

Essay Archive 2: Navigating a New Millennium (2000-2005)

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"The purpose of a writer is to keep civilization from destroying itself." - Albert Camus

When 2000 began, I had no idea what a pivotal year it would be for me, or how different my life by the time it was over. On New Year's Day 2000, I was still looking for efficacious medication for a treatment-resistant mood disorder. But in the spring, I finally found what I needed, and things began improving by the day. It was a thrilling year; one I was beginning to think I would never have the pleasure of living (see poetry archives for a more detailed autobiographical treatment of this period).

Just before I found the right treatment, in the dead of winter, hunkered down in my small dimly lit basement apartment, I was still trying to negotiate some kind of detente with my depression and anxiety; to make them more like acquaintances I am compelled to live with than brutal adversaries. But it was turning out to be just another losing battle in what was increasingly an unwinnable war; and I was forced to admit that after more than twenty years of unsuccessfully searching for the right treatment, I was becoming bitterly resigned to a dark and despairing existence.

Then one day in February, pursuing the latter train of thought while a blizzard raged outside, I was starting to get glimpses of my mood disorder as something more than an affliction. Could there be a silver lining in this somewhere; one I might be able to regard as an asset of sorts? Might there be a trade-off at work in my life? Might the mood disorder be a necessary exchange of happiness for a special vision?

I sat down to my keyboard late that morning to work it out for myself, and before the end of the afternoon I had a piece I could feel good about. Just a week or two later I would finally find the treatment I needed, and the clouds of depression would be lifting. But as different as I feel today, after more than twenty years of my mood disorder being a non-issue for me, I am still intrigued by the reasoning in this essay and the conclusions it reached. It may just be just the desperate hope of a troubled soul trying to make sense of his circumstances; and, faced with the distinct possibility he may never be delivered from it with an effective treatment, struggling to find some dignity and

purpose in his life of suffering. This is most likely what is going on with this piece, but sometimes I return to this essay and wonder....

The Insight of Depression

Of late an entirely different way of looking at my plight has begun to dawn on me. Up to now I have understood that which I am afflicted with as a bipolar mood disorder, commonly known as manic depression; for I have been diagnosed, suffered with, and medically treated as such. Not that the treatment received, and the lifelong parade of psychiatrists and psychologists, have met with any real or lasting success. They have not.

Since the age of twelve I have been pursuing treatment for this "disorder". I have just turned forty, and over the course of my life I have been subjected to a wide variety of medications punctuated by patches of psychoanalysis. The former has probably taken years off my liver and kidneys (the long-term effects of such medications is not known, though it is recommended that liver and kidney functions be monitored), and the latter has been plied with varying degrees of competency with little or no lasting benefit. A truly compassionate doctor well versed in the "talking cure" is hard to find. Short of this they are glorified, albeit well-intentioned, pharmacists administering the latest pill with an expert command of the wait-and-see attitude, and repeatedly it would seem in my case. The result: I am no further ahead. Or am I?

Somewhere along the way a suspicion slipped into the back of my mind and started to grow; a suspicion far too ominous to accept when first encountered, but far too significant for a fiercely analytical mind like mine to dismiss out of hand. Given time, it becomes too serious to ignore, until the time comes when it simply must be entertained. That time has come.

Serious clinical depression and anxiety demands and inevitably commands your complete and undivided attention. And that's the problem really. The waves of fear and dread that washed over me this morning as I came to consciousness are just as fresh and severe as yesterday's, last week's, or even when first they assailed me in puberty; and they will dog me through another day. It is unrelenting.

But is depression and anxiety the cause of my suffering, or are they the primary effects of an even more unsettling crux? This is it. This is what I finally have the courage to explore. It is not some deep, dark secret that I have

repressed, for I am all too aware of everything that has befallen me. I have come to terms with all possible external cause(s), yet the terrible feelings remain because I have yet to find an efficacious treatment. I must come to grips with the possibility I may never find it.

No, the crux of which I speak is a different animal entirely. It is as though I am privy to some special vision, one so difficult to endure that it causes intense anxiety and crippling depression. Can this be the truth behind it all? Am I, and those like me, condemned to view the world in a way that is all too real; so real it is simultaneously accompanied by the unavoidable weight of responsibility that comes with seeing things as they are in truth? Is this the true origin of my anxiety and depression?

I say "seeing things as they actually are" because this is how it seems: like all is revealed in its raw being and I am unshielded, unable to escape by becoming completely immersed in the day-to-day routine of one's life. For being able to get lost in one's life means avoiding that painfully authentic vision that sees the world in the bareness of its mere existence - a terrifying, nauseating sight. The so-called normality of mental health may be just the ability to maintain the innocence of "seeing through a glass darkly".

If I am right, I suffer from an all too pure insight into the true nature of things; not as phenomena (things as they are for us), but as noumena (things as they are in themselves). This brings with it the most onerous of responsibilities, leading to anxiety and depression in the extreme.

None of this should be in any way construed as a boast. For if I could return to a more innocent or ignorant perspective, I would. But the cat has gotten out of the bag and cannot be returned to it. One cannot un-know something, unless for some reason they lapse into psychosis and lose it all, in which case the glass is opaque and cannot be seen through at all. No, there is nothing to be proud of here. There is just an all-pervading sense of overwhelming pretension, and a helplessness as to what to do about it. Nothing can be done. It is mere being. It is the way things are - existence.

