

### 1 PM - 1910s On hope and reality

“Can’t the newspaper do something?”

“About what?”

“This poor person in need of a transplant came in today to place an ad looking for donations.”

“Every day we run articles for free that point readers to events scheduled to help people who are in need.”

“I just feel like I should do more.”

“Should? What ‘should’ be done? Who ‘should’ do it? It’s gut wrenching, I know, but where should the newspaper invest its resources? Where should you invest your resources? What about your family? What about the families of all our employees? Should I take money I could spend on employee pay and put it towards a transplant? Is it callous of me not to donate money for the operation or for ads to solicit funds? And in the abstract, where do you learn the equations you use to balance your life?”

“What equations. I didn’t learn any in school.”

“Not at all . . . and usually not in church either. How can we put your perplexity in context? Tell me, how many people are there on the planet?”

“Not a clue.”

“Let’s Google the question to find out. . . . There are some 6.8 billion people on Earth, of which you are one. You are the most acutely interested person of them all from your point of view. Your universe revolves around you. You experience the universe through your senses. But where do others—and everything else—fit in? You need perspective, but without reeling and buckling your knees. What is your responsibility to these 6.8 billion people?”

“Well I can’t help everyone.”

No, your shoulders are not broad enough to carry them all. So, do you give up? How many do you help? Should you help as many as I help? I mean, should we all tithe?”

“I don’t know!”

“Socially imposed altruism has others pressure you into what to do for those in need while charity is how you decide for yourself what to do. Altruism is bunk. It gives you no practical way to answer the question, ‘Do you help one, two, ten, or ten thousand?’ But if altruism is bunk, you need to come to your own terms with generosity to create a reasonable, human alternative that puts your today, your life, and that of others in context. Charity comes from the one heart and one home, not from government. Dress it up as they might, the tyranny of the few who sway a gullible majority is coercion even when they claim it is for good cause. Worse than a socialist is someone who wants the power to control others to get certain results ‘for the good of the disadvantaged,’ for they are socialists who don’t know their own disease.

“Absent government direction, how should you discover your personal charitable balance? From where you are in space-time, place yourself between the very, very big, and the very, very small. Then, place yourself between the long, distant past, and the unimaginably distant future.”

“How?”

“The universe is, perhaps 156 billion light years wide and 13.7 billion years old. Ever think of where you fit in?”

“Hah! Not at all!”

“In the book, *Powers of Ten*, at  $10^{25}$  meters—that’s 10 to the power of +25 or ten with 25 zeros after it—most of the universe can be seen. Each number increase or decrease in power is ten times more or ten times less than the previous number.

- At  $10^{22}$  (to the power of +22) you can see the entire Milky Way.

- At  $10^{14}$  the Sun is clearly visible and the solar system begins to resolve.

- At  $10^9$  the view contains the Earth and the orbit of the moon.
- At  $10^7$  the Earth fills the frame.
- At  $10^6$  1,000 kilometers would cover the state of New York.
- At  $10^2$  100 meters would cover a football field.
- At  $10^0$  or one meter, would cover from your nose to your fingertips. This is where you fit in.
- At  $10^{-3}$  a millimeter, would cover several human hairs.
- At  $10^{-4}$  cells would be visible.
- At  $10^{-6}$  a cell nucleus would be visible.
- At  $10^{-8}$  DNA's helix structure would be visible.
- At  $10^{-10}$  the electron cloud of a carbon atom would be visible.
- At  $10^{-14}$  10 femptometers, the nucleus would be clear.
- At  $10^{-15}$  a proton would resolve itself.
- And  $10^{-16}$  puts you at the level of quarks. And maybe, if you go smaller, superstrings become visible.

“Humbling, isn't it, to know your consciousness fits in between 1,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 meters and 0.000,000, 000,000,000,1 meters, and between 13,700,000,000 years of history and an infinite future, among a world of 6,800,000,000 people, many of whom are in need of help.

“Well, that puts things in perspective, doesn't it. I certainly feel pretty small.”

“Small? Yes. But it puts you in charge of that single point in the universe that is the center of your unique consciousness at this one instant in time, gifted with the will to make decisions. Whatever its physics, the center of the universe is here, now, where you and I meet.

“Just as you are in charge of your point of consciousness, and I of mine, others are in charge of theirs. It is your responsibility to defend your point and path from others, and, reciprocally, resist the temptation to impose your trajectory on them. You can teach, but you cannot rule, except insofar as they violate the minimums of society. Now, how do you decide what to do?”

“Thanks for the pressure. It's not easy to figure out. I didn't even know there were minimums to society.”

