

Undated

Ima N. Trubble
123 Everyman Lane
Elysium, Eldorado 00001

RE: Life Lived Well

Dear Ima:

Enclosed are the following documents:

- A. Excerpt from *A Guide to Rational Living*;
- B. *De Officiis*, by Marcus Tullius Cicero.

The Occasion of This Letter

Kim and I were deeply concerned about your life after talking with you and Cynthia last night at the Space Needle. Before I address a person's life, I prefer to converse at length. The purpose of this long question and answer prelude is to insure I possess all the relevant facts, to give me a chance to reflect and imagine, and to convince the person with whom I am speaking that I am hearing their view of matters, not merely imposing my own. Your inability or unwillingness to endure such a protracted exchange cut short the process of my education and your unburdening.

Normally, I would take your abrupt departure from our dinner table at face value and assume that you do not value my counsel or, at a minimum, do not want to take the (often bitter) pill of my analysis just now. But your description of your circumstances strikes me as so exigent that I cannot in good conscience stand silent. Nor can I in good faith convince myself that you will be safe until such time as your efforts to work out your problems on your own have resolved. So, I am writing to you—now. When I err for lack of information, forgive me. I also ask you to take responsibility for your part in my ignorance.

Examining Your Life

Socrates asserted that “the unexamined life is not worth living.” (Plato, *Apologia*). By this letter, I invite you to examine your life. You can do so alone if you please. You will have greater success if you do so with another, especially a wise other. Cicero advises: “[D]are to give true advice with all frankness; in friendship let the influence of friends who are wise counselors be paramount, and let that influence be employed in advising, not only with frankness, but, if the occasion demands, even with sternness, and let the advice be followed when given.” (Cicero, *Laelius de Amicitia*, 157).

You will not like much what I have to say, Ima. Ralph Waldo Emerson encouraged men to “speak the rude truth in all ways.” (Emerson, *Self-Reliance*, 123). He further said of intimacy that for persons who care about one another it is “better [to] be a nettle in the side of a friend than his echo.” (Emerson, *Self-Reliance*, 198). This letter is both rude and nettlesome. Learning, especially learning about your own soul, is difficult. Aristotle said, “Learning is no amusement, it goes hand in hand with pain.” (Aristotle, *Politics*, 226). I invite you to learn.

“Make your rules of life brief, yet so as to embrace the fundamentals.” (Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 63). At the end of the journey described in this letter, should you decide to undertake such a journey, Ima, you may grasp your life with such clarity that you can make a list of the rules you believe govern life. With luck, they will strike to the heart of the fundamentals of human existence.

EXIGENT CONCERNS

1. Depression.

As Seattle rotated slowly past our view last night, you acknowledged that you are depressed and in pain. You attribute that depression to the collapse of your relationship with your recent boyfriend and his family, domestic violence, loss of your job at the local restaurant, the provincial culture of your small town, conflict with your parents, and lack of friends beyond Cynthia.

Depression is a life-threatening medical condition. The person least able to know how to cope with depression is the depressed person. Your psychologist is correct about your treatment. You are wrong about what you need.

Depressed people must deal with the underlying physiological problems antecedent to their disturbed psychological states before they are able competently to be led to insight about their dysfunctional mental states. Put simply: fix the body, then address the mind. Your counselor is right that you need to get rested, straighten out your blood chemistry, ameliorate your brain neurochemistry, remove the stress-inducing stimuli, and heal yourself. That means go to bed at the same time every night (I suggest your retire nightly at 9:00 p.m. and rise at 6:00 a.m.), eat properly and take a good (expensive) multivitamin and other needed supplements, take an appropriate antidepressant, lose your boyfriend and his family, separate yourself from your mother (with whom you seem to be in a running battle), establish a meaningful routine, balance your life (work, self-nurture, meaningful relationships), and learn to provide for yourself.

After you have spent a few months getting physically stabilized and beginning to learn how to talk about your life constructively with another person, then you may be ready to begin the hard work of restructuring your attitudes and thoughts. I attach an excerpt from *A Guide to Rational Living*, which is a simple book about self-therapy for people whose problems are not too complex. This book employs a “rational-emotive” or “cognitive” approach to dealing with neurosis and dysfunctional thinking processes. It is the most widely used approach among psychologists in practicing therapy. Reading this excerpt might help you identify some of the issues involved and the “feel” of psychotherapeutic talk.

Your problems, Ima, are not the sort that should be approached on a self-analysis basis. Your problems are too complex, and your analytical skills too feeble. Your mind and emotions and will pose to you a maze from which you will find no exit. You need a competent psychologist to assist you, one that you trust, and one with whom you are willing to spend a great deal of time over a long period. That person will help you straighten out your body, and ultimately your attitudes and thoughts. If you will embrace the process, you will become both more productive and less self-

destructive. In the long run, those characteristics will translate into happiness and a profound sense of well-being that you can savor for the rest of your life.