Is this the real me? In other words, is my "condition" a separate thing which afflicts me, or is it part or all of who I am? If the latter is so, then a so-called healthy me would, for all intents and purposes, be someone else. And if I should finally find a medication that works for me, wouldn't its working mean that the real me has been watered down or lost to some extent? Aye, there's the rub. It seems I would have to choose between being aware, authentic, and unhappy, or being unaware, inauthentic, and happy.

There can be no question - ignorance is bliss, and 'tis indeed folly to be

wise. It has always been like this. Throughout history there have been many who suffered in this way. A great majority of people so afflicted are, for the most part, paralyzed by this "condition" and unable to rise above its debilitating effects to be productive to any extent, except in fitful, all too infrequent spurts. I fear I am condemned to be in this category, only occasionally (like now) able to translate the pain of the insight into some form of meaningful expression.

One in a million, however, somehow find the fortitude to produce, despite and at the same time due to that special insight. These people constitute the bulk of our greatest authors, poets, playwrights, philosophers, theologians, and artists of every genre. Somehow, they work through the pain and obscurity of this perspective, though I know not without considerable spiritual hardship, and leave behind a body of work which serves to enlighten the rest of humankind regarding the nature of truth and beauty – a thankless task, to be sure. The only thing worse is to be unable to win anything at all out of the suffering, sentenced to an existence where the insights act like a mental cancer, consuming and torturing the sufferer throughout her/his life.

The vision at issue here is at once a blessing and a curse. It has given me an acute sense of reality and historical locatedness. I know that I understand this world as well as anyone can, maybe too much, and I feel the spirit of my time. Coupled with my education, this has informed my understanding and appreciation of the human condition and allowed me to be of considerable help to those who seek my counsel.

But there is a substantial price to be paid. I am empathic, in that I feel what those around me feel without trying to feel it. I am picked up and carried away by other people's feelings. I have no choice in the matter. It would be wrong to say that I am always right about this, but in practice I have proven to myself that it is quite rare for me to get an inaccurate reading. This means pain. Unable to avoid feeling the weight of another's pain or pleasure, I am subjected to this whether I wish to be or not. It never ends. For in between feeling for others, I am awash with the vision of reality as being, or so it would seem. All looks pitiable and obvious. Sickeningly naked truth assaults my consciousness every waking moment of every day and night. And as much as I see the futility in the lives of others, nobody's life seems more futile, pitiful, and insignificant than my own.

I am overcome with nagging self-doubt and an oppressive sense of fear. It is all too much to bear, yet somehow, I do bear it. At least I have up to this point. But it grows worse with each passing day, and I have great difficulty

seeing a future for me. Even now I wonder if what I have said holds water. I mean, is this what is really happening? Am I experiencing an insight so hard to take that it results in anxiety and depression? Or maybe my mind invented this idea to protect me from the unbearable truth: there is no reason. Could it be that there is no basis in reason for how I feel; that the anxiety and depression simply happen for no reason at all save biochemistry? Put another way, is there a biochemical deficiency, or is the chemical balance exactly right for one blessed with the vision to see things in this way?

I honestly don't know. But I do know how it seems: life for me is like staring into a horrible gaping wound, unable to avert my eyes. But as painful as it is, real truths do emerge from this. And no matter how hard those emerging truths are for me to brook, it is still infinitely preferable to meaninglessness. Of this I am certain.

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Towards the end of 2000, Canadians were seeing disturbing TV news images of poor Inuit children in Davis Inlet, pitifully huddled together by the side of a building sniffing gasoline to get high. Soon thereafter the then Governor-General, Adrienne Clarkson, was moved to take a week-long tour of the north to see first-hand what was happening, and to draw more attention to their plight. As terrible as it was, and as troubling as it was to see these scenes, I couldn't escape the fact that it was just the latest example of the sad and marginalized lives endured by our indigenous peoples every single day, and I was moved to write this essay.

It was written back in early 2001, in light of the situation in Davis Inlet, to bring non-indigenous Canadians to a better understand of what life must be like our First Nations peoples at the turn of the 21st century, compared with life before the English and French usurped the continent and took over. It was my hope then, as it is now, that the essay will help non-indigenous Canadians who read it to do more than just sympathize with them from a distance, and to move a little closer to empathizing from the perspective of a more knowledgeable, understanding heart.

I sent it to the Telegram as an editorial, and to Governor-General Clarkson on a whim, thinking she might appreciate it. The Telegram didn't publish it, I suspect due to the length. But a few weeks later I received a formal letter from Clarkson's attaché with her official letterhead, telling me the Governor-General had read the piece with great

interest, that she shared my views, and the essay had been passed on to her speechwriter at her request.

Though written about a different kind of crisis for indigenous Canadians more than twenty years ago, the sentiment expressed therein apply very well to the most recent revelation – the shocking discovery of 215 indigenous children’s bodies in a mass grave at a residential school in B.C. run by the Catholic church.

A Feat of Understanding

It is indeed disturbing to hear of the many crises faced by our indigenous peoples on so many levels. Scratching the surface, we see footage of Inuit children sniffing gasoline; we see statistics that show the disproportionate socio-economic disadvantages of the average indigenous person in Canada; and the shocking numbers of missing and murdered indigenous women – all of which should profoundly offend the social conscience of any thinking, feeling person.