“First, decide whether to give up on altruism. In my opinion, altruism is a premise whose time has never come and never will. You have no obligation to help others—although those who would take advantage of you for their own reasons may try convince you that you do. But do recall Dickens' Ebenezer Scrooge after his epiphany. Scrooge's new perspective on his own existence led to reverence for the situation of others. More alert to your own journey, you are more sensitive to others, which presents an opportunity and a personal interest in charity.

“Few people, if any, read Adam Smith's first book, *Theory on Moral Sentiments* any more, but he recognized that altruism was not an effective virtue. Self-interest brings the truth of experience and, ironically, can be more effective at prompting people to help others. That may sound ridiculous and contrary to observation in today's selfish world, but Smith described a principled position not to be confused with unthinking consumerism. Have you heard of Dr. David Livingstone, the explorer, missionary, and physician once thought lost in Africa in Victorian times—of the 'Dr. Livingstone, I presume.' fame?”

“I don't know anything about him.”

“He worked to abolish the slave trade, educate Africans, and improve their health care. While his efforts may have encouraged colonization at the outset, his educational efforts fostered independence movements later on. Ever hear about Dr. Albert Schweitzer?”

“Never heard of him.”

“Schweitzer was a theologian, philosopher, musician, physician who organized clinics in west equatorial Africa, and who sought a universal ethical philosophy. Schweitzer said, 'Until he extends his circle of compassion to include all living things, man will not himself find peace.' And, of course, everyone has heard of Mother Theresa.”

“Certainly. In Calcutta, she ministered to the poor, sick, and terminally ill for almost 50 years.”

“So who did Livingstone, Schweitzer, and Mother Theresa do their work for?”

“The poor?”

“That’s the conventional wisdom, but they worked for themselves. Joseph Campbell advised people to follow their bliss. That’s what Livingstone, Schweitzer, and Mother Theresa did. They put themselves where they felt they belonged. Is central Africa, India, or our poorest neighborhood where you belong?”

“I don’t know.”

“And I don’t know either. It is not a role someone else can press upon you. Not altruism, but your own inquiry into yourself will lead to your particular answer. Let’s approach it from a different way. For each of these questions, figure how far along a continuum you’d place yourself:

- Are you most comfortable when you are busy or idle?
- Are you most comfortable with physical work or mental work?
- Are you most comfortable solitary or social?

“Along the X, Y, and Z axes you can, respectively, place answers to those questions. There is only one location in the graph that describes your unique comfort zone for today. It will be different on other days and different for other people. Certainly there are more questions and axes possible, and all of them challenge you to be responsible for setting the mean between the extremes, that balance point of yours Aristotle called the virtue between the vices. Your balance point for each question can change over time. Your task is not to put yourself at the center of one continuum or another, but to understand where, along each continuum, is the healthy, comfortable place for you to be.”

“And if, among your considerations, you find your bliss tending to a garden, tending to your family, tending your neighbor, tending to your community, or tending to your world, at that moment, that is where you belong. If it is in the heart of Africa, at a soup kitchen at the Welcome Hall, teaching, writing, or coaching Little League, or simply loving your family or friends, go for it! It is not the job of someone else to shame you into altruism. How dare they try!

“When you are at peace with your place in the universe, when you are in balance, you will find that Kant’s concept of duty is

not the powerful motivator. Reciprocity—the sense that others live their lives as acutely as you live yours—is a powerful motivator to help and share, and you’ll find great joy in it.”

“But what about this person who needs a transplant?”

“We are prisoners of our times. Walk with alacrity, but don’t rush.”

“That makes no sense at all.”

“You eat meat, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“How barbaric, to take animal life for sustenance. There are other ways to get protein.”

“Not as nourishing. Not as satisfying.”

“I agree. Eat meat now, but in a hundred years people will look back and laugh at us for barbaric eating habits. By then, science will have synthesized proteins and their manufacture that will likely be every bit as nourishing and flavorful as a decent steak. In their time they may judge our meat-eating as ‘morally repugnant’ but all that will show is their time bigotry—shortsighted chronological prejudice, their challenged sense of time and place in it, and how light in meaning is their understanding of the word ‘moral.’

“If I live so long, with my replaced body parts, I’ll stop eating my corn-fed, farm-bred livestock. Until then, I am a prisoner of my time, as my ancestors were prisoners of theirs. We do not have to arrive in our future at the expense of living in the present. We cut through our chains slower than our projections into the future would wish. Leave the anguish of having been born in our time up to the zealots and defend yourself from their brickbats with laughter.”