If you choose to “treat” your depression yourself, you will fail. Worse, you could end up dead. Suicidal ideation (recurring thoughts about killing oneself) is a symptom of depression. The urge to end the pain of depression can lead one to dramatic action. For some depressed people, that means suicide. Those persons do not “decide” to kill themselves. All of a sudden, depressed people just find that suicide seems to be the only appropriate option. To the depressed person, it all seems so plainly logical. Then they are gone, leaving their loved ones in a sticky soup of grief and second-guessing from which it is difficult ever to extricate oneself. This could happen to you, Ima, and to us who love you. I ask you to take my words seriously.

You expressed concern about the amount of money it might cost to rectify these problems you are suffering. Your family, whom I know, will all step up to take care of the cost of treating these problems. You, too, will be able to contribute, because an important part of healing yourself will be to find meaningful work. Take the months required to heal your depression. Be patient.

2. Anger and Domestic Violence.

Many people, both men and women, suffer domestic violence in their intimate relationships. We Americans have long taken the position that hitting is an acceptable form of dispute resolution. People can “just take it out back” and the matter will be resolved with a broken nose or two and some skinned knuckles. We are, as a culture, only now beginning to insist the hitting stop and that other forms of dispute resolution replace the fisticuffs.

The focus in American jurisprudence on domestic violence has fallen squarely upon male hitting. American jurisprudence has sorely neglected female provoking. Women strike with their mouths, men with their fists. Women often think they can strike men (verbally or physically), and expect those men to behave chivalrously in declining to strike back. Those women are wrong. Some such women suffer broken bones; others die. You have learned that fact personally and painfully.

Kim and I deal with domestic violence routinely in our work. We know that the reason your boyfriend was not prosecuted for domestic violence was one or both of two issues: either you refused to bring the matter to adjudication by testifying against him, or you also committed domestic violence against your boyfriend and gave as good as you got. When either or both of these events happen, the judicial system throws up its hands and waits for the problem to escalate to coherence and clarity. That means something bigger happens. Then the bench belatedly puts someone in jail for felony assault or murder. That solves the problem for everyone except the victim.

I do not know your boyfriend. He obviously has problems, and those problems find one root in his family. I do know you. One of your problems is anger. You do not know how to manage your anger and vent it constructively. Your anger problem, like your boyfriend’s, has roots in your family.

Ima, you were ill-parented. You describe them as people who have struggled long and successfully against daunting obstacles. They prospered financially and carved out for themselves lives they find generally meaningful. As you will discover, that is not so simple a task as many people would have us believe. Your parents deserve your respect. They are, as you describe them, honorable people, hard-working people. They are not, however, perfect people.

Your mom and dad did not parent you well. They worked too much. Maybe they ran out of ideas or energy. Perhaps they cared too little. I do not know. I imagine that whatever the problem was, it was generally diminished, obscured, and wallpapered over. You recount people expressing concerns about your development. Those delicate words met steely denials and recriminations. As a child, you tell me you were farmed around between daycare providers, school teachers, grandmas and grandpas, parents, your great grandma, and any other convenient caregiver. Each cared for you as best they could, but the overall result was that you lacked coherent care and carefully delineated boundaries. Your parents had neither the time nor energy nor the educational resources to cope with your problems as those quandaries developed.

You say you did not eat well. Your childish fits were tolerated. Your poutiness was poo-pooed. Your adolescent inanities were ignored, or in the alternative, countered with angry outbursts. Your life was not given a structure upon which you could rely. You were not taught intimacy and communication. You were not taught problem-solving, especially for your own psychological needs. You were left in the educational wastelands without the nourishment your mind required. These deficiencies were not parental abuse. This was parenting shortfall. Every childhood suffers some degree of parenting insufficiency, since no parent possesses all another human being needs. As an adult, it is your job to take up where your parents left off or failed, to parent yourself, to elect to grow and fill in the coping skills you missed or your parents failed to communicate.

As a result of defective parenting, you experienced frustrations consequent to your problems, and those frustrations went unremedied. You got angry. A deep-seated long-smoldering anger about everything and nothing in particular took root in you. You developed some dysfunctional self-talk that you are probably little aware of at this juncture. Further, you unreflectively drank in the attitudes and perspectives of your psychologically dysfunctional classmates and their crippled families. Then, at seventeen or eighteen, you began to interact with the panoply of complexities which constitutes adult American life. You were ill-equipped and have swamped rather badly in your maiden voyage into adult waters.

The appropriate aim of parenting is to equip a child to meet the challenges of forming for herself a meaningful, socially-connected, and socially-responsible existence. Life construction does not come naturally to humans; we have to be taught the skills. This is especially so in highly differentiated cultures like western civilization. In such cultures, there are high degrees of specialization and deferral of rewards and postponed entry into adulthood. For many persons, whether due to youth or immaturity or lack of native intelligence, finding a place for oneself can be bewildering and fraught with dangers. Parenting is supposed to ease the shock of transition from the protective umbrella of hearth and home to sloggng forward under the persistent drizzle of American adulthood.

When I say that you were ill-parented, what I am saying is more in the way of an observation than a criticism. You are not equipped to make your own good life. I know that because I see that your efforts are misdirected. You eat poorly. You sleep at the wrong times. You communicate ineffectively. You ignore the wrong people. You heed the disastrous people. You have failed to sustain a productive work environment. Most, you have not achieved a vision of your own personality and future that is workable. How can you turn things around? I shall have more to say about rightly directing your efforts below, when I address concerns that are less in need of immediate remedy.

Ill-parenting has exacerbated your anger. That cauldron of antipathy now bubbles barely beneath the surface, waiting merely an inconvenience or slight to boil over. It sloshed forth when your car burst a radiator hose. It spilled again when Kim contradicted you last night at the Space Needle restaurant. I can only imagine how your igneous pot of anger erupted when your boyfriend crossed you and wrongly harmed you. You have also let your anger sting your boss at the restaurant from which you were fired, your mother, and, I am sure, your former friends. Last night you boiled over on Kim. “Your mind will be like its habitual thoughts; for the soul becomes dyed with the color of its thoughts.” (Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 84).

There are means to dampen anger, to grasp its origins, to redirect it, to avoid it, generally, to manage it. You can learn these approaches. You must learn these skills if you want a good life. Anger will poison not only your relationships with others, but also your everyday consciousness. It will make your life unpalatable if it remains unmanaged. Even you will spit yourself out.

3. **Hubris.**

The word “hubris” is a Greek term. It means “overweening pride or arrogance.” Usually, the word “hubris” conveys the idea that the pride in question is wholly unwarranted. Hubris is not the justifiable pride one feels at a job well done or the confidence one feels when one has acquired skills upon which one can rely comfortably. Hubris is the pride one asserts when unreflectively rejecting another’s challenges to you or your actions. Hubris is a defect of character, an impediment to maturity. Hubris loves the company of other killers of the good life: denial and anger and defensiveness and pointless self-justifications and revisionist histories and bitter resentments. In the mouth of Socrates, Plato puts the words, “And is not this the most reprehensible form of ignorance, that of thinking one knows what one does not know?” (Plato, *Apologia*).

Ima, you suffer hubris. You are not listening, except to persons whom you should never heed. You suffer from delusions of adequacy. You think you know much more than you do; you consequently welcome incoming wisdom too weakly. Some of your selective deafness is adolescent rebellion. About this transitory state I am little worried, because it will moderate as your hormonal structure achieves adult stability.

About the character issue your hubris betrays, I have great concern. If you notice, I am putting this in the section of my letter entitled “Exigent Concerns.” “Exigent” means “requiring immediate action or aid.” In my view, your hubris is a pressing danger. I will speak obliquely of hubris again in the second section of this letter, where I discuss issues of character development

generally. But here I want to address the issue of hubris not as a general defect of character, but as an exigent danger.

Hubris seals one's ears; it inoculates the mind from intruding wisdom. Cicero said, "Now we must despair of the safety of the man whose ears are so closed to truth that he cannot hear what is true from a friend." (Cicero, *Laelius de Amicitia*, 199). You stand at the embarkation point of your adult life. The skills you lack are numerous; those you possess are few. More importantly, you have little idea of who you are or what you might be able to accomplish in life. You meander, or worse, lie fallow. You tell me you have inherited or been taught your mother's pigheadedness and disdain for learning. There are few spectacles more disheartening to me than that of an uneducated troglodyte shouting down the quiet wisdom of an informed and willing counselor.

If you do not like my counsel or Kim's, that is fine. As an adult, you choose those who advise you. But you must seek some counselor, for you are suffering a dire scarcity of wisdom. Where will you find the wisdom you lack? Bleak nihilism (the belief that nothing matters) is vogue among people your age, Ima. Refuse their march. The world contains not only ugliness and futility, but also beauty and possibility. Reconcile yourself to the battle between nihilism and utopianism (the belief that a perfect society can be achieved), and choose to be hopeful rather than despairing, so long as there exists some reasonable basis for hope.

The inoculant for the disease of hubris is humility. Humility is a habit, and not an especially difficult one. Humility amounts to an accurate and forthcoming self-appraisal; in this context, reality is ever pressing upon us opportunity to state accurately our deficiencies in the form of humility. When confronted with his ignorance, the humble man says "I need to learn; please teach me." When confronted with her errors, the humble woman says "I am sorry about my actions; please let me repair what damage can be repaired." Even when confronted with his knowledge, the humble person says "I am glad I know, but greater wisdom lies deeper still, and just a bit beyond my reach at present; I shall continue to grasp after it." Epictetus, a Roman slave and philosopher, captured well the attitude of humility: "If a man has reported to you, that a certain person speaks ill of you, do not make any defense (answer) to what has been told you: but reply, the man did not know the rest of my faults, for he would not have mentioned these only." (Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, 33)

Our culture often equates humility with a soggy, milk-toast compliancy. Some imagine that humility means that the humble man senselessly depreciates his capacities and cowers in the bushes when human lions prowl onto the scene. This denigrating perspective is inaccurate. Humility makes people strong because it makes them adaptive. Humility coexists comfortably side-by-side with great confidence, and in fact builds confidence. Humility obviates the need for denials or backpedaling explanations or outbursts of assertiveness.

Humility is the natural state of the human ego. When a person is not distorted by fictional mythologies or diseased ideas or neuroses or debilitating trauma, when a person is surrounded by loving and supportive intimates (very close friends) and has meaningful work and gives to others in preference to taking from them, then a person naturally becomes humble. When we eat, our bodies naturally convert those substances into the stuff of our existence. When we chew upon reality, we naturally become humble.

Hubris is a state of confusion and unreality. The overweeningly proud person conceals a sorely damaged self-concept by his or her hubris. Hubris is therefore a mask; its purpose is to hide from oneself and others the vision of the damaged and incomplete person that each of us is. Hubris is therefore a form of lying—to oneself, to the world. Hubris deludes oneself and attempts to mislead everyone else.

Hubris makes an intelligent person stupid. Here, by “stupid” I mean not lacking in native intelligence, but inclined, even compelled, to repeat past errors. An overweeningly proud person sees the errors of others, but denies, after reflection, her own complicity in problems. Consider yourself. What is your part in the domestic violence with your boyfriend? What is your part in your unemployment? Why did you flunk out of high school and then fail to complete your graduation requirements at the alternative high school? Why were you willing to accept a diploma without simultaneous commitment to complete the requirements for graduation? What is your part in the fragmentation of your relationship with your mother? What fault in your soul sent you fuming from the dinner table last night? If you feel your anger rising about now, or if you cannot answer these questions sensibly and specifically, hubris dims you.

Ima, you lack humility. Hubris cuts off people. Your intimates **are** you. [I will explain more about this below.] When you cut off people who care and are supportive, you are cutting off a piece of yourself. Hubris is a kind of spiritual anorexia. The person possessed of hubris refuses the very sustenance that might nourish and heal and preserve her. Thus, considered spiritually, hubris is a disease process.

Ima, take the inoculant. As you grow honest with yourself and others, you may be momentarily embarrassed. But the blush of cheek will pass quickly and you will be refreshed by the great freedom and transparency that humility affords its beneficiaries.

NON-EXIGENT, BUT NEVERTHELESS PRESSING, CONCERNS

Life is mostly habit. Habits include not only physical acts, but also mental acts. We have habits that incline us to turn left at certain corners when driving, and to click on our seatbelt without thinking “I am going to put my seatbelt on now.” We also have habits of thought, such as a penchant for adding two and two and getting four, or the habit of thinking well or ill of oneself. When you add up the sum of a person’s habits, along with the sum of the person’s relationships, you have the person. “Character is the interpenetration of habits.” (John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 38).

In contrast to habitual thought, humans also think substantively on occasion. Humans think substantively only when pressed by a novel problem or circumstance. The result of substantive thinking is that we make changes to our habits or institute new habits. So, the big issues in moral life are these: what habits shall one seek?, and how can one change the habits one already possesses? The first issue is philosophical; the second is practical and technical. I will address each in turn.

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A. Which Habits Are Best?

“The really important thing is not to live, but to live well, . . . to live honorably or rightly.” (Socrates in Plato, *Apologia*, 33). How one goes about living well is not immediately apparent. Plato writes: “It is our duty to do one of two things, either to ascertain the facts, whether by seeking instruction or by personal discovery, or, if this is impossible, to select the best and most dependable theory which human intelligence can supply, and use it as a *raft to ride the seas of life*, that is, assuming that we cannot make our journey with greater confidence and security by the surer means of a divine revelation.” (Plato, *Phaedo*, 68).

Aristotle wrote of the good life: “The best life, both for individuals and for states, is the life of virtue along with such external goods as suffice for the performance of good deeds. . . . A man’s felicity [happiness] is in exact proportion to his moral and intellectual virtue, and to his virtuous and wise conduct.” (Aristotle, *Politics*, 192).

The classical world (from the rise of Athens to the fall of the Roman Empire, approximately one thousand years, from 500 B.C. to 476 A.D.) formulated a view of habits that demonstrates enduring value. Several hundred generations have benefited from the classical formulation of the virtues. This question about virtue, which means morally good action, boils down to what habits one ought to seek.

The four classical virtues are wisdom, self-control, justice, and courage. Wisdom pertains to insight about the meaning and import of events as they unfold, and often includes prognostication about where present events might lead. Self-control is also called temperance, and it includes the Greek ideal of seeking the mean, avoiding the extremes in all things. Justice pertains to our relationships with others both personally and in society; it aims to insure that each individual receives what his actions and character deserve. Courage is the only virtue that directly pertains to an emotion. The emotion of courage means the ability to face danger without shrinking, and to be confident in the face of uncertain outcomes.

I decline to explain further these classical virtues because that job has been done so much better than I can manage by Marcus Tullius Cicero, a contemporary of Julius Caesar in the first century B.C. Cicero’s son, also Marcus, was an underachieving youth who avoided work and lingered too long in Athens. Cicero was concerned that Marcus lacked all the moral direction he required, and so Cicero set himself the task of explaining moral virtue to Marcus. The result was *On Duties* (translation of *De Officiis*), an essay for the benefit of Cicero’s son.

There exists widespread modified endorsement of this four-part structure to moral virtue. It is the starting point for most discussions of the moral good. Of course, many people, including me, would put his or her own spin on each element of classical moral virtue. Christians would emphasize that wisdom entails humility, and justice should be shaded strongly by the demands of love. Buddhists would emphasize that self-control and justice should be tempered by the knowledge that this world is transitory and reality lies beyond things visible. Ghandi would alert us to the fact that courage consists mostly in the quiet strength that undertakes moral challenge, and not in battlefield heroics. Friedrich Nietzsche would put the whole scheme on its ear, creating anti-classical and specifically anti-Christian virtues. The canvas of moral virtue has been

decorated by many shades upon virtue, painted there by intellectual artists, literally thousands of them, each with distinctive brush and style.

You too are an artist of this sort, Ima. You get to decide what counts as a habit worth having. You get to reject some habits and endorse others. You get to grow, which means you do not have to reach ultimate conclusions--ever. You will nevertheless have to make interim decisions and act upon them. You will enjoy the benefits and suffer the consequences of those decisions. You get to advocate. Everyone else gets the same privileges of moral artistic expression and endorsement. The only differences among people in this regard is the care with which they make the decision about what habits to have and what habits to eschew, and why they endorse or reject those particular habits.

What is at stake here is not some minor matter. The issue is what sort of person you want to become, what sort of self you are making you into, and what sort of world you hope you and others can live in.

What follows are some general thoughts and admonitions to keep in mind when selecting the habits you prefer.

A. 1. Communal Identity.

You are not alone. You were created when a germ of tissue from your father swam up a fallopian tube in your mother's belly to meet her germ of you. You first learned that you were you when you recognized, at about six months of age, that your mother was something separate from you. Since that moment, your learning has consisted in differentiating what is inside you from what is outside you. So where is the "you" that is Ima?

Our culture answers the question succinctly: Ima is what is inside Ima's skin. Ima is an individual and a repository of certain "inalienable" rights. Ima is ultimately created alone and remains alone. Ima is on her own, left to her own devices. This answer, which summarizes American individualism, does not satisfy me.

"Ima" exists as a shifting set of relationships, some close, some distant. Psychologically, you extend beyond the confines of your body and "self." Your consciousness of others invades your consciousness of yourself. In fact, you are you only insofar as those intimate relationships exist. You are not YOU alone; "you" are the intersection (a nexus) of all these relationships. The person closest to you is an overlapping nexus of relationships, similar to yours but different. You reflect them to themselves. They do the same for you. We find ourselves in one another's responses. At some point, you might want to read a book by a Jewish theologian, Martin Buber, called *I and Thou*. It is the wellspring of this way of understanding individuals and communities.