But as non-indigenous Canadians, we lack the insight and perspective necessary to fully understand all that is happening there, and the multifarious ways it negatively impacts these people. We rush to judgement on their problems, then we rush to solutions, and efforts to help always seem to fall short. Assuming we really care and want to do something substantial to help, we still find it hard to comprehend it all, which is entirely understandable. For non-indigenous Canadians, fully appreciating the underlying causes of the problems our indigenous peoples are grappling with every day would require nothing short of a feat of understanding.

Take rampant substance abuse among young indigenous Canadians, for example. It is extremely difficult for most of us to put ourselves in the shoes of a pubescent Inuit person living in abject poverty in northern Canada. We can’t even imagine what it’s like, as an adult or child, to have our culture threatened with extinction, and have no choice but to try catching up with someone else’s culture. We have no idea what it’s like to be forced to watch your heritage ripped away while staring into a bleak, uncertain future. How could we? This kind of human existence is outside of all the frames of reference non-indigenous Canadians use to order their lives psychologically, socially, legally, professionally, and culturally. We see the world in a completely different way; until finally, ironically, we realize that seeing Canadian life the way our indigenous peoples do is entirely foreign to us.

Sadly, the people who have lived on the land that is now Canada since the dawn of humankind's appearance on it, are alien to the people who annexed it just a few hundred years ago. What's more, the ideology that forced its will and world on them is the same ideology to which they must submit; and they are expected to be grateful to be completely subjugated and absorbed by the very people that are crushing their ethno-cultural identity – surely the unkindest cut of all.

It is equally true that indigenous Canadians have great difficulty seeing life from our perspective. What's more, unlike us, they don't have the luxury of laying these issues aside indefinitely, or until they can summon up the will and energy to be compassionate. Indigenous peoples in Canada wrestle daily with these life and death matters, even as they endure an utterly devastated psyche and lifestyle.

The wholesale adjustment indigenous peoples have been forced to make is completely unreasonable. For centuries upon centuries, they were free to enjoy a pure, idyllic relationship with Nature, totally immersed in it; where Nature, life, and belief resonate in perfect harmony. Then expected to abandon all this and assimilate into a different world with an utterly different worldview, a world in which they are marginalized. Adding injury to insult, they have since acquired many health problems they had never known, and previously unknown psycho-social problems like poverty and substance abuse. An already violated soul must apprehend and address concepts and issues with which it is entirely unprepared to cope; and expected to do so with DNA that has evolved for a totally different purpose, with a whole set of now redundant skills, and another set of goals entirely. And they are expected to do all this cheerfully, in just a few short generations.

Children look to adults in a community as role models. Non-indigenous young men growing up in most areas of Canada have at least one marginally successful father figure in their circle of family and friends, in their schools and institutions, and many examples of success in general. CEOs, social and political leaders, teachers, professors, cutting-edge scientists, and artists abound; allowing the youth to dream of future achievements in an array of endeavours. This gives such a child hope because it says that success is a goal that is entirely possible to attain.

But for young indigenous Canadians, there are very few examples of their people achieving success in Canadian society, past or present; and what used to count as success among their people has lost almost all its meaning. Add to this the spiritual fragility of puberty, a critical phase of life in any

culture; then factor in the discouraging effects of being brought up by impoverished, forlorn parents who cannot explain what is happening, much less know how to fix it. Then we are shocked when these hopeless and impoverished kids resort to the dead-end escapism of substance abuse.

Is there anything in our spirit or experience as non-indigenous Canadians that can help us appreciate what has given rise to these circumstances, and what they have ultimately wrought for these unfortunate fellow Canadians? Well, there must be, because I am performing this feat of understanding right here and now, and we need many more non-indigenous Canadians doing the same. When enough people know and understand who or what is responsible for a given problem, that which previously defied solution begins to come clearer. Previously unseen options and strategies present themselves to a person who tries to learn and understand with heart as well as mind.

I hereby propose two initiatives which, with consistent effort in providing all the practical assistance this country can offer when properly motivated, may facilitate lasting positive changes in the future feelings and fortunes of indigenous Canadians.

First, we require the popular and political will to make fundamental changes to the Canadian constitution; changes that will allow the document to better reflect the historical facts regarding the genesis of our nation. "Aboriginal rights", "entrenched" in 1982, were certainly an improvement on the status quo, but they didn't go nearly far enough. If they had, the crises indigenous peoples face today would be fewer and less intense, and efforts to address them would get better traction socially and politically. But they don't, so our appreciation of who they uniquely are, and their full inclusion and respectful treatment in the family of Canadians, never happens.

It is high time we acknowledged the elephant in the Canadian constitutional room; one we have somehow allowed ourselves to silently ignore. The nation called Canada was built despite a host of First Nations already occupying the land. In the process, some of these nations, like the Beothuk of Newfoundland, were completely wiped out. Pre-existing nations who once enjoyed life in an unfettered, unspoiled relationship with Nature, historically predate and logically precede the concept of squatter's rights, and the constitution needs to explicitly acknowledge this truth once and for all. Confession can be good for the collective as well as the individual soul.

We would do well to review the policies of other countries that have and haven't had some degree of success in this area, according to the indigenous

people who live in those countries. We cannot revere what we don't properly and fully recognize. A country effectively run by elected lawyers, given enough time and the proper motivation, should have no difficulty reframing the constitution and couching changes in terms that don't endanger or call into question the 'ownership' of the territory. Practically speaking, nothing need change, nor should there be any legal implications, so we ought to cheerfully do whatever is necessary to right this fundamental wrong. It is a national humanitarian wrong that, more than ever before, is painfully inconsistent and incongruent with the expanding socially conscious spirit of our time, and with what we believe to be "Canadian".

It's like all the commotion in working out an understanding and civil relationship between the English and French settlers, which rages on to this day on many levels, has somehow blotted out our attention to matters concerning the inhabitants who were living here to begin with, and still do. Addressing what the birth of Canada has done to our indigenous citizens and continues to do has been lost in the shuffle, and we are at best constantly playing catch-up, at worst merely paying lip service. Frankly, it is a shameful, national embarrassment for a country voted best nation in which to live by the United Nations every year.

It is simply a matter of officially recognizing that the joining of "two solitudes" took place on land already inhabited. We call them First Nations for good reason - they were here *first*. There is no disputing this, and the very use of the term 'First Nations' in Canada should be acknowledgement of it. But as things stand for these people in Canada today, it mocks them instead. The constitution should clearly and unambiguously state that the Canadian people and their government recognize and affirm this fact, pledging that our country's legal system and social policies will henceforth seek to take this into account as never before.

By all rights, the constitution should say that the country was founded by the joining of three solitudes, not two. We would thereby be making genuine, respectful peace with our First Nations. At the same time, we would be making peace with the truth. That is, two imperialist solitudes came in, summarily annexed all the land, and created a new country; and, in so doing, *initially* trampled over the lives and the rights of the land's original residents. It is a fundamental wrong that we can make right; and it is well within our power to do so.

Secondly, a renewed, concerted effort to rescue and proudly preserve the rights and unique culture of our indigenous peoples must be launched in

response to a perceived Canadian cultural crisis. It should be carried out with the same purposeful energy we use defending French language rights or Maritime fish stocks. This, too, must be entrenched in the constitution as something we hold as sacrosanct; and it must be enacted into law, with statutes demonstrating a genuine desire to uphold and maintain the integrity and precious cultural heritage of our First Nations.

Think of the positive effect such a campaign would have on the battered hearts and minds of our indigenous peoples. Think how you would feel, to see the country rise as one and finally give your people their due - politically, socially, legally, culturally, and morally. Official recognition of the full, unabridged, and unedited story of Canada's creation in the constitution would reduce the alienation and isolation so deeply felt by our indigenous citizens. The spirit of all negotiations, impact studies, commissions, and official efforts aimed at recognizing and/or bettering the lives of our indigenous citizens should expect a positive boost and renewed dedication on all sides. No longer outsiders in their own land, desperately trying to make claims to bits and pieces of it, the protection of their culture as an instantiated Canadian constitutional commitment would go a long way. Also, serious consideration of the inherent psycho-social problems in preserving one's ancient culture, while adjusting to a relatively new one, would help bring about a much more painless and compassionate transition.

We change the Canadian national anthem to better reflect bilingualism and gender equality, yet our very own ethnic minority of indigenous peoples are the only Canadians who can sing the first line of that national anthem in truth. How can we call ourselves a proud multicultural nation if we don't sufficiently and authentically treasure and celebrate our indigenous peoples too? So long as this continues, we are incomplete as Canadians, and we squander the best opportunity we have to model for the world, as we do in so many other ways, how best to address indigenous concerns everywhere.

Children abusing substances is just one of many disgraceful and unsettling manifestations of a massive national injustice that has persisted since before confederation: a socio-political systemic lack of appreciation for and devaluation of our indigenous peoples. This is caused by two basic shortcomings on the part of the average Canadian and the government: the failure to accept the complete story of how our country came to be, and the failure to care to truly comprehend the issues faced by our indigenous brothers and sisters today. Nobody decided to make it this way, but we *can* decide now to make it the way it should be. We cannot turn back time or pay reparations, nor can we let anything stand in the way of our twenty-first century progress.

But we *can* do the right thing for our indigenous peoples and make a meaningful beginning afresh. And it all starts with a feat of understanding.

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One evening in the summer of 2002, on a visit to Toronto, I was casually chatting with an Albertan in a North York bar. The conversation turned to the subject of friends and good times, and he began to tell me about this other Newfoundlander he once knew. When he was finished speaking, it occurred to me that every time a mainlander told me about another Newfoundlander, I always heard the same things – he’s a hard worker, he loves music and parties, he’s a funny guy who always has a joke to tell – it sounds like they’re all talking about the same guy!

This got me thinking about the subject in general, including some of the commonalities we may share as natives of The Rock, so I fired off a short editorial on the matter. Thankfully, the opinion of most mainland Canadians regarding Newfoundlanders has improved greatly over the last twenty years, which may mean they could now understand what I mean in this piece...

What a Character!

What qualities most bespeak the character of the average Newfoundlander? I do not here refer to some provincial catch-all phrase that pigeon-holes us in a flippant way, for such generalizations just play into the hands of those who delight in the pejorative stereotype that is all too prevalent in Canada. In the past, that characterization has meant we are regarded as some sort of quaint, national pet; tolerated, but not really taken too seriously. No, what I am referring to here is something else, something more substantial and closer to the truth.