“What’s the point of talking about food when the issue is transplants?”

“Look at all we have accomplished! In one short generation, how many more people are alive today, with quality of life unimaginable just 50 years ago when Christiaan Barnard

transplanted the first human heart. Transplantation is today almost an ordinary event. Beyond that, the science to make transplantation unnecessary, through disease control or organ regeneration has rapidly advanced, even if such things are not yet ordinary. Those people who died in Louis Pasteur's day because pasteurization had not been conceived are no less and no more to be anguished over than your transplant patient today. When time is compressed, compassion becomes confused.

"The circumstance of your transplant candidate is unfortunate. But do not let that circumstance force you beyond where you belong. It is your job to find the joy in life that comes from giving the fullness of your time and effort. Life is experienced as a string of todays strung together, and, as certain as you are close to turning out the light tonight before you jump into bed, you will, before you know it, be just that close to your death. When you shuffle off this mortal coil you should be filled with the joy for having found your balance and lived well whatever your length of life that fortune grants."

"Life isn't always joyful."

"No, it isn't. Neither is it so bad as some often portray it to themselves. It is always a wonder. For some to think their lot in life is so bad to contemplate suicide is hubris unchained. It is the presumption that you understand the world so well you can unerringly predict the future. Sometimes people get so wound up."

"I try to relax!"

"I know. I believe it. You try very hard. It has to be very frustrating. It's a paradox. The harder you try to relax, the further away you get."

"A paradox?"

"As in a Zen master's lesson to his pupil, 'Okay, grasshopper, what is the sound of one hand clapping?' A paradox is a seemingly logical inconsistency that nevertheless expresses a life lesson."

"But, I *do* try to relax!"

"That's a sweet irony. Look at the two halves of what you have said. 'Try,' on one hand. 'Relax' on the other. Try takes resolve. Intensity. Effort. Tension. . . . Building up exactly the stress you are trying to relieve. Yet that is the method you'd use to relax."

"Then what can I do?"

"I read a book once with little to say for it—except for a single kernel of useful information on how to meditate."

"Meditate?"

"Meditation, the author said, is not the absence of thinking. Meditation is recognizing what it is you *are* thinking about and then, for a time, putting that thought on the shelf. Subsequently, should you discover you have begun to think about something else, calmly put that on the shelf also. Thoughts on your shelf will wait until later to be worked on. But, for now, thoughts resting undisturbed on the shelf help you relax just that much more. Meditation is learning how to empty your mind."

"But, how?"

"Let's see if we can find a good analogy. The brain is the best tool we've got to deal with what we sense, but it is far from perfect. Evolving over eons to do what it can now do, it's a double edge sword that can work for you or against you, and there is no instruction book how to operate it or to set its limits."

"I certainly never found one."

"Where, then, do you learn to control it? In school? Not according to the curriculum of specific subjects. That's why I get miffed at schools and the certificated pooh-bahs that presume to run them. For all that is taught, everyday useful wisdom is easily overlooked. Your brain is like a thoroughbred horse. You hold the reins. Either you control the horse or the horse controls you."

"Seneca speaks to everyone on internal balance, 'What's the use, after all, of mastering a horse and controlling him with the reins at full gallop if you are carried away yourself by totally unbridled emotions? What's the use of overcoming opponent after opponent in the wrestling or boxing rings if you can be overcome by your temper?'"

“If you are unprepared when you get in a mental bind, you are handicapped trying to work your way out of it. You can’t use your intellect to pull yourself out of it when your brain loops back on itself. It’s called recursion. Caught in a loop, the best way to escape is to get outside the engine in conflict. Read a book. Take a walk. Exercise. Sleep. Play with your children. See a movie.”

“What kind of movie?”

“Marx Brothers movies were made for this. Laughter is therapeutic. Seeing your brain slip up, you’d normally get angry and frustrated, but, since you are human, *let yourself be human*. Laugh.

“If you want to test that you have lost yourself in a loop, see how hunched over you are. Try to stretch your left ear away from your left shoulder, then your right ear from your right shoulder.”

“I see.”

“Probably not. You tell me you do, but you have a lifetime of habit to address. You’ll leave here and loop on what’s been said. You’ll go home tonight and loop on what’s been said. You have been told something, but you do not own it.”

“You know me too well!”

“Like any effective teacher, I can’t teach you anything. I can only see where you are headed and try to set something in your way for you to stumble over so that you have the opportunity to learn from the experience. You are in charge, not me. You need to practice to make it your own.