That is why friendship matters so much. Aristotle says that man is essentially a social being. That means that we cannot live without others, not only physically, but also psychologically. This relationship, or rather set of relationships, is difficult and requires careful attention. “It is not possible to have many friends in the full meaning of the word friendship . . . [F]or perfect friendship you must get to know a man thoroughly, and become intimate with him, which is a very difficult thing to do.” (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 473).

One upshot of this way of understanding yourself is that in taking care of your intimates, you are in fact taking care of yourself. This way of thinking expands the “you” to include the intimate others, and blunts the imperative of selfish action. It encourages openness and generosity toward others. It restructures the ego.

A. 2. Criteria for Habit Selection.

Before you even begin to decide what habits you want to choose, you have to decide what sort of person you want to end up being. This is a matter of vision, of looking into the future imaginatively.

With this purpose in mind, John Dewey urged us to be loyal to what makes excellent life possible. (John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 21). He went on to suggest that, overall, we want to seek an essential openness to the world. “The important thing is the fostering of those habits and impulses which lead to a broad, just, sympathetic survey of situations.” (John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 207).

I would add the following to criteria for selecting one’s habits. Your habits should:

- Make you physically healthy;
- Make you happy in the long run;
- Enable you to endure short term pain and difficulty;
- Help you do what you think is best;
- Foster relationships with other people;
- Make other people’s lives better;
- Help you face challenges squarely;
- Lead you from mistakes to better future decisions;
- Keep your life balanced;
- Help you sort the more important from the less important;
- Provide guidance in the face of difficult decisions;
- Let you die with dignity.

A. 3. The Problem of Priorities.

Adult American life often becomes a morass of competing urgencies. It grows difficult for adults to sort out what is more important from the welter of less pressing matters. “Wisdom . . . is the ability to foresee consequences in such a way that we form ends which grow into one another and reinforce one another. Moral folly is the surrender of the greater good for the lesser; it is snatching at one satisfaction in a way which prevents us from having others and which gets us subsequently into trouble and dissatisfaction.” (John Dewey, *Theory of the Moral Life*, 60).

Your life should have priorities, Ima. Make a list—one to whatever. You should be at the top of the list. Your first job is to take care of yourself. “[F]or a man is his own best friend. Therefore he ought to love himself most.” (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 551). This is not to say that a person should be essentially selfish. First, the “self” is bigger than just your consciousness of your body. Second, life is seldom so pressing that the only item permitted is care of your self.

Next on your list should come your intimates. They, after all, are parts of you. Then comes those persons to whom you are close, but they are not the two to seven people with whom you share everything (your intimates).

After that, your priorities should include other persons and events, but the order differs among individuals. Family, work, your social periphery, your hobbies and interests, and your involvement in society generally should be on the list, but you should order them to fit the life you want.

Here are my priorities:

1. Me (rest, exercise, diet);
2. Kim and Lucy;
3. Intimates;
4. Family;
5. Lancaster Law Office and clients;
6. Enrichment: writing and reading, guitar, Rotary;
7. Shoreline;
8. The United States;
9. The world.

The big danger in priorities is letting the loudest demand take first priority. Americans frequently let work drown out all else. We then suffer the spectacle of fathers who seldom see their children. Low priorities can also get top billing too. I have seen marriages damaged beyond reclamation by a love of golfing.

The point is this. You have to know what is most important, and keep it that way overall. Minor deviations are sometimes necessary, but long term deviations will destabilize your life.

A. 4. The Problem of Emotion and Impulse.

Your brain has a three part hierarchical structure. We share a brain stem with all vertebrates, from salamanders to gorillas. It controls autonomic functions like heart rate, respiration, secretion, and other matters of which we are barely aware. Overlaying that portion of the human brain is the limbic system. We share those brain structures with higher mammals, from rats to chimpanzees. The limbic system is the seat of emotional response. It gives us our “fight or flight” capacity, our human bonding, our sense of well-being or lack thereof. Capping the human brain structure is the cerebrum, a great mass of gray matter deeply implicated in higher consciousness and abstraction, human vision, perception of time, and other higher functions.

Problems arise because, although all these brain structures communicate with one another and are integrated, they do not function identically. In essence, these three levels of the brain give competing, and sometimes contradictory commands. Consider happening upon a hungry grizzly bear alone and far from your campsite. Your brainstem will raise your blood pressure, increase your heart rate, and prepare you for battle. Your limbic system will scream “Run!” and command you to seek help of other humans. In the alternative, under the right circumstances, the limbic system might ready you to fight (futilely) for your life. Your cerebrum says, “I read a book about bear encounters. It said to back away slowly, don’t run, and stay calm. I also have a hatchet.” What will you do? It depends on your habits.

In ethical thought, there has been a millennia-long strain that emphasizes that human emotion is fundamentally unreliable as a basis for decision-making. In recent history, however, emotion has been better received, and thinkers and scientists alike have recognized that one cannot merely suppress such an important portion of human consciousness. Emotion provides motivation, insight into social interactions, and constitutes an “intelligence” of a different sort.

There lie dangers in emotion. Our self-talk can be truly life-affirming, but it can also destroy us. Please consider the admonitions of *A Guide to Rational Living*. Those authors assert that we largely create our negative (and positive) emotions by the self-talk we promote. The importance of reining in emotion and impulsive action, and moderating its grip on life cannot be overestimated. “Happiness is a matter of the disposition we actively bring with us to meet situations, the qualities of mind and heart with which we greet and interpret situations.” (John Dewey, *Theory of the Moral Life*, 46.) What will you do with your emotions, and how will you manage them? Your happiness hangs in the balance.

A. 5. The Problem of Evil and Stupidity.

“Evil” is a theological concept much maligned in the last fifty or more years. In academic circles, for many decades to speak of evil was to invite scorn. Yet, evil humans have never been more prominent and destructive than in the last century. Consider the Nazi Holocaust, the killing fields of Pol Pot, the Stalinist purges and the Gulag archipelago, the Cultural Revolution in China, the African tribal genocides, and the Balkan atrocities.

One thinker has defined “evil” as malignant narcissism, and proposed the scientific study of the phenomenon as such. Narcissus was an especially handsome youth in Greco-Roman mythology who caught sight of himself in a mirror, fell instantly in love with himself, and ultimately died of longing because his love was unrequited. Narcissism is a habit that makes the self the all-absorbing center of attention and importance. Conjoined with the idea of malignancy, the evil person is one whose conviction of self-importance is exported to others, who themselves act in the thrall of the evil person’s narcissism.

Evil comes in small packages as well as large ones. The effects of “small evil” are less newsworthy, but no less damaging at the personal level. Evil in the individual life can best be characterized as bad conscience or bad faith, upon which the Danish thinker, Soren Kierkegaard, ruminates extensively. When one lies, for example, he disrupts relationship with the person to whom he lies, as well as with himself. Distrust spreads. “The difficulty is not so much to escape death; the real difficulty is to escape from doing wrong, which is far more fleet of foot.” (Socrates, in Plato, *Apologia*, 24).

Habitual personal evil, such as prevarication or substance abuse or violence, is closely linked to the phenomenon of moral stupidity. By “moral stupidity” I mean not general dullness or incomprehension, but rather the propensity to repeat evil behaviors without regard to their negative consequences. Moral stupidity is not an inability to learn, but a concerted refusal to do so.

A. 6. The Problem of Authority and Dissent.

We live in a day when distrust of societal authorities seems well warranted. Wall Street cheats, the President lies, charities pay their CEOs unseemly salaries, and the Catholic Church hides sexual predation of minors by its priests. To question authority is healthy and necessary. Conforming to sick institutions can make one sick, and condemn one’s society to a slow death by lethargy. Nietzsche said human cultural institutions all want the same thing: “All dogs nicely on a leash.” (Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy*

of Morals, 90). At least some of us need to run free, to keep our systems honest.

Despite the downside possibilities, “authority” is frequently a repository of wisdom. The structures in which we live and the rules by which we govern ourselves often reflect painful learning of prior generations from which we can and should benefit. To fail to do so is to re-learn every lesson every generation. That is a fool’s errand.

The problem comes to a head when society’s institutions are vacuous or corrupt. What should our habitual response be then? Dissent is appropriate under such circumstances. The “right” then lies elsewhere than in the edicts of the empty or perverse institution, be it a church, a government, or a bridge club. “Any man more right than his neighbors constitutes a majority of one already.” (Henry David Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience*, 259). Differentiate yourself; stand apart from the offending institutions. “To refrain from imitation is the best revenge.” (Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 91). Or, from that iconoclast, Ralph Waldo Emerson, we hear: “Insist on yourself; never imitate.” (Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Self-Reliance*, 142).

When selecting your habits, question institutions. Embrace their good acts. Criticize them from within and without. Hope for the best, but watch them as an enemy lying in wait. We cannot live without institutions, but living within them can injure you grievously. If an institution is a blessing, give thanks. If it is wrong, speak out. If that institution is intransigent, depart.

A. 7. The Problem of American Consumerism.

Corporate America has decided that the public exists to purchase its goods. It spends billions annually brainwashing us to do just that. Aristotle addressed the problem, long before America was anybody’s dream, in the fifth century B.C.: “Some people, therefore, imagine that to acquire wealth is the object of household management, and their one idea is either to grow increasingly rich, or at any rate sit tight on what money they have. This attitude results from their being so intent upon living rather than upon living well. They are anxious to possess unlimited means for the gratification of their unlimited desires.” (Aristotle, *Politics*, 19).

The wisdom of most of human history contradicts American sentiment. “A good life requires no unlimited amount of property.” (Aristotle, *Politics*, 16). “Nature herself, as I have frequently remarked, demands not only that we should be able to work well, but also to make right use of leisure; indeed, this latter power is the basis of all human activity. Occupation and leisure are both necessary; but leisure is preferable to and the end of occupation.” (Aristotle, *Politics*, 222). By “leisure,” Aristotle does not mean sun-tanning and lazy strolls. He means freedom to pursue virtuous

activity. He means opportunity to read a good book, volunteer at the YMCA, or parent a child in need.

The American “good life” requires so much labor that little energy is left to expend on self-nurture, or the nurture of others. One wage earner was not adequate; our toys and extravagances have required that every family have two adult wage earners. Nevertheless, bankruptcies have reached epidemic proportions. We go on buying. One recalls Jesus’ admonitions regarding rich men and needle eyes.

I encourage you, Ima, to think consumerism over carefully. This habit, once encouraged, can overwhelm all others. Reconsider your wardrobe.

A. 8. The Problem of God.

Theological ethics are much simpler than philosophical ethics. In theological ethics, God speaks, then believers do as they are told. If the Bible, or some other good book, is finally authoritative because God said so, then that really settles the matters of morality once and for all. Nietzsche contemplates this possibility and ridicules the possibility of “some spider of finality and morality which is supposed to exist behind the great net and web of causality.” (Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 90). Nietzsche is plainly not a proponent of theological ethics.

After many years thinking about theological ethics, I have come to the conclusion that God wrote no books. And so, I do not believe we can settle the issue of which habits one should prefer by asking, “Well, what does the Koran say?” Many books contain valuable insights. I have quoted some of my favorites, and entirely neglected others I hold dear.

Though the problem of what habits to choose is difficult, I encourage you to make your own decisions on a case by case basis, rather than adopt a prefabricated ethical structure “off the shelf” from some religion or guru.

Those are my thoughts to date on selecting what habits to promote in yourself. I’ll turn now to the second, less complex, issue. How does one change one’s habits?

B. Changing Habits.

Habits, once established, become ingrained. Often drivers make their usual turns at a corner, despite the fact they intend to go the opposite direction. Often one calls a woman by her maiden name, even after one is fully aware that she has married and taken her spouse’s name. Habits have a life of their own. That is good, because that is their benefit. Habits keep us on a good path, when those habits are good.

When, however, our habits are undesirable or have become less useful than they once were over time, how do we break a habit? In my experience, the strength of a habit is directly proportional to how early in life we learned the habit and how frequently we exercise the habit. The time to change a habit wholly can be roughly equivalent to the time it took to acquire it in the first place. “Ends contemplated only in thought are weak in comparison with the urgencies of passion. Our reflective judgment of the good needs an ally outside reflection. Habit is such an ally. And habits are not maintained save by exercise; they are not self-generated. They are produced only by a course of action which is persisted in, and the required persistence cannot be left to chance.” (John Dewey, *Theory of the Moral Life*, 53-54).

To change your existing habits, you must:

- Conceive an alternative path of behavior;
- Consciously force yourself to follow the new path you have selected;
- Consciously refuse to follow the habitual path;
- Persevere until the new habit is firmly established.

This can be easier said than done. The habit of smoking can be decades old. Will you have to live with cigarette craving for decades to be free of the habit? Not necessarily. But many people find that instead of ridding themselves of a deeply-ingrained bad habit, what they end up achieving is effectively stalemating the undesirable impulse. This can be almost as good as establishing a better habit, if the matter is one of mere abstinence. If, however, the matter entails continued interaction with the subject matter of the extinguishing habit (as, for example, in eating), stalemating the undesirable habit can leave one with a burden of perennial conscious deliberation before each act. And that is exhausting.

PRACTICAL CONCERNS

You have practical concerns. How can you change residences? How can you get into a school of your choice? How can you pay for these events? How can you deal with your feelings? Where will you find new friends?

I encourage you to be patient, Ima, and to treat your life with greater seriousness than you have to date. Educate yourself. “The less a man knows of the past and the present, the more unreliable must his judgment of the future prove.” (Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, 2). Learn not only at schools, but in the lessons life brings each day.

There are people in your life who will help you deal with your problems, Ima. Kim and I are two such persons. You will have to trust us and those others. You will have to face and embrace some pain and disappointment. You can do it. Things will turn out well.

I am your friend, Ima,

Brad Lancaster