your time on this planet.

Has your life produced more positive than negative results? Will the world breathe a sigh of relief when you finally utter your last words? Have you only endeavoured to satisfy your own needs, and to be as happy as possible for as long as possible? Is it important for you to leave behind positive results of your existence? What, indeed, are positive results? These are questions that every person can and should answer for him or herself.

I have discovered a few principles and implemented a few measures that make it possible for me to function as a fairly normal adult in the world and time in which I was born. I have also discovered that life outside my apartment door is to a large extent a game and that if you manage to decipher the rules and reconcile yourself to these rules to a satisfactory degree, it may just be possible for you to lead a happy life, and to declare at the end of it that your life was worth living.

Yet, if I have the option, I would want to live my life as a conscious effort to achieve more positive than negative results that I can leave behind, rather than to just know I was happy, and that my life was worth living, or even that I succeeded in finding my “true self”. (What is the value of a highly developed awareness of your own self, if it is not ultimately conducive to leaving behind positive results from your time on this planet?)

Can one go further and ask about the results of every day? Every week? Okay then, the average results of every year? Can you purchase “positive results” shortly before the end of your life? Who determines the quality of these results? And

what is the possibility that the beauty of a single day or even a single moment can get lost in the rush to leave behind a positive legacy of your existence?

Regardless of what you believe about the value and meaning of your own life, or about what makes your life worth living, regardless of the weight you attach to results of your life, one thing remains: **YOUR LIFE WILL ULTIMATELY PRODUCE RESULTS**. Whether these results will be more positive than negative depends to a large extent on yourself and the choices you make on a daily basis.



## **The formula that leads to result**

Sunday, 27 June 2004

What is the difference between me and Joseph Stalin, or between me and Bill Gates? The difference is results of our lives.

Joseph Stalin, Bill Gates and I were all born in particular places at particular times, within communities with particular needs. If Stalin were born in 1979 instead of 1879, in the same town in Georgia, with a relatively similar domestic situation (adjusted for 1979 reality), his life would have produced different results. The same can be said if I were born in 1771 and not in 1971. The importance of fate data – where you were born, when, and as whose child, and events later in your life about which you have no control, or did not have control – and the needs of the community can NEVER be underestimated as factors contributing to the final results of a particular person's life.

The only other factor that plays a significant role is choices. Stalin chose against the path that would have led to him becoming a priest, and chose in favour of joining Lenin and the Bolsheviks. So I have chosen, for example, against whatever employment I could have obtained in South Africa and opted in favour of teaching English in Taiwan to keep myself alive. The choices Joseph Stalin had made had a dramatic impact on who and what he became, and on the results he produced of his existence. The choices I have made so far in my life have also had a dramatic impact on who I am at the present moment, and on the results that I have so far produced of my existence.

The following formula can thus be suggested: **RESULTS OF YOUR LIFE = FATE + NEEDS OF THE COMMUNITY + PERSONAL CHOICES.**

## **Concoction full of thoughts**

Monday, 28 June 2004

00:02

Children are the easiest “result of a life” to produce. The hard part comes afterwards.

00:09

Parents – in the ideal parent-child scenario – leave children behind as a result of their lives. Business people generate profit and leave businesses behind. Entrepreneurs and inventors leave products behind. Artists leave art behind. Writers leave books behind. Architects leave buildings behind. Civil engineers leave infrastructure behind. Revolutionaries leave behind new political dispensations.

And then there is the revolutionary who also leaves behind children, the inventor who leaves behind children and profit, the writer who builds up a successful commercial enterprise from which many people can benefit until long after he has moved on ...

## Lose yourself, or apply yourself

Friday, 3 September 2004

(Johannesburg)

It is simple, it is obvious, and everyone knows it, but it is nevertheless useful to mention: in order to survive, you need to function. Identity (all those answers to the “Who am I?” question) serves a purpose, and that purpose is to enable you to function in a particular environment, at a particular historical time.

The question is then, is this who you really are?

The suggestion appears to be that to truly find yourself, you should lose yourself. This is a risk in the particular environments we live in and at this particular historical time. In order to survive, we must be able to function, and in order to function, we need to be able to introduce ourselves to others in our environment (we must *identify* ourselves, and for that we need what is called “identity”).

It can further be said that the environment (or environments) in which we are expected to function – and then within certain established boundaries of acceptability – is not conducive to taking such gigantic steps like “losing” oneself. (If there were a map of the psyche, such a place where you could lose yourself would be marked with the warning, “Here be dragons!”)

The only way a person could thus discover his or her “true self” in this life would be to withdraw to a place where they can still survive, but without functioning in fellowship with other people (for which they would need so-called identity).

Interesting to see what two specific religions have to say on this subject.

To some extent this is what Buddhism proposes – to withdraw from society, to not get attached to the material

world, and to focus your energy on preparing for the eventual release of the immortal element of your person from the seemingly endless cycle of life and death.

Christianity tells of Jesus who had a particular identity and who functioned relatively well at the time and in the place where he had been born, as both a carpenter and a preacher – the latter being relatively successful up until his death. He lived according to his beliefs, and ultimately died for what he believed in; or to put it differently, when the choice was put to him to water down his beliefs or die for them, he refused to deny himself or to renounce his beliefs. Jesus then sacrificed himself – who and what he was as a *person*; he died in, and according to the Christian faith, *for* this world, and eventually became, according to Christian doctrine, who he really is – God. According to Christian teachings, he therefore died as a particular man ... and became Universal God.

[Certain theologians and clever preachers might point out that Jesus as Particular Human was concurrently Universal God. Although this point is of great theological importance, this text is not the right platform to give this topic more attention.]

\* \* \*

Perhaps the purpose of this life is not to go where the dragons lie, that is, to “lose” yourself, but to get involved, to take sides, and to offer yourself, as it were, for a “good cause”.

Apply yourself therefore in this life to the realisation of good things, and prepare yourself through that for whatever awaits beyond your earthly existence. (I am aware of the dramatic new direction I am taking here.)

\* \* \*

“I’ve converted to a new faith.”

“Oh? What’s it called?”

“It’s called ... oh heck, I don’t know what it’s called. Does it matter?”

\* \* \*

I repeat what I wrote in a previous note: Perhaps the purpose of this life is not to lose oneself in order to find your truer, purer self, but to apply yourself, who and what you are right now, to a good cause.

[Why not just “apply” yourself to your own happiness?

I know my own reasons, my own motivations, what is good enough for me and what is not. I can therefore not answer this question for anyone other than myself ... for now.]

## **Some afterthoughts to “Lose yourself or apply yourself”**

Monday, 6 September 2004

Fear is the foundation on which the House of Life and Functional Identity is built. The question is, what lies buried beneath the house?

\* \* \*

The options: Withdraw or Get Involved

\* \* \*

“Fulfil your mission on earth through engagement with the world.”

Serve your purpose and leave ... or stay and enjoy the show for as long as your ticket is valid?

\* \* \*

If the answer is to withdraw, what then is the meaning of the way humans are born?

\* \* \*

The Buddha abandoned his wife and new-born child and walked into the wilderness.

Jesus became involved. He gave comfort, relieved pain where he could, and sacrificed himself – his physical self – for a “good cause”.

Muhammad also became involved. He waged war to transform the world so that people can live their lives in the “correct” way (according to his convictions).

\* \* \*

Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha) withdrew into the wilderness. Muhammad also initially withdrew – to a cave. Jesus spent forty days and forty nights in the desert.

Both Jesus and Muhammad withdrew ... and then got involved.

Even Nietzsche's hero – the eventual "superman" – withdrew for a decade, and then started with an attempt to redeem people from their ignorance.

\* \* \*

So: Withdraw ... and reappear as a transformed person – one with an agenda, a cause for which you are willing to die?

## **Lose yourself, or be yourself ...**

Tuesday, 7 September 2004

00:40

If anyone should ask me what the result is of ten years of thinking and writing about “things”, I would at first want to mention several themes. In practical terms however it comes down to an increasing conviction that I now understand how things work, that I am ready to move on. Also, that the day-to-day struggle for survival, for satisfying needs is a game in which I do not really want to participate anymore. What almost seems like a suicide wish is rather what I now call withdrawal – to “die” as participant in this world. Although the idea, superficially seen, is attractive – no more arguments or explanations, no more conventions or rules, I still hesitate at the crossroads: withdraw, or get involved?

(And then there is the possibility that the last five or ten years of my life – my last year in Stellenbosch, two years in Korea, and so far almost six years in Taiwan, can in a way be seen as my withdrawal from the world.)

A few months ago, I said: Find yourself.

Now I say: Lose yourself, or be yourself for a good cause.

08:19

What would your personality, your identity, who and what you are, look like if it were not built on fear – fear of want, fear of poverty, fear of death, fear of pain, and fear of loneliness?



14:16

Again, if you eventually get to the point where you declare that you know who you are, and you know why you are this person and not someone or something else, you may also realise that the search for your “real, anonymous self” has only just started.

You then stand before a choice: reduce the necessity to be who you are now – for the sake of functioning in a particular environment – by withdrawing from the world (relatively speaking); or, choose and start fulfilling a role (with the conscious knowledge that it is a role), and apply your knowledge, your experience, your skills and your personality in a way that gives your life value in a particular environment and at a particular time in world history.

In other words: Be who you are (now), for the sake of a good cause.

## **Desert or city | A principle**

Tuesday, 21 September 2004

### **DESERT or CITY?**

To lose your identity-for-the-sake-of-functioning, or to accept it and to be that person for the sake of a (good) cause ... say you have walked around in circles and criss-crossed the same areas for many years but you manage a straight path for long enough to finally come to the edge of the CITY, just before you enter the DESERT, where you no longer have to function according to conventions of time and place, and you turn around and walk back, re-entering the CITY, to live your life in pursuit and in the service of a Good Cause with the knowledge that you have about who and what you truly are, and who and what you need to be to survive and to function ... until the time comes when you will enter the DESERT in a different form.

Thursday, 23 September 2004

### **A principle**

Many of us are trapped in a life that is not the best we can achieve, because to make adjustments will require more effort than to merely maintain our current, sometimes frustrating life on a daily basis.

This is why change usually follows a proverbial flash of lightning that shocks us into action – an event or incident that makes our current existence unbearable.

## **To APPEAR or to DISAPPEAR**

Thursday, 23 September 2004

For years I searched for identity and tried to work out how I should appear to the world. I finally came to the realisation that you have to confront your “given self”, accept what you cannot change, and then taking into account the given material and given time and place, define who you want to be, how you want to appear to the world, whether you want to play any kind of role in the world, what role you might want to play, where you might want to play this role, and how you plan to meet your own needs where you currently are considering who you have decided to be and what role you have decided you would want to play, or what contribution you would want to make.

One question remains, however, after you have figured out these things: **DO YOU WANT TO APPEAR?**

If you choose to appear, all your answers to the above questions kick in.

Should you choose to not appear, everything changes. Most of your answers will become useless, with new questions that will need to be answered in order to fulfil a different set of needs (or similar physical needs, but psychologically different).

This is the question I am contemplating at this point of my life. Do I want to be who I am (now), in the place I have chosen to be this “I”, and to fulfil the role I have defined for myself, or do I want to disappear ... or rather, do I only want to make minimal, and mostly anonymous appearances in order to fulfil my basic physical needs?

Sunday, 10 October 2004

You get tired of explaining yourself to other people. You also become increasingly aware of your own caricature in

appearing to the world. You increasingly start to experience a need to withdraw.

Is this an inevitable part of spiritual evolution? Can the increasing desire to separate yourself from the rest of the world be avoided?

# Purpose of existence, three sets of comments

Saturday, 2 October 2004

## 1.

Every minute little thing around us serves a purpose – parts of a machine, the machine itself, organs and body parts, animals, insects, oxygen, other chemical elements, organic compounds. It would be utterly ridiculous to suggest that human beings, literally surrounded by purpose, do not serve some or other purpose themselves.

\* \* \*

Non-human life forms as well as inanimate things serve a purpose without having to “think” about it. Some people also end up fulfilling a purpose without ever having seriously contemplated the possibility, but many others have to consciously consider their own purpose. Why? Have we as humans changed in ways that make it a challenge to discover and fulfil our purpose?

## 2.

Two weeks ago I had this thought that nothing is ridiculous, if you really think about it. Things only appear ridiculous, so my note continued, if you have views and expectations about how things, or people, are supposed to be, and the reality does not match your views or expectations. What about this whole notion that human life has a purpose, then? Does the idea of an aimless existence not appear utterly ridiculous simply because I have this view, and even the expectation that human life should serve a purpose?

I reckon it is perfectly reasonable to expect that certain things are supposed to do or be X, Y or Z. If I am anticipating

the arrival of a guest and my doorbell rings, I am going to expect the person to enter my apartment in a normal fashion. If they walk in on their hands, buck-naked, with their feet kicking in the air, most people won't blame me for bursting out laughing. Why? The person's behaviour would be ridiculous.

Now, I'm willing to admit that reactions to the naked appearance have something to do with cultural beliefs and expectations of "normal behaviour" – expectations that differ from place to place and from one historical period to the next. The walking on hands when there's nothing wrong with your feet and legs, on the other hand, is simply not how one ... and the organ goes into a higher octave, the clapping becomes rhythmic ... it's simply not how human beings are designed.

The same can be said if I come home one evening and one of the cockroaches that regularly make a nocturnal appearance in my kitchen is busy cooking dinner, with a neat little apron covering its lower body. I will laugh – or shriek in terror. It's not what the cockroach is supposed to do. Why don't any of the cockroaches in my kitchen do such a thing? Why does the spider not watch TV in the living room when I'm working on my computer? Why are the street cats outside not sitting on the sidewalk with a bottle of beer in one paw, and a cigarette in the other? Because it's physically impossible. Because it's not what their genetic code dictates they ought to do. The physiology of cats makes it possible and natural for them to keep the mice population in check. The physiology of cockroaches enable them to ... do what they're supposed to do. The physiology of bees enables them to fly around and pollinate flowers. Flowers do something else.

Do I want to imply that everything should function like a well-oiled machine? Should all forms of life know their place, play their roles, and fulfil the various purposes of their existence? I admit it is somewhat problematic. Few people, myself included, like the idea that they have to recite their rhymes every waking hour of their lives and move their arms and legs in ways that have been preordained.

It's clearly not a black-and-white matter. Just because it isn't simple is, however, not an excuse to not recognise what you can only ignore if you are ridiculous, namely that we are surrounded with purpose.

### **3.**

Almost all vultures serve the same purpose. Do human beings as a species also serve a specific purpose, or do individual members of the species serve different purposes? If the latter is the case, why is this so?

Another question: How do you argue purpose without a "creator"?

## **In case anyone has forgotten**

Saturday, 23 October 2004

We need to function, and for that we need information – who we are, what we are, what we need, what we want, and how we should and may go about getting what we need and/or want.

We also need to create or assist in the creation of an environment that is conducive to us becoming what we want to be.

This process of “becoming” should however not be confined to people serving only their own agendas, their own needs or wants. The participation of individuals in a larger process which aims at a result that would benefit more than just a single person, or a handful of individuals, should always be sincerely and actively encouraged.

Why? For one reason, as you participate in the improvement of someone else’s environment, so someone else participates in the betterment of yours. We also share environments, both in the larger sense, and in a more domestic sense. If we all partake in the improvement of our common environments, we all benefit individually.



## **Planet filled with purpose and reason**

Sunday 9 January 2005

“Why should there necessarily be a purpose to human life?” someone may ask.

Looking at the natural world, everything from cloud to water to air to the antennae of a cockroach, it seems that everything has a purpose. Why on earth would the entire planet be filled with purpose and reason, yet there is no purpose and reason for a human being’s existence?

For me the question is rather: WHAT?

[05/01/12: The legs of a chimpanzee serve a clear purpose. But what is the purpose of the chimpanzee? Do each animal and each species really serve a purpose? Mosquitoes spread viruses and parasites that keep the populations of certain species in check ... yet mosquitoes and the cargo they carry are regarded in the modern world as an abomination that must be eradicated.

The demand for purpose is certainly hot for contemplation and discussion. I am fully open to the possibility that we simply attach purpose and meaning to what we observe in the physical world, including our own lives. Yet it seems the whole world is pervaded by this-thing-do-this and that-thing-does-that.

My intention is not to end up with a theological argument. For me it is rather a case of an assumption that if a pattern can be found throughout the whole visible world, that human life must certainly also serve a purpose. [[25/05/15: Can a human life really be compared to something like the paws of a chimpanzee or a human eye? Is the former not too abstract to have a purpose?]]

And just to complicate things, one should perhaps also wonder whether individual chimpanzees serve a unique purpose they unknowingly pursue ...]

[26/12/12: It is like a hierarchy: this cell serves a purpose; this collection of cells serves a purpose; this collection of several groups of cells forms a “foot”, which serves a purpose; the “foot” is attached to a “leg”, which serves a purpose ... but the overall organism to which the foot and the leg and the eye and the head and the hand etcetera are attached serves no purpose? Or “purpose” is just a figment of our imagination?]

## Ability to serve a purpose | Totalitarian state

Tuesday 8 February 2005

08:57

Two thoughts:

1. John X was not necessarily “put on earth” to fulfil a certain purpose, but he was born with the *ability* to fulfil a certain purpose – in the same way a woman is born with the ability to get pregnant and give birth, something that is closely associated with a certain role that has to be fulfilled, or a purpose that has to be served.

2. A totalitarian state says: Surrender to the state, and the state will give you an identity with a strong nationalistic character, something bigger than yourself you can identify with and where you will find a home where you will feel you belong, and many ways in which you can regularly confirm membership.

14:32

To be GIVEN the ability to serve a certain purpose, and the FREE WILL to do so or not.

## **The\_purpose\_of\_existence\_310305.doc**

Thursday, 31 March 2005

A fundamental shift has occurred in my thinking. Four years ago, I tried to formulate the purpose of my own existence as “creativity”. I believed that to be creative was the ultimate goal not only of my own existence but of any person’s existence, should he or she ever develop far enough from a state of primary needs fulfilment.

Human existence is lived out within a specific environment with unique (or semi-unique) social, cultural, economic, political and historical elements, and with the assistance of, and sometimes hampered by, a unique mixture of genetic characteristics GIVEN to each human being by the proverbial fate. As things are, some people find it hard to construct a life with a certain meaning within the environment that was given to them. Important CHOICES then have to be made. These individuals might need to make adjustments to their identity that may utilise elements from other sources as those which were originally given to them. They will probably change where they live and work – considering the vital importance of environment on who we are and how we apply our existence. Finally, performing the roles they will eventually define for themselves will constitute not only an existence with a certain meaning, but also the pursuit of a specific purpose of their existence.

Should anyone challenge me at this moment with the question of how creativity fits into this whole matter, I would have to admit that I do not have an answer ready to recite. To be creative, to live out your earthly existence as a creator is no longer enough for me as an answer to the question of the purpose of my existence.

The search for the True Purpose of Human Existence cuts like a ritualistic blade through the soft flesh of what we call “life”. Where do humans come from? Is there a reason for our

presence on this planet? What type of questions did our earliest ancestors ask? Is this thing of asking questions a by-product of our development, or part of what drives us forward? Was it always in the proverbial cards of what humans would become? Is there an invisible force behind human existence? Was and is the assumption of this “force” that we have to serve some purpose? If so, why is it not clearly laid out to us? Has it all been laid out for us more than once, with many of us simply continuing to ignore it as many of our ancestors also did? Why, if we accept for the moment that it is indeed important to serve a purpose, is the true purpose of our existence not again and again and again spelled out as a matter of daily cosmic ritual?

A person is to an extent that can never be exaggerated a product of their environment. The set of sounds with which you communicate and the vocabulary in which your thoughts take shape, the beliefs that you adhere to, the ambitions you define as your own, where you live, where you work, how much income you earn every day, month or year, where you sleep, on what kind of furniture, under what kind of bedding, with whom, what you do between the moment of waking up and the moment you drift off again at the end of the day, how often you leave your home, for how long, where you transport yourself and with what kind of transport medium, and how all these things interact with your consciousness can all be directly or indirectly traced back to the environment you were “given” at birth. (Even if the environment where you live out your adult existence is radically different from the environment that was given to you, your chosen environment remains inextricably linked to your given environment because your ultimate choice was most likely influenced by your given environment and was probably to some extent a reaction to it.)

It is furthermore true that the environment where your existence started and from where you received your earliest “programming” is also the primary source of information about the purpose and meaning of human existence. Now, 500

or 1500 years ago this was also the case, but the world that many of us are aware of in the 21<sup>st</sup> century extends considerably beyond the boundaries of the town, city or village in which our existence is lived out. Mass media and the Internet also expose us to alternative ideas about the possible purpose and meaning of our lives that two or three generations earlier could not have contemplated on even the most tranquil of mornings.

The sources we can consult, should we desire to pinch off a minute somewhere to contemplate the issue, is much richer than a generation or ten ago. Despite this many still choose to seek answers from local guides, whether parents, grandparents, friends, pastors, priests, rabbis, imams, self-help gurus or popular entertainers. Answers can certainly be gotten from these people. My question remains: what are these answers? What possibilities are offered by the usual line-up of self-appointed or community conscripted Providers of Truth and Guidance?

Maybe a question closer to the heart of one hiding behind a computer screen filled with words he is typing while no one disturbs him in the privacy of his own apartment: **WHAT ANSWERS WOULD I GIVE SOMEONE ON THE QUESTION OF THE TRUE PURPOSE AND MEANING OF PEOPLE'S EARTHLY EXISTENCE?**

[One-hundred-and-seventy-two words neatly woven into four paragraphs followed, to make up for the fact that I could not think of any clear answers. One-hundred-and-seventy-two words have therefore bitten the dust.]

\* \* \* \* \*

Monday, 18 April 2005

An American aid worker (a woman named “Marla”) died last weekend in Iraq (roadside bomb). She was probably in many ways an ordinary woman – as ordinary a person as most of us. What was extraordinary about her was her value for a certain community of people who are trapped in a primitive struggle for survival. What was extraordinary about her was her willingness to lose her life for this struggle.

\* \* \* \* \*

Thursday, 21 April 2005

Walter Reuther (1907-1970), American labour leader: “There is no greater calling than to serve your fellow man. There is no greater contribution than to help the weak. There is no greater satisfaction than to have done it well.”

\* \* \* \* \*

## **Everything revolves around the POINT**

Wednesday, 4 May 2005

15:41

Sometimes a person's life unfolds in a way that leads you to understand that there is a POINT around which your life revolves. What then happens is that everything you do can be seen in terms of how far away this activity is from this POINT. Basic hygiene and food intake, for example, sustain the body, which is necessary for you to allow your life (which is not viable without the body) to revolve around this POINT. So it is with work, or then income generating labour, which is done in the first place to earn capital to sustain your life (unless your work is the POINT of your life, which is a matter you have to sort out with yourself). Another example is my own EFL projects. I am currently contemplating whether a series should consist of three or five books, how many pictures will be included, whether the book should be in colour or black and white, how many and what kind of exercises I should include, the dimensions of the book, and so on. As long as I know these decisions I have to make are still related to the POINT of my life (in this case in a secondary/sustaining/conducive role), I can continue with this activity without developing an existential crisis about it.

17:02

Everything revolves around the POINT.

The POINT is not a goal you strive for and reach – it is something around which your life revolves. You do however strive for a long time to accomplish something so that your life can revolve around this POINT.



[27/01/15: What is “purpose” and what is “point”? A purpose is a reason for doing something (like staying alive). You can either succeed with this purpose, or you can fail. A point is an axis around which things revolve. Why do things revolve around this particular axis? Perhaps because it enables you to strive towards a particular purpose. Therefore: to strive towards and fulfil the purpose of your life, your life must revolve around a certain point.]

[13/06/15: A woman says, “To keep my children happy and to raise them properly so that they themselves can one day become productive members of society and help maintain civilisation, is the purpose of my life ... No, wait. The woman actually says: “The purpose of my life is to make a contribution to make the world a decent place to live in, for myself, for my children, for all the other people I love, and for all those with whom we share our world. Considering that I see that as the purpose of my existence, I see my primary role at this stage of my life as keeping my children happy and raising them properly so that they can also someday become productive members of society and do their part to maintain civilisation. To do this, to play this role properly, my children have to be the POINT around which my life currently revolves.”]

Saturday, 7 May 2005

To achieve independent wealth through entrepreneurship and creativity, in order to own (most of) my own time, in order to dedicate – to apply – my daily existence to the pursuit of goals that will not only be to my own benefit, but that will be beneficial to the fulfilment of the potential of other people to lead purposeful, constructive, benevolent and happy lives. To allow my own earthly existence to revolve around this central POINT.

## Value for only a few other people

Monday, 9 May 2005

Busy reading the vocabulary list to the 16:30 to 18:00 class when the word “irrelevant” pops up in my mind, as in “I am afraid after all my efforts my life is in fact irrelevant, with value for only a few other people ...”

– a mundane life –

– a life of no significance –

[16/06/15 “value for only *a few* other people” – what is the magic number? 7? 53? 125? when your life has value for *how many* people will you not regard your life as irrelevant anymore? you save one person from drowning – do you look around for other people that may be drowning because one just isn’t enough? you save one person from soul-destroying poverty – not good enough? not even worth the effort, you’ll think?]

## Worthy of existence | Teleology | Reasonable philosophy

Thursday, 12 May 2005

For the past ... say, twenty years or so I have been in the habit of believing I must constantly prove that I, Brand Smit, am worthy of existence, that my birth was not an error of judgement, that I have to prove – constantly – that I am indeed worthy of the blood flowing in my veins. Whatever the reason for this, it is going to drive me into an early grave.

Saturday, 14 May 2005

I have to let go. I have to accept that my life will end sooner or later, that the world will continue without me, almost ... almost as if I had never been here.

See the true relationship between things, and your own place in the Greater Reality.

I must recognise that my life is not nearly as valuable as I would like to think. (Can a suicide-of-sorts be incorporated into this concept?)

\* \* \*

A case therefore of recognising that your greatest fear is to a large extent true? There is certainly a pleasant element to this kind of acceptance ...

Sunday, 15 May 2005

“Aristotle came more and more to think of the universe as a vast complex of organisms each striving to attain the end assigned by Nature to it. [...] The Aristotelian system is often described as ‘teleological’.” ~ From the introduction to Aristotle’s *Ethics*

17/06/15:

“A teleology is an account of a given thing’s purpose. For example, a teleological explanation of why forks have prongs is that this design helps humans eat certain foods; stabbing food to help humans eat is what forks are for.

A purpose that is imposed by a human use, such as that of a fork, is called extrinsic. Natural teleology contends that natural entities have intrinsic purposes, irrespective of human use or opinion. For instance, Aristotle claimed that an acorn’s intrinsic telos is to become a fully grown oak tree.

Though ancient atomists rejected the notion of natural teleology, teleological accounts of non-personal or non-human nature were explored and often endorsed in ancient and medieval philosophies, but fell into disfavor during the modern era (1600-1900).

In the late 18th century, Immanuel Kant used the concept of telos as a regulative principle in his Critique of Judgment. Teleology was also fundamental to the speculative philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel.

Contemporary philosophers and scientists are still actively discussing whether teleological talk is useful or accurate in doing modern philosophy and science. For instance, in 2012, Thomas Nagel proposed a neo-Darwinian account of evolution that incorporates impersonal, natural teleological laws to explain the existence of life, consciousness, rationality, and objective value.”

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teleology>

Monday, 16 May 2005

13:51

The Greek philosophers, or then specifically Aristotle, did not claim authority from the outset on theological grounds which they had assumed everyone, or the majority of the population,

accepted. Their foundation was one of reason, of a group of people sitting around a proverbial table saying, “Let us agree that we are intelligent beings, that we are aware of our existence and that we are capable of good actions, and also capable of the opposite of good actions. Let us continue to define what ‘good’ means, in practice, and what ‘bad’ means, how we can pursue the former, and the reason why it is better.”

In this regard my own modest efforts of the past few years can be considered closer to the Greek philosophers of more than 23 centuries ago than to modern preachers and theologians.

18:24

Am I simply another random fusion of sperm and egg that has so far survived for 33 years and a few months, and who struggle every day with billions of others on this planet, or millions on this island, or thousands in this city for food, shelter, a little comfort and some entertainment every now and then – in short, who struggle for a place in the sun, OR ... can I make a contribution to other people’s lives, something that will transcend the value of my own life beyond this time and place?

[31/12/2015: The answer to the first part of the question is, yes. The answer to the second part: it would be good if you can.]

## Value in the Greater View of Things

Wednesday, 1 June 2005

15:41

The feudal order and the organised societies that followed the feudal order are good illustrations of how one is born with certain information – never anchored in concrete, but according to which people nevertheless live out their lives.

A similar situation exists today. Unless you are born with excellent – indeed, superior – pedigree and other information in terms of position, wealth and prescribed role and function – you fall in the group in which most people find themselves: where your position and your value for all practical purposes amount by default to next to nothing in the Greater View of Things, or Only of Value for Friends and Family.

What it comes down to is that by the time you are a functioning adult, you sort into one of three groups: a) next to nothing in the Greater View of Things, Only of Value for Friends and Family; b) role, function and value that extend beyond your Circle of Friends and Family; c) next to nothing in the Greater View of Things, and of No Value for Any Living Being. (Train arrives. The point: if it is not given, make it a reality.)

16:08

Statement: Some people's lives only have value for friends and family, and by chance possibly for a few outside this circle. (Let us call it for the moment Type A.)

Statement: Some people's lives have value for family and friends, and by their own will also for a few outside this circle. (Type B)

Statement: Some people's lives have value for family and friends, and by their own will also for people they will never personally meet, in places that will never be visited by this person. Thus, his or her value exceeds the time and place where his or her existence takes place. (Type C)

Statement: Some people's lives have value for family and friends, and by their own will for people they will never personally meet, in places they will never visit; these individuals' names will be recorded in the official political history of a nation. (Type D)

Statement: Same as Type D, but to a significant extent because of given factors rather than own will, for example, the crown prince of the British royal family. (Type E)

Note: Some Types A accept their fairly limited value. Others murmur, but never actually do anything to change it (can therefore be called, respectively Type A and Type A2).

Statement: Some people's lives have no value for friends and family (possibly because of the absence of the person in the lives of family and former friends, and/or the absence of friends and family in the person's life), and also has no value for any human or animal. (Type A2)

## **Not everyone is important**

Monday, 6 June 2005

20:20

In the end 99.9% of the people on Earth comes and goes, and they either contribute in their own way to the maintenance and growth of civilisation, or they contribute to its destruction. Of only 0.01% of people and perhaps even less it will be said in hindsight that they were exceptional, superior to most of their peers, even that they were “destined” for important roles.

22:20

Everyone wants to know they are important. The idea that you are of no importance to anyone – neither man nor beast – is for most people too much to bear. How do people affirm their value? How do they make up for it when they become convinced that their value is insignificant?



## The kind of adults we become

Saturday, 2 July 2005

11:35

I am watching a Kevin Bacon movie, and a specific plot line catches me offside for the umpteenth time in my adult life. Now, I know it is just a movie, but it's not science fiction, it is a dramatised version of a life with which I am sure most viewers, who certainly count in the millions, can associate.

The story goes as follows: a young man who has ambitions to become a writer and who has a view of himself as someone who does not merely want to do the same as the proverbial everyone else marries a young woman whose character is not so clearly developed as her husband's, but who one can assume has ambitions of a more conventional life. They buy a house in a middle-class neighbourhood. He gets a job at an advertising company and tries to write in the evenings, but does not get much done. He doesn't really know what he wants out of life, but nonetheless works to maintain the "house" that is his life – a life he has not chosen as much as it just happened as a standard option for which he has taken the right actions at the right times like showing up for a job interview and showing up at the bank to fill out forms for a home loan. He wonders why he cannot just accept himself the way he is, and be satisfied with where he is.

As could be expected, it does not take long before pregnancy and children become part of the story. The man complains that his life is without meaning, and it is increasingly suggested that fatherhood will make a big difference.

The story thus follows a familiar plot:

- Man and woman get married.
- Man and woman are uncertain about the value of their lives in the Greater View of Things (and although it

has been mentioned that we do not always live in the Greater View of Things, we also do not only live in the world of sour milk and annoying pop tunes and screaming children – all these things are part of something bigger, and most of us know this). They may even believe that they have to justify their existence. They must show the world that they too are worth something, and that they can make a worthy claim to the oxygen they breathe and the sun warming their cheeks.

- They get jobs somewhere, buy a house, and try to fill holes that doubts about the value of their existence blaze into their consciousness like an open flame would burn holes through delicate rice paper.

- They have children – the joy, the profound change in their daily lives, the happiness and the congratulations from all serve to emphasise that they have reached a good point. They are parents now, which means new roles to play as well as the additional value this gives to their lives in the Greater View of Things. The child or children are raised to initially be like their parents (language, sports preferences, religious affiliation, other loyalties), and to perhaps lead similar lives after a few decades. The whole cycle continues: have children, adulthood, have children, adulthood, have children ...

What is my problem with this? I like children! My own sisters have beautiful children and I am happy for them! I may also want to have children one day! What is my problem with this most primitive, most widespread of phenomena? My problem is the type of adults that many people become. And I believe the kind of adults that people become are strongly influenced by the reason or reasons why they came into existence in the first place. [Example: Prince William of Britain: reason for coming into existence: to become king (or queen if the dice had fallen the other way).] If I look at my own case, my own parents may have had me because they had wanted more children for their own selfish reasons. I turned out okay. As an adult I make witty albeit slightly cynical

comments on the lives of other adults, I pay my bills (late, but still), and I believe I make my contribution, however small, to the progress of civilisation, or at least to preserve what is good.

Is this not in the end good enough?

I think it is time that I face one of the hardest truths ever: Not everyone's life is important in the Greater View of Things. To have one life with value that exceeds the primary needy-organism-behaviour-to-satisfy-needs model requires possibly dozens of primary models. This is a horrible truth: that my life in the Greater View of Things may be worth more than someone else's, and that someone else's life may be more valuable than mine – that my life can be regarded as disposable if necessary to keep someone else alive whose life is regarded as more precious and more valuable than my own. (And I am not referring to the value of my life in the sense that my life has value for my mother, and John X's life has value for Mother X. I am talking of value where personal relationships are not a measure.)

What this means is that perhaps as many as nine out of every ten adults must produce offspring to give value to their lives and to contribute their share to fulfil the needs of the community in the decades to come (children become teachers and doctors, and road builders, and so forth). One in ten, or maybe just one in every hundred people, does more – something that will transcend their value beyond their intimate inner circle and the labour value they have for the local economy. To produce these one-out-of-ten or one-out-of-one-hundred people, **MOST ADULTS SHOULD HAVE CHILDREN**. That is how it is. It is time that I accept this.

(Incidentally, the movie's name is *She's having a baby*.)

23:40

Again it comes down to this: there is no universal human value. Each person has to work out his or her own value in the

Greater View of Things. If he or she is not satisfied with the preliminary outcome, he or she must take action to achieve their desired value – in so far as it is within his or her ability.

What is your value if you do not work it out yourself, and if you are not among the group of people bothered with their value in the Greater View of Things? Then your value is the result of fate – time and place of birth, gender, family, socio-economic status, race, etcetera, needs of the community – X number of teachers are needed, X number of garbage removal workers, and so forth, and choices and actions you take, or have taken to satisfy your needs up until the current moment.

Great. (Possible title or subtitle for an essay: Initially about a movie.)

[Say you work out your own value – whatever that means, and you think you too can be counted among the group of people who are bothered with their value in the Greater View of Things, is this not ultimately also 100% part of your process to satisfy your own needs? One out of every 100 people who will then rise above the proverbial masses do so for the same reason a subsistence farmer plants a potato and harvest it: to satisfy their own needs.]

## Statements and questions | Four goals

Monday, 25 July 2005

10:25

Eventually all questions about identity, religion, beliefs, integrated view of existence and philosophy come down to a practical matter: How should I function? How should I live from sleep to sleep? What should I do with an existence I cannot but recognise?

15:45

All those questions from the 10:25 text are about more than just functioning. It also comes down to the results you will leave of your existence.

\* \* \*

I make a statement: My favourite colour is green. Someone else hears it and think, “What is my favourite colour?”

I say, “If I had NT\$100,000, I will go to China for three months.”

The other person says, “Oh. What will I do with NT\$100,000?”

I say, “The purpose of my life is to \_\_\_\_\_.”

The other person hears this and reflects on his or her own life. “What is the purpose of my existence?” the person asks.

The point is not to only ask questions but to also say what you believe, what you do and how you see things. Another person hears what you say, or reads what you have written, and an inner voice also kicks in in the other person’s mind, asking some of the same questions you have contemplated over the years.

18:50

Question: What is life about? (One of several possible formulations of what is basically the same question.)

Answer: Functioning + End Results

Saturday, 30 July 2005

My four goals in life are as follows:

1. To be happy, and if I can be happy with someone, that will be outstanding.
2. Creative independence – to create and to produce what I find good and not as dictated by others.
3. Financial independence – to never have to look in anyone's eyes for money; to have enough money to make possible the following: creative independence, in reality and not just as an ideal; to do things that make me happy; to create a home environment, or to co-create a home where I will be comfortable working, spending time with other people and resting; to afford a lifestyle I have been pursuing for many years.
4. To help other people in their struggle for survival, and/or to be of value in their own efforts to develop an understanding of their existence that will enable them to lead happy and productive lives; also to contribute to a healthier habitat for humans and animals.

## **To leave something behind**

Thursday, 29 September 2005

Ten hope that they will leave something of value behind of their lives on Earth. Six realise after X number of years as an adult that the only way they can leave something behind of their lives while playing a satisfactory role is to have children. Three eventually come to believe that they have no chance of leaving behind anything or playing any kind of significant role, or they have no motivation for the actions that will be required of them to leave something of value behind or to play a more or less valuable role.

\* \* \*

The above is an oversimplified representation. In fact, many probably start with the process of leaving something behind, things go wrong, and their lives end stripped of all dignity and self-respect.

Other people have children in a desperate attempt to appear better to themselves and to family and friends, and then, ten years later, as a result of a confluence of circumstances they play a prominent role or make a positive contribution, in addition to raising their children, that will leave an indelible and very constructive result of their existence.

And then there are others who reckon hedonism is their happy fate and personal religion, who sometimes end up as martyrs for a good cause for which they as hedonists, years earlier, never would have pinched off a minute of their time.

\* \* \* \* \*

Wednesday, 30 November 2005

Struggle is a key element of our existence – initially for survival, and then for something more. Figuring out what this “more” is becomes part of our life journey.

Also, how do we struggle? How do we exist from day to day? We exist, and maintain and direct our struggle, by becoming a Particular Person, with a more or less unique identity. This identity enables us to survive and to function. Our personal struggles are given direction by way of tradition, culture or religion, or it is defined by us in a complex process that includes elements of a variety of sources. This struggle becomes the purpose of our existence – it gives value and meaning to our lives.

\* \* \* \* \*



## **A life that serves a purpose | Intelligent, creative agent – or agents**

Tuesday, 6 December 2005

I need for my life to have purpose. To this, some people may respond in a somewhat sceptical fashion. “Purpose?” they’ll ask. “Purpose in life is a primitive religious concept. It supposes things that cannot be proven. It also implies that your life is worthless unless it serves a purpose.”

My reply: Say you have two men, Mister A and Mister B. The latter has no desire to feel that his life has purpose. His focus is mostly on himself, and his own material and emotional needs. He works – because he needs the money; he marries – because it’s better than being alone; and he makes friends – because he likes the feeling of being liked, he likes the companionship, and it relieves his boredom. His life thus consists of family, friends, work, and doing things he enjoys. He does not actively strive for any action or participation that would make him look at his life with the conviction that he has served some (good) purpose. (Chances are that he inadvertently does serve and has served a good purpose, but for the sake of this argument it is important to illustrate his case as one where no purpose is actively and deliberately served.)

Mister A, on the other hand, is one of those people who believe merely existing – working, having a family of his own, being a friend and having friends, and doing things he enjoys – is not enough. He feels a strong urge to serve a good purpose – something that would give his life more value and meaning. Say he chooses as his purpose in life providing legal aid to people who do not have the means to obtain this type of assistance when they need it. Over the course of 30 years he provides legal assistance – directly, or indirectly through an agency he founded – to hundreds, even thousands of people. (It might be that he pursues this purposeful life as an adherent

of some religious belief system, which will also give him the satisfaction of knowing that his service is sanctioned by his particular religious community. It might also be that he is an atheist, and that he is motivated by the self-respect his service inspires, and by the respect and gratitude he gets from other people. Religiously motivated or not, his choice of pursuing a purposeful life would have the same end result for the people who benefit from it.)

Let's say both Mister A and Mister B were born in the same year, in the same city, with similar cultural backgrounds and socio-economic standing, and let's also say they die in the same year after short illnesses. Mister B's life was a good one. He will be missed by his colleagues, friends and family. Mister A also had a good life, and he, too, will be missed by colleagues, friends and family. What is the difference? Mister A's life benefited hundreds, even thousands of people. His life had value far beyond the value of the life of the average individual who does not actively pursue a purposeful life. He dies with the satisfaction that his life served a purpose. He lived his life with the satisfaction that not only his inner circle of colleagues, family and friends but many other people benefited from his life and the choices he had made. Mister B lived without this satisfaction, and he died knowing that beyond his inner circle no one really benefited much from his existence. Hopefully this would not have mattered to him, since he had professed early on in his adult life that he does not feel the need to serve any purpose nor for his life to have value and meaning beyond that which it has or had for himself and his inner circle.

Then my partner-in-dialogue responds: "So it's about personal satisfaction? Or is it about numbers – the one guy affecting hundreds, even thousands, the other guy maybe 20?"

My reply: One guy's life positively affected the lives of two dozen or so people. The other one positively affected hundreds, even thousands. What is exactly is your question?

[\*]

Partner-in-dialogue: “Say I tell you there’s a new drug on the market that has no side effects, is very affordable, and it contains a natural component that provides your brain with exactly the same feeling as the satisfaction one would derive from a purposeful life. It will thus give you the same kick, without the effort!”

Me: And the people whom I may have positively affected stay unaffected. Very real results of my intended actions would remain unfulfilled. I’d say no thanks. I will stick to the effort.

\* [Question is perhaps this: Is affecting two people better than affecting just one? How about affecting 2,243 versus affecting the lives of 2,242 people? How about one person positively affecting the lives of 50,000 people and the other person positively and constructively affecting only 76 people’s quality of life?]

Wednesday, 7 December 2005

For many people the idea that there is no intelligent, creative agent behind everything that exists is the most preposterous thing anyone can imagine. What, or who this agent is – or what or who these *agents* are, is something that people have pondered, argued about, fought and died for since the dawn of human thought. We have given this supposed agent – or these agents – names. We have given him/her/them human-like qualities. We have even imagined the gender and appearance of this supposed agent – or of these agents. Many people have settled on a simple term: “God.”

We can continue to contemplate, argue, fight and die for particular beliefs about this agent – or these agents. It is apparently in our nature to do so, and if it gives us a sense of purpose, security and meaning in our lives, then I guess it makes sense to some degree that we continue to do so. One thing remains certain: for many people, nothing will ever take anything away from the idea that an intelligent, creative force

is the only reasonable explanation for our own existence, and for the existence of all other forms of life.

Why this supposed intelligent, creative force caused our existence, whether or not our existence serves a purpose, and even the possible nature of this supposed agent – or of these agents, these are questions that will remain as fascinating as they have always been.

## A shameful, embarrassing approach to life

Thursday, 26 January 2006

20:13

Fear of embarrassment: the large, hidden cause for a certain approach to life I have never been able to shake. I have always thought if you reach your dying moment, and five minutes earlier you were still jumping around laughing in joy that you were still alive, how embarrassed you would feel in that final moment before you breathe your last breath. Imagine how silly, how stupid you would feel! Almost as if you'd like to say to the Angel of Death, "I am sorry I was so frivolous just five minutes ago ... if I had known ... and I should have known! If I had considered the possibility at that moment that I could be uttering my final words in five minutes' time ... I would have been so much more solemn and sincere! I wouldn't have made jokes or listened to such upbeat music! In fact, I disrespected Death by being so frivolous! Now look at me! I feel so terribly ashamed!"

So then you are serious all the time. Or if not all the time, you make sure you think about death often enough, and about terrible things that can happen, and about all the situations that could bring you trouble if you are not careful, so that when you do get into a difficult spot, or worse, if you're staring Death in the face, at least you don't have to be embarrassed. So that no one, least of all yourself, can say at that final moment, "Yes, and to think you were having such a good laugh just moments ago!" Or, "Just the other day you were so happy. How silly you look now!"

Fear of embarrassment – how many carefree days, how much happiness do I not sacrifice on the altar of this fear?

\* \* \*

What is fear of embarrassment? What is shame? Is it not to be exposed for what you are – naked, small, vulnerable, frightened, and at the end, mortal, like a plant or an insect? This despite our best efforts to make ourselves appear better and more sophisticated than plants or insects or other animals.

“Are we not more important than plants or insects?” you might ask.

Of course we are, many would argue. But at what point does More Important Than A Plant Or An Insect become our demise? At what point do pride and self-love become the causes of our fear to be exposed?

In the end: What are we? What is our real value? How is it measured? And is one last moment of shameless recognition of our mortality worth the effort to avoid a careless moment of being slightly too joyous?

20:43

As if you will fall even further when Death and Misfortune hit you while you tried to worry a little less and be a little happier, and every so often succeeded.

But keep struggling, stay poor, keep wallowing in the dirt ... at least you won't have far to fall.

And dream! Yes, dream of lots of money and happy times and doing whatever you want! Dreams are cheap! Just make sure you never go so far as to work hard enough to turn your dreams into reality. Because once you have a lot of money, once you see how nice it is ... that days go by that you don't worry about a thing, when you can travel and visit interesting places and spend time with family and do things you enjoy ... you'll climb higher and higher ... and you'll have so much further to fall.

Twenty years ago I would have thought God would look at me with anger in his eyes if I aim to climb too high. Now it is Death and Misfortune. And you have to respect them. “Stay low,” you tell yourself. “Struggle. Keep dreaming, though. It doesn't matter after all ...”

## **Purpose and reason – at least three possibilities**

Saturday, 29 July 2006

Possibility 1: There is a predetermined plan and purpose for my existence – which means each and every human life of the last 30,000 years plus had to be planned in the minutest detail to produce (among others) “Brand Smit”. This means nothing could have been left to chance, and no factor that could spoil everything, like free will, could have been allowed to any significant degree. Which means no one is guilty of any actions they commit that are not “good” because everyone is just playing their roles. (A so-called criminal is therefore just as guilty of his or her crime as the *actor* Anthony Hopkins is guilty of murder in the film *Silence of the Lambs*.)

Possibility 2: There is no predetermined plan, but it is possible that a plan and purpose were set up after my birth, taking into account known facts about my existence (background, ethnicity, language, etc.) as well as statistical possibilities.

Possibility 3: Free will, which means I define the purpose and reason for my existence, and pursue it as well as I can, according to my abilities and conviction of my beliefs.

(I did not plan to end the note on the “free will” possibility; it was simply the third option. There may be other possibilities.)

## I decide the purpose of my existence

Tuesday, 1 March 2011

I look at a showerhead, and I see something whose existence has a purpose. I also know it is something that was designed with a particular purpose in mind, and manufactured to serve this purpose.

Some people believe it is logical to deduce that if there is a purpose to your existence, that you – you specifically – were designed and manufactured to certain specifications by an Invisible Force to serve this purpose.

It will be dishonest of me to create the impression that I believe so too.

Where does this leave me? One possibility is to accept that my life serves no purpose.

Suppose, however, I *decide* that my life has to serve some or other purpose. In that case, I can design, as far as possible, my life, even my person, for this purpose. I would have to work within available means, but is that not what the people behind the showerhead also did? I will thus for all practical purposes *manufacture* a life to serve a particular purpose.

My life will then eventually serve this purpose, because I *decided* it should be the purpose of my existence.



## **Three broad possibilities for how you can live your life**

Monday, 12 March 2012

I've been thinking for quite some time that I have to draw everything I've written to a conclusion, to provide an answer to the question: Now what?

One idea that might be worked in: I believe there are three broad possibilities for how you can live your life.

Option one: You live for yourself, for your own benefit and happiness, and for your own well-being.

Option two: You withdraw. You spend as much time as possible on your own. Perhaps you do so because you prefer your own company, or just to keep your life simple. Perhaps you do it as part of a spiritual experiment, what some people call "searching for God" or "being close to God". And perhaps you opt for this lifestyle for a few months or even a few years to sort things out for yourself.

Option three: You live for someone else, or for something you believe in. You choose to temporarily suspend your own happiness and well-being and the fulfilment of your own dreams and ambitions, or you choose to permanently sacrifice these things in order to assist another person or other people in their struggle, or to labour for the growth of an institution, or to promote a cause you believe in.

Sometimes one of these lifestyles dominates a person's life to such a degree that it's not difficult to see under what "option" the person sorts. There are also people who combine aspects of all three manners of living. Some people believe it is wrong to live only for themselves, so they give Number Three strong consideration. Even though most people like to be part of something bigger than themselves and truly enjoy other people's company, they sometimes yearn for Number Two – especially when "everything" becomes "too much". And even when someone sacrifices the best part of every day

for their children or for friends and family, they will sometimes do something just for themselves – even if someone else may have to carry a heavier load for a short time as a result.

## **Drenched with specific purpose and function**

Friday, 20 July 2012

Imagine a thick slice of white bread. You spread a thin layer of butter on it, and then you pour about seven tablespoons of golden syrup over the bread. Seven tablespoons. Then you go watch TV for an hour. What do you get when you go back to the kitchen? As expected, you will find yourself a slice of bread completely drenched with syrup.

So it is with purpose and all life on earth. Everything from the eye of the fly to the parts of a microorganism, to your own eyes, skin, toes, blood and bones – everything is completely drenched with specific purpose and function. [Apparently quite a complicated issue. Initially, scientists thought much of the human genome was “junk DNA”. Then they discovered that they may have missed a few things.]

How on earth can every part of every small and large organism and creature on this planet have a specific purpose, but the whole of the fish or cockroach or rhino does not? How can every small part of a human being have a specific “task” to do, but the person as a whole does not? How can someone shrug and claim that his life does not actually serve a purpose? And if it does serve a purpose, they do not know what it is.

Of course no one is born with a note tied around their neck that explains what the purpose of their life is supposed to be, but how many people aren't exactly psyched up to seek out what might be the purpose of their lives?

Does human life have a purpose? Does each individual have a specific role to fulfil? If so, who – or what – determines what it is? And what kind of possibilities are we looking at?

Many people who wonder about these things turn to their local minister, pastor, priest, imam or rabbi and expect these figures to tell them what the purpose of their lives is supposed to be, to spell it out for them, to give them clear instructions.

I think that's lazy. I think that's the easy way. I think it is a shortcut that too many people take.

Question: Does the education we receive from our parents and at school and in the broad community prepare us to sort out or discover what the purpose of our lives may be?

If not, what can we do as adults to make it easier for the next generation? What should we do as adults today to give this quest a reasonable chance of success – for the next generation, and also for ourselves?

-----

More information:

“Junk DNA”

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noncoding\\_DNA#Junk\\_DNA](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noncoding_DNA#Junk_DNA)

“Junk DNA not so useless after all”

<http://healthland.time.com/2012/09/06/junk-dna-not-so-useless-after-all/>

## **Result, Process, Identity and Happiness**

Saturday, 11 August 2012

RESULT is what matters. And RESULT does not only refer to the calculations that are made the day after your passing; it also refers to the outcome of every task you attempt to fulfil, every undertaking, every project you take on.

PROCESS precedes RESULT. PROCESS is either conducive to good RESULT, or it is not conducive to it.

IDENTITY is what enables you to function as a human being during the historical period when your existence plays out, and in the place where you were born and raised, or where you find yourself as an adult. Your IDENTITY is good enough if it enables you to survive, and if it enables you to pursue good RESULT.

HAPPINESS is one of the conditions that make PROCESS worth the effort.

BEING HAPPY makes it more likely – although there are exceptions – that the PROCESS will lead to good RESULT.

-----

Preceding thought:

This week I started moving my workspace to a home about fifty metres from my old apartment. The new place – actually only two empty rooms on the second floor of a house where the couple who owns the place overnights once every two months or so when they have business in the city – is okay, but not perfect.

“The result of the process is ultimately what is important,” I thought to myself on my way back home earlier tonight, “and the new place is good enough to at least not undermine the process.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Monday, 15 April 2013

Question: How do you justify your existence?

Answer: There is no justification. I was born – had no choice about it. I'm alive. I try to do more good than bad. I try to mean something to a few people. I try to leave something positive behind of my time on Earth. That's it. No justification.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **Much to be learned from a cat (and a cat doesn't even try to teach you anything)**

Tuesday, 28 May 2013

Why do I write?

To serve a cause?

To try to win an argument?

To make a contribution?

I write, to a large extent, to say one thing: I was here.

Wednesday, 3 July 2013

“What am I doing?” I ask myself.

Would the guy in prison ask himself this question? If so, what would he answer? Would he answer, “Nothing, I’m in prison”?

Should the family man ask himself the question, he would surely answer, “I take care of my family.”

Is that enough? Is that good enough?

Ask the pastor or church minister or missionary, and they would answer, “I am doing God’s will.”

Easy. Shift the responsibility to God. “I’m just doing what I’m told.”

If the soldier asked himself the question, his answer would be similar to the religious person’s: a pre-formulated answer will be recited. With conviction.

Would the poor man or woman in the squatter camp say they are trying their best to get back on their feet again?

If the mother of two children in a war-torn area asked herself the question, it would certainly be quite reasonable if she answered: “At this point I do what I need to do to keep myself and my children safe and alive.”

What would she say if the guns fell silent?

How would the couple respond who returns to the ruins of their home after two years in a refugee camp?

What would the heroin addict say?

What would the alcoholic say when he has his first drink of the day, shortly after breakfast?

How would the unscrupulous businessman answer? Would he dismissively reply that he makes as much money as he can, as if you should have been able to guess the answer?

Would he really be satisfied with that? If he is reasonably intelligent, and if he thinks about things every now and then, and you sit for an hour with him at a coffee shop or lounge bar, what would his more comprehensive answer be?

What would the entrepreneur with a social conscience say?

How would the young politician answer who has not sold his soul yet?

How does the author, the artist, the actor, the playwright, the comedian answer?

If everyone has to dodge bullets or shrapnel, or if they wake up at night from hunger pains or cold or the call of a hungry loved one, everyone just reacts. If anyone in the area wants to take a moment to ask a philosophical question, he or she will probably be pushed aside. If you simply react every moment you are awake, the answer to what you are doing is obvious.

But what happens when you are not in immediate danger, and you have options to choose from before you act? What do you do then? And why that choice or action?

Friday, 5 July 2013

What does a cat do?

The cat did not ask to be born. The cat had no choice about its species or gender, or about the time, place or condition of its birth.

And yet, there it is.

What does the cat do with its daily existence? It tries to get through the day and night with as little tension as possible.

That's the only thing that makes sense to it.



## What you live for, and what you die for – a few short notes

Wednesday, 29 October 2014

On Sunday, 14 November 2004 I wrote: “The ultimate question is not just what you live for, the question is what you will die for. My opinion is you die for the things or the people you live for, for the causes you serve.”

Contemplating this note, I thought: People who have children have something to live for, and something they will die for.

I mention this not because I wish I had children; it is simply a theme that often surfaces when I think of major issues that affect the lives of many adults.

Inevitable questions: What do *I* live for? What causes do *I* serve? What will *I* die for?

Answer: I have a partner. I love her. I don't normally think that I live to make her happy, but it is something that affects most of my important actions and decisions on a daily basis. Would I be willing to die for her, if that ever becomes necessary? Yes, I would.

-----

I later discovered there was a follow-up to the original text, on Monday, 13 December 2004:

“The point is to live for something, so when we die, we will know our lives were not in vain.”

\* \* \*

“The question then is, what do you live for?”

Many people will say, ‘We live for our children.’

I ask: What does that mean? You live for your children, they live for their children ... at some or other point someone will have to live for something else, whether they have children of their own or not!

I think it's ill-considered, even dangerous to say you live for your children. It feels right. You love your children, and you will surely take someone's face off to save your children, so ... it can only be right to declare: 'I live for my children! And for my wife ... (or my husband).' Isn't that true?

No! It's something that feels noble and right – and it looks noble and right on paper, but in actual fact one generation simply replaces the next with no proper understanding of the value or possible purpose of their lives, other than, 'I need to have children.'

Does anybody else hear alarm bells going off?"

## Old ghosts, or sleeping dogs

Sunday, 25 October 2015

23:28

Who am I? Where do I belong? Where is my place in the world? What is the purpose of my existence? What should I do with my life?

I find it strange that I don't really think about these things anymore. As if you only ponder these questions at a certain stage of your life.

Wouldn't it be interesting to wake these old ghosts from their slumber? Or are they sleeping dogs?

23:42

Do I not think about those questions anymore because I have discovered or worked out the answers? Or is it because I don't care anymore? If the latter, it is because I have become more cynical over the past ten years? Why have I become more cynical? Was I naïve ten years ago? Or rather, in what ways did I still believe like a child ten years ago?

A few days ago on my way to the convenience store I asked myself a big favour: Please don't become a bitter old man.

# **The real or not real purpose of our existence**

Tuesday, 15 December 2015

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

\* \* \*

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

Is it good to think your existence serves a purpose?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Everybody wants to reach a point

Wednesday, 18 January 2017

Some people arrange their lives according to systems they believe will increase the likelihood that they'll survive and at least half of the time feel good about themselves. Other people have goals they pursue. Regardless of whether you prefer systems or goals, or a combination of both, I think everyone aspires to what I can only describe as a *point*. Sometimes you are aware that you are striving for this point, sometimes not.

This point for many people is an ideal lifestyle – a specific way they would like to spend their days and nights on earth.

Some people's point is to have a family, to play the role of mother or father to children of their own.

Then there are people who want to reach a point of almost inexhaustible financial means – to know they can buy whatever they want and do whatever they want, the well will either never dry up or the money spent today will simply be replaced tomorrow.

My point is to have the ability to get lost in an activity – it may be a writing project, or a book, or research on a topic that interests me. I want to get lost in an activity without needing to remind myself that I'd have to go out later in the day to sell something (usually my ability to do some or other activity) or do something else that is supposed to make money.

Most people don't think about it on a daily basis that the real purpose they are pursuing is to survive that specific day and night. And if you survive, you do what you have to do to make your survival worthwhile. To have a point you are aspiring to is more than just a goal you hope to achieve. It is the inspiration that propels you forward; it helps to make your survival today worthwhile.

## **Point, and what makes my life worthwhile**

Monday, 14 August 2017

The POINT of my life is to report. I live; I experience things; I think about things; I write about it. Perhaps someone else finds an insight or opinion useful.

What makes my life WORTHWHILE is to be a witness to the life of the woman I love, to be her partner, and to make her feel loved. What also makes my life WORTHWHILE is maintaining good relationships with family and friends, caring for our pets, eating good food, reading interesting things, relaxing when I'm tired, watching interesting or funny movies, travelling, or visiting places I like, and pursuing the POINT of my life.

Does my life have a PURPOSE? Look at the POINT of my life, and what makes my life WORTHWHILE.



\*\*\*\*\*

If you enjoyed this collection or found it educational,  
please consider purchasing a printed copy, or an electronic  
copy for your reading device.

Remember: the writer also has to eat and pay rent!

[ASSORTEDNOTES.COM/BOOKSTORE](http://ASSORTEDNOTES.COM/BOOKSTORE)

\*\*\*\*\*



\* \* \* \* \*

Available titles by Brand Smit – in both digital and  
printed formats:

*In the grip of heretics – or, The Christian  
Not a table, a dog or a pencil  
The real, or non-real purpose of our existence  
As long as you remain standing  
The necessary unpleasantness  
The adult life  
On writing and the writer  
Exile*

*Thirteen minutes on a Saturday night  
Time doesn't really fly*

More information is available from the writer's website:

[ASSORTEDNOTES.COM](http://ASSORTEDNOTES.COM)

\* \* \* \* \*