“Don’t get frustrated. I’m twice as old as you are. My lifetime of experience came the hard way to learn all that you have an opportunity to learn much sooner.”

“I probably spend 90 percent of my time in business as publisher counseling employees and only 10 percent managing. My time is spent on remediation—like colleges whose many students carry weaknesses with them from high school, and high schools before them to attenuate weak students from middle school. Someone who says ‘I seen that. . .’ illuminates an obliviousness to life—not

an indication of social station, but evidence of an ordinary habit of a lifetime, abetted by our social institutions like families and schools.”

“When would you start counseling someone?”

“When an employee who is corrected indicates confusion by asking, ‘Why do you hate me?’ that’s an opportunity. They stand in their own way, a victim of their own mental misdirection about the root of the problem. Misdirection is as common a defense in individuals as in cultures. Organizations single out excellence for teaching awards when that papers over the need to identify the weakest for mentoring. Literature awards often celebrate the conventional. Nobel Peace Prizes celebrate posturing, not results. And the *Times* still keeps Duranty’s Pulitzer Prize for gullibility. It is often a habit to resist learning.

“In prominent literature from 1910 to 1920, much like today, authors took pride in their descriptive powers. Literature then hinted at hollowness not unlike the elephant in the room today. When E. M. Forster paints *Howard’s End* in 1910, he pits the capitalist against the intellectual and against the lower middle class. He discovers class is not monolithic, with connections between classes that tie the disparate classes closer together, exposing the flaws in each. His conclusion, ‘Only connect!’, was thin. In 1913, D. H. Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers* is descriptive and dramatic covering themes of family, work, passion and freedom. Modernist in style and substance, James Joyce’s 1914 *Dubliners* presents characters that seem powerless and almost paralyzed, working for a political candidate they don’t really respect in a town of declining prosperity.”

“You describe a pessimistic time and a pessimistic circumstance.”

“In 1915, Ford Madox Ford’s *The Good Soldier* calls attention to his own ignorance and confusion wondering why he should confront his own limited power of understanding. Joyce returned again in 1916 with his modernist *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, self-reflective, with timid personalities, full of anxiety and fear, complete with an ambiguous and unexplained ending. Perhaps he did not see it might have offered so much

more.”

“Why did I miss learning these things?”

“Much of your generation has. What school subject do tools fall under? Not English. Not history. You’re at the leading edge of a century-long train. Ours is a generation for whom history begins at dawn. History offers nothing to them because they have no connection to it and no use for it. It doesn’t speak to them. Squeezed of all value, Social Studies became a set of notes students sweat over to pass a final. If history begins at dawn, you are at the mercy of feelings and inclinations. Without a sense of history, principles can’t happen.”

“Why would that matter?”

“Willful disregard of history isn’t the most egregious offense, but those who dare to disregard it open themselves up to misuse of history by others. The political class will intentionally rewrite events to attempt to get their way. I don’t need to ascribe mendacity to them, but such violation of trust betrays an ignorance of consequence. Spared the consequence of real pain in their protected lives, to them politics is just a game. Pain bides its time, waiting for some great collapse to launch them into the eighth level of Danté’s hell, reserved for the fraudulent and the deceivers.

“The first decades of 1900s and the 2000s shared the same false hope that motivated progressives. The 1900s pinned that hope on new technology—electricity, transportation, tall city buildings—the institutions of their day, just as early Romans had their arts, their aqueducts, and their army. Technology seemed the answer. Hubris gnawing at the brain, gave misplaced confidence that this generation—academics in particular—were correct simply because *they* were doing the thinking. Clichés, recited, and repeated, entranced them. Enchanted, they bet everything in their wallet on promises of hope and change, while every promise came with an asterisk and an expiration date.”

“But this is not new?”

“Henry James’ 1903 book, *The Ambassadors*, displayed an attitude toward life and society. He experimented with form and style,

paying close attention to new understanding about the workings of human consciousness and psychological truths. He could feel confident in his science because although so little was known, earlier novelists knew less and seemed superficial. James’ characters were liberated; ready to live life to the fullest . . . until they detested the lives they led. As one of his characters said, ‘What I hate is myself—when I think that one has to take so much, to be happy, out of the lives of others, and that one isn’t happy even then. One does it to cheat one’s self and to stop one’s mouth—but that’s only at the best for a little. The wretched self is always there, always making one somehow a fresh anxiety. What it comes to is that it’s not, that it’s never, a happiness, any happiness at all, to take. The only safe thing is to give. It’s what plays you least false.’”

“That sounds so . . . so . . . hopeless!”

“What seemed hopeless then is not hopeless now. It just takes time to for understanding to work its way to conscious awareness. James could only work with intuitions. Fortunately, today, we have access to metaphors he could, literally, not even dream about. Strong metaphors make it easier to grasp hold of concepts.”

“Metaphors were part of English class, not my world.”

“Exactly. You were taught their use as a decorative in literature, but not their practical value as a tool of your mind. Literature often forgets what great power it can exercise. Literature typically unfolds personality as developed by events. But, is it character or is it personality that is unfolded when George Eliot uses accidental events in *Middlemarch*? Character development is the name authors use for what they should call personality development. In *Middlemarch*, personalities do not share the same values, and as the plot unfolds, the core of what should be character is left as an exercise to the reader. Authors typically develop personalities. They do not develop character.”

“Why criticize literature? John Kennedy was talking about art and literature when he said, ‘I am certain that after the dust of centuries has passed over our cities, we, too, will be

remembered not for victories or defeats in battle or in politics, but for our contribution to the human spirit.”

“A novelist can aspire to be more than a cultural ornament and go beyond entertainment. The novel can have a positive influence to help some sort out what E.M. Forster called the ‘muddle of life.’ A novel telescopes the exercise of choices and their consequences too often absent from school curricula. Studying Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in the classroom doesn’t necessarily encourage better life choices, particularly when based on multiple choice questions that ask whether it was Laertes, Polonius, Rosencrantz, or Claudius whom Hamlet skewered through the tapestry.”

“Literature is the jewel of our humanity.”

“Here’s a question, then. In a novel, is it the fiction that matters or the fact? Is literature a jewel for what it is or for what it does?”

“Literature is a beautiful achievement. No one can look at Shakespeare and be unimpressed.”

“And other writing? Is journalism to be revered as an object of art?”

“It might, but journalism’s purpose is to educate and inform.”

“Isn’t that literature’s purpose? Being, not doing, undermines art no less than place-holding teachers undermine formal education: ‘Hey! You have a degree, you must have earned it, you must be worthwhile, and I must respect you for your credentials.’”

“I can’t imagine any educator would think literacy was an end in itself.”

“If you have a student who earned excellent grades for reading, is that student educated?”

“Not a all.”

“Correct. The student reader is in a position to become educated.”

“But, excellent teachers cover diverse subjects thoroughly and professionally.”

“We teach subjects very well, but that specialization comes at a price. Carving out ecology, for instance, creates experts who thoroughly understand the consequences of humanity’s existence, but they seem unable to turn their microscope around. Their detailed lens throws off the scale of judgment outside their area of expertise. Nietzsche was right. Zealotry in any form is suspect. The scope of remediation for generations of pollution should not be thrown upon one generation’s shoulders, to crush their quality of life. Sometimes the costs of remediation are out of line with the benefits and if we tread water today, the march of science over time will bring economic solutions sufficiently soon.”

“But if we do nothing . . .”

“Shouldn’t you support the need to understand climate change before rushing headlong to pass legislation one way or another?”

“The consensus among scientists is that something needs to be done now.”

“Consensus is popularity, not science. You would short-circuit science for political gain. You don’t even know the history of climate change.”

“What history?”

“We owe the blossoming of government in the cradles of civilization in Egypt and Mesopotamia to climate change, the population of the Americas to climate change, and the dynamism of Europe to climate change. Climate change brought us to where we are today, taught us the understanding to use energy to deal with it, and created the wealth to cushion the impact from it. Climate change isn’t the problem, but rather that we don’t understand the science of it—the causal connection—or our relation to it.”

“In 3000 BC, climate change brought about governance that made society possible. In the cradles of civilization, Egypt and Mesopotamia, humanity was obliged to transform from hunter/gatherers to tame the flooding rivers, store food, divide labor, develop industry, tax citizens, defend borders, set up governance.”

“But we need to reduce man’s impact on the climate.”

“Back up what you say with science. Science means understanding the mechanism behind it. Science means independent verification of the data and the models. Science means rejecting what is demonstrably false. Without that, and on both sides of the issue, what you call ‘science’ is no better than mystical reading of goat entrails.

“It is either hubris for politicians to say we know enough to understand and control it or mendacity to seek to restrict the energy we use to defend ourselves from nature. The political class would misuse data and call it science to gain power and control. They want the power to tax the creation of energy and the power to control the tax revenue that comes from it.

“These are such significant questions.”

“Congratulations. You have discovered that what to teach and why are enormously important questions, but they pale when one asks the question *who* should teach. That’s the question that caused the state to put Socrates in the dock.”