Is it our artistic ability? No. Yet we have boasted many world class artists in many artistic genres, from Gerry Squires to Mary Pratt, from Ron Hynes to Brian Macleod. Is it our wit? No. Even so, we have had comic geniuses like Greg Malone, Tommy Sexton, Rick Mercer, and that caustic curmudgeon Ray Guy back in the day. Is it our business acumen? No, but we have the Crosbies, the Dobbins, and a host of industries now competing in the international marketplace with a wide variety of quality products and services. Is it our

political savvy? No, but we've had truly historic premiers in J. R. Smallwood and Brian Peckford; and let's not forget the considered flippancy of John Crosbie.

In fact, Newfoundland is replete with intelligent, witty, talented, and astute individuals. To be sure, we have our fair share of dunderheads, slow-wits and unregenerate boobs, and an electorate with a remarkably short memory, maybe shorter than most. But overall, I hasten to add, the relative composition of our population stacks up against any in the country, or the world for that matter. Yet none of this is what gives us our uniqueness. What sets us off from the rest of Canada is a set of qualities we embody as human beings – our character.

The average Newfoundlander is, above all, genuine. We project unabashed honesty and a disarming humility in our dealings with others. We are proud, but it is not the puffed-up pride of shallow materialism. Our self-respect is born of hardship and plain effort. Paradoxically, our very character acts as a bulwark against the historically difficult circumstances from which it has arisen, with the aforementioned humility as ballast.

All this is plied with a rueful, endearing sense of humour, and an uncommonly generous heart. Newfoundland hospitality is legendary, and we give more to charitable causes per capita than any other province, even when we were "have not". We are self-deprecating, possessing the rare ability to laugh heartily at ourselves. And a Newfoundlander's rectitude and down-to-earth common sense are not easily circumvented.

The result is a truly distinct society. Not simply because we speak a different language, though many jokingly say we do, or because we have this or that resource. We are distinct due to a common core personality. It is not because of something we have, but something which we are. Of course, there are a lot of humble, charitable, and friendly Canadians all across the country, but nowhere do so many of them come together and cheerfully make a common home.

I have spent years living on the mainland as the friendly, upbeat Newfoundlander that I am, and quite often that good nature was mistaken for naivete. Yet despite this, the genuineness of which I speak has engendered a grudging respect they try, but ultimately fail, to conceal. Such experiences give a native Newfoundlander a sense of pride not to be realized in Newfoundland itself. Most mainlanders will say they never met a Newfoundlander they didn't like. Even so, we have seen many revert back to the stock opinion of Newfoundlanders so prevalent in the past, affording them the self-absorbed delusion of superiority.

The good news is that the profile of the average Newfoundlander in the eyes of other Canadians is certainly improving. It's a slow but worthwhile process, but we are getting there, and I know it is our character that will sustain us along the way.

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If I were to add up all the time I spent as the significant other of a Catholic woman, it would come to well over thirty years. In each of their families there were a lot of siblings, and one had eight brothers and eight sisters. So, as you can imagine, I have heard a lot about Catholicism and the role Catholicism plays in the lives of its followers, young and old. And I can report that for every positive statement about the Catholic church/religion I've heard, there have been dozens of negatives. So much so, I believe that if you were to ask the average Catholic to tell you the best thing about Catholicism, in many cases your question would be met with silence.

Before I renounced all organized religion at the age of twelve, I was raised in an Anglican family. Pierre Burton titled his best-selling book about the Anglican church "The Comfortable Pew", saying it was a relatively tame, non-threatening Christian denomination. And the contrast between Anglican and Catholic is indeed stark. With so much time spent in and around large Catholic families as a person of Anglican origins, I gained an objective perspective on Catholicism about this or that aspect of the religion when I heard it being discussed. One of the most prevalent issues I heard raised was the many different ways Catholic guilt pervades everyday activities, and how it seems to be a factor in so many areas of human life.

More than ten years after the Mount Cashel revelations, there was still next to nothing being done about the phenomenon of Catholic clerical child sexual abuse, and similar news stories from all around the globe were starting to pile up. I didn't know it yet, but I was preparing to write a book about the dysfunction and sexual abuse in the Catholic church; and experiencing all this from inside large Catholic families would prove as much an asset in writing the book as my degree in philosophy.

At this point, however, I was concerned with how and why the Catholics I knew and loved were suffering, and it was clear to me by now that Catholic guilt was playing a central, almost ubiquitous role. I wanted to help my Catholic friends and their families, but first I needed to marshal my thoughts on the subject. I decided an essay would be best, so I did more research to confirm what I knew and fill gaps in my

knowledge of the issues involved. The piece turned out to be too lengthy for publication as an editorial, so after providing a few Catholic friends with copies, I filed it away, hoping I would be able to publish it in some form in the future.

It never did get published as an essay, but it did become one of the research touchstones for the writing of my first novel, *Grace Ungiven*, some eighteen years later...

Understanding Catholic Guilt

This essay is intended to give an objective and considered theosophical perspective on Catholic guilt for Catholics and former Catholics who are grappling daily with this affliction. And it is indeed an affliction, as it twists and mutilates the thoughts, feelings, and lives of otherwise healthy, intelligent women and men, thwarting their efforts to be happy. A person so afflicted feels limited in terms of freedom, sexuality, and self-worth. Happiness, they are taught in so many ways, on so many levels, is unattainable due to their "sinful" nature and need for punishment and redemption, which can only be found in the church – the very perpetrator of this unnatural, oppressive set of ideas. This is not a criticism of Catholic people, but rather an indictment of the institution that controls and hurts them.

To understand the concept of Catholic guilt, and truly appreciate its insidious and damaging presence in the lives of Catholic women and men, one needs to understand a few issues with respect to the origin of the church itself. It is not necessary to go into an exhaustive treatment of church history, doctrine and/or liturgy. It will be more helpful for our purposes here to simplify the church's origin, review the subsequent birth and development of the concept of Catholic guilt, and examine the church in terms of pre-religious history and our everyday understanding of basic human psychology.

The degree to which the teachings of the Roman Catholic church take over and even arrest thinking in its pupils, may be seen in practicing Catholics who almost unwittingly equate God and church; and we see it in "recovering" Catholics who feel "godless" when first they break with church dogma and begin to question the church's inconsistencies and faults. It is virtually forgotten that God, by definition, logically pre-dates all human-conceived religions. As obvious as it sounds, this fact is essentially glossed over and, for all intents and purposes, rendered meaningless for the average Catholic mind. Here we find religion supplanting spirituality. Our original spirituality, the center of our nature that is given each of us at birth, is denigrated and redefined as sinful from the start. Man-made religion gains supremacy, and it

recasts everything on its own terms to ensure that power, wealth, and control over its people rests with church leaders, and this must be strictly maintained.

The origin and true nature of the divine is inscrutable to the human mind, which is capable of only vaguely understanding the idea of God. The most basic psychological conception is that of God being “before everything else”. Once a human mind grasps this idea, the idea of a Creator God is often not far behind. For our purposes here, it is as far as we need go, except to say that all religions hold this to be true. Even atheists and agnostics believe there is an order of some kind ‘behind’ existence. They choose to resist the urge to give it a personality and all that comes with it, but they also acknowledge that this order came into existence long before the dawn of human history and eventual religious development.

The Roman Catholic church traces its origins back to Peter and the founding fathers of Christianity after the death of Jesus Christ. Peter and his friends set out, we’d like to think, with the best of intentions. Unfortunately, much of the spirit of Christ’s teachings on many issues, no less the subject of “church”, were left behind from the beginning, and the early church developed more in accordance with all too human feelings and ideas than with the teachings of Jesus Christ. Over the centuries, the core values that Christ taught became increasingly compromised, mitigated, and watered down according to the desires of the men who led the church.

They immediately made Catholic church leadership a “men only” profession/calling; they decided which books were and were not to be included in the Bible; and to this day most Roman Catholic clergy claim authority with respect to its interpretation, without objection from the faithful. Enough of the life and love of Christ and his followers is included in the Bible to give the church some claims to legitimacy (New Testament). But most of the Bible is comprised of Jewish apocalyptic literature (Old Testament), furnishing the best tools for clerical fear mongering, the better to gain and secure power and control. The distinction contemporary theologian Matthew Fox makes between the loving, creating forgiving God of the New Testament, and the violent, vengeful, punishing God of the Old Testament, should be strongly considered here.

Human greed shaped the dogma, practices, and direction of the church ever more as the centuries passed, as successive generations of elderly, male church leaders solidified their power and control over the church and its people; all while living in a lap of luxury that has been furnished by money taken from poor parishioners, and gains ill-gotten from other sources. Followers lived in fear of the “power of God” as administered and even brandished by the clergy, and the church wielded a great deal of influence in

local, national, and international spheres of politics, culture, and economics variously throughout history.

Along the way other churches have come into existence, often protesting the practices of the Roman Catholic church and promising better, as was the case with Martin Luther, the founder of Protestantism. Today the remnants of the “catholic” in Protestant religions tends to give the leaders and followers similar problems, with similar consequences for the psyche of the people; but they usually tend to be much less intrusive and more liberal. The Anglican and United faiths, for example, do not arbitrarily and unilaterally teach that anyone who doesn’t believe what they believe is going straight to hell, or is in any way of less worth. There is no coercion, church ministers may marry, and they can be male or female.

Leaving aside the obvious evils of televangelism as unworthy of serious consideration here, we may nevertheless say that Catholicism exhibits several characteristics of fundamentalism and cultism; on a much larger scale, grounded and inexorably bound to centuries of world history and culture. The evidence of the Roman Catholic church’s influence on our world past and present is a matter of historical record, from the Crusades of the Middle Ages to the church’s varied and highly suspect political involvements with the strangest of bedfellows. Instances of the Catholic church’s negative influence on the human psyche are less evident, but no less wrong or detrimental; and they are found deep in the hearts, minds, and personal lives of the afflicted – chief among them, Catholic guilt.

While it is true that the devotion of the average Catholic parishioner is not as strong as it used to be, there are still a lot of middle-age and senior Catholics suffering under the yoke of the church’s unrelenting command over their lives. It would be wrong to think that this has no effect on how they raise and interact with their children and grandchildren, and that this has no effect on how they, in turn, live their lives. Considering the positively chilling silence and lack of action by Catholic parishioners in response to the countless cases of Catholic clerical child sexual abuse revealed over the last thirty years around the world, it is safe to say that the church has as tight a grip on its remaining followers as ever.

Oxford defines guilt as “the fact of having committed a specific or implied offense.... or the feeling of this”. The word ‘fact’ in the definition is key here, pointing to the actual existence of a wrongdoing and the feeling that arises therefrom. This is a natural human concept and emotion, and it has been argued that it is indicative of a ‘conscience’ in human beings.

Catholic guilt differs from real guilt in that there is no actual offense committed, yet the feeling of having done so experienced by the individual

emotionally is as real or worse. It is better captured in Oxford's definition of the psychological condition known as a guilt complex: "a mental obsession with the idea of having done wrong". To maintain its intimidating position of power, Roman Catholicism has carefully and systematically inflicted its followers with an onerous guilt complex, giving them a lifelong obsession with the feeling of having done wrong even though no real offense needs to have been committed.

The devoted faithful of the Roman Catholic church are saddled with an aimless feeling of guilt that follows them throughout their entire lives if left unchallenged. It starts early, as the church's doctrine, liturgy and practice teach children they are "born in sin", guilty right from the start. Redemption, they are falsely told, can only be found through the church. A life of struggling against a feeling planted by the church is begun thereby, a struggle that so consumes the individual that any reaction against or challenge to the church, this idea, and the feeling of guilt itself is most often unthinkable.

From birth, "good Catholic boys and girls" were surrounded by concepts and examples that programmed them to spend the rest of their lives 'catholicized'. Girls learned early that the female's station in life is defined by males; they learned to accept a secondary role behind the male, and even a tertiary role when children came into the picture. Over the courses of their childhood girls learned to accept that females are inferior; not as important or worthy as boys are. Catholic women are often heard to complain about how they had to serve their brothers as they grew up, and that there was no way to protest or resist this. Conversely, boys learned early that they are privileged and superior compared to their sisters, and that somehow even their sins are less of an issue. The example modeled by parents was a daily indoctrination into the male dominated world of Catholicism; and a childhood steeped in this tradition, whether male or female, results in an adulthood riddled with guilt-driven dysfunction.

Good Catholic boys grew into good Catholic men, convinced of their superiority over women. This feeling of superiority was considered 'normal' and virtually inseparable from their natural personality. If the man was naturally a forward, forceful person, his Catholicism made him toxic, overly macho and domineering, unable to conceive of any other way of being. Such a man perceives romanticism and artistic sensitivity as weaknesses. But if the man was naturally gentle and fair-minded, his Catholicism made him confused and at odds with himself. His upbringing meant that his natural ease with his 'female side' was to be suppressed, and such a man carries an inner conflict that often results in a variety of psycho-social problems (i.e. alcoholism, violence, depression, suicide, etc.). In either case, the Catholic man

continues to model that which made him what he is, and the dysfunction is perpetuated indefinitely, as intended.

Good Catholic girls became good Catholic women, convinced of their inferiority to men. They accepted, on some level, that they are no different than their mothers. As adults, these women fight all their lives to be happy, but ultimately fail to achieve any real measure of joy or genuine happiness. Convinced of their sinfulness they feel unworthy of happiness, never deserving to be content or at home with their natural impulses and desires. Such a woman will often sabotage a happy time to satisfy what has been bred in the bone – oppressive and ever-present Catholic guilt. A lifelong, inescapable feeling of sinfulness and undeservedness shouts down the truth of her happy moment and her natural spirituality.

Her sexuality is a shameful embarrassment, and even when she manages to enjoy sex it is soon followed by heavy guilt, self-condemnation, and self-punishment. What should be a beautiful, healthy, and fulfilling experience becomes little more than confirmation of her inherent sinfulness as a woman. Menstruation is punishment for being female, the pain of labour and childbirth carry the same implications, and child rearing involves far too much self-sacrifice and self-denial. What does all this say about the concept of ‘woman’ in the Roman Catholic church? With the church as the perpetrator, little wonder that many resort to episodes of ‘martyrdom’ as a strange kind of psychological self-defense.

The effect of Catholic guilt on the male is complex and damaging enough to the individual and society, but in the life and society of the female the influence is far more intricate, and the implications for her and society are profound. Consider that the church’s policy and practice of celibacy is essentially the statement that women are sinful. Only men can be priests, and priests are forbidden sexual contact with women. If you are to be a “man of God” you must vow to abstain from living naturally with a woman. The only woman acceptable is a virgin who somehow managed to conceive a child without defiling a man with her sordid and sinful sexuality, but who still carried a child and gave birth in pain.

The depth and breadth of the negative psychological effect of the Catholic concept of celibacy on Catholic men and women, and society, even today, is immeasurable. Its name is Catholic guilt, and it poisons individual lives and families. This impoverished view of woman is insulting to all men and women, and it continues to have untold consequences for society on any number of levels. The problem of Catholic guilt is complex, and I don’t claim to have given an exhaustive treatment of the subject here, or to have all the answers. Much more work needs to be done, and done by Catholics, if we are

to address the problem for individuals and lessen the adverse effects it has on our society, to say nothing of the sexual abuse of children. But it does need addressing if we are to live happily as healthy men and women.

We need to hear from 'recovering' Catholics with testimonials of how they shook off those bonds of guilt, and how those who love them can best help. Whatever the solution(s), it will involve understanding and love on the part of those trying to help, and a great deal of trust and effort on the part of the afflicted. The answer, I believe, lies in love, and in a return to our original spirituality; and the religiosity responsible for this pain must be distilled from the psyche and lives of guilt-ridden people. They need to be shown the beauty and purity of their true spirituality, something they have been prevented from discovering within themselves.

* * *

Anyone who knows me knows I am not political by nature. I couldn't be pegged as a Liberal or a Conservative, as I have always voted according to the candidate's suitability to serve the district in which she/he is running. Personally, I believe the greatest flaw in democracy as we know it is the presence of political parties; the degree to which these parties impose their will on the system and the people; and the fact that we end up with just a few platforms from which to choose, each supposedly able to satisfy all a voter's issues and policy concerns. This is, of course, impossible, and we end up voting for the lesser of three or four evils, thereby participating in something less than the democracy we think we have.

Then, during the Newfoundland provincial election campaign in October 2003, I shelved the idea of exploring the notion of a democracy without political parties for another time, and I began to wonder what could be done to improve democracy within the party system. Soon I was speculating about a party that would be able to model or allow itself to be shaped by these improvements, and maybe even elect a government in the process. For reasons I provide in the essay, I settled on the provincial New Democratic Party as the best place to start, as forming a new party would be too complicated, time-consuming, and may never result in the election of a government.

Soon after finishing the essay, I happened to meet an NDP speechwriter at a bar downtown, and later emailed him the essay, but I never heard back from him. Then, leading up to the provincial election in May of 2019, NDP leader Alison Coffin and I passed each other as she was coming out of a CBC Radio interview and I was going in

for one. I broached the subject with her briefly, and she asked me to send her a copy. This I did, and again I received no reply. In both cases, I think my pull-no-punches critique of the NDP in the early portion of the essay, and the more circumscribed role I give the party leader later in the piece, put them off.

In any case, the NDP turned in yet another predictably lackluster campaign in the 2019 election, with the same dismal result as always. Obviously, they didn't use my template, and I still think the proposal is a sound one...

Renewed Democrats: A Roadmap to Achieving and Holding Power for the New Democratic Party of Newfoundland and Labrador

Too many people have become disillusioned, even cynical about the political process in our province and our country. So much so, it has become fashionable to be blithely resigned to the fact that it doesn't matter who is in power. Many feel politicians are only interested in "feathering their own nest" and, as a result, far too many of us don't bother to exercise our franchise at election time. With so much democratic potential neutralized by voter apathy, and the political process left in the hands of a privileged few, everyone loses.

Even relatively high voter turnouts in recent elections do not reflect a renewed interest in the political process, or in democracy, but rather a blind participation in a forgone conclusion. The electorate occasionally expresses a half-hearted desire for "change", but in the years between elections they revert to lamenting that the change they voted for is really no change at all. Democracy in Newfoundland has stalled and is now stagnating.

When apathy turns to pro-action, we begin thinking more purposefully about this problem. We realize that the process itself needs serious reworking, and people need to care more about the process. We rightly recognize there is little difference between one government and the next, regardless of the party in power, especially when it is always either Liberal or Conservative. We soon see that if the change is to be fundamental, we will need a political vehicle or platform of some kind with which to affect this change. Forming a new political party is a prohibitive alternative, and time is of the essence. So, we take a fresh look around; and from this perspective, we may see the New Democratic Party of Newfoundland and Labrador in a new light.

Viewed with our long unrequited desire for fundamental change in mind, the NDP is a perfectly good political party that continues to go to waste. They have been an active party in our province for decades, and its national beginnings with the CCF Party out west are both honourable and historic. Yet now, early in the twenty-first century, the provincial party has gotten to the point where holding on to just one or two seats in the House of Assembly is considered a victory. This is hardly the kind of determined idealism that has founded and driven the party in the past, and it certainly falls short of what I am calling for here. In fact, it is an admission of failure, a resignation to future failure, and the best indication of the party's ongoing inability to become a serious, potent political force in this province.

What is wrong with the NDP in Newfoundland and Labrador? It is time to ask the party and ourselves some hard questions. Why is this party and its fortunes little more than a recurring sidebar story at election time? Why, after years of courting the unions, have their promises and efforts to mobilize labour as a powerful voter block failed so miserably? Is this possible or even desirable any more as a party tenet? And then there's the question of leadership. With all due respect to its past leaders, who I know to be intelligent, caring individuals, it has become abundantly clear that changing leaders in this province's New Democratic Party has had little or no impact, which is yet another indication of the need for real change in the party's approach.

From the leadership to the grass roots, a complete overhaul of the party and its policies is strongly indicated. Otherwise, the NDP is doomed to continue playing a minor role in the politics of Newfoundland and Labrador, doing little more than pick up what's left after the Liberals and Conservatives are done. It is my sincere belief that change is not only possible but imperative. A brand-new set of ideas is needed if we are to turn the party around and have a lasting positive impact on the province; and nothing short of a wholesale change in approach is called for. The new leader should be less occupied with embodying leadership, and more concerned with leading the charge in an entirely new direction – the direction for which I am advocating here.

Consider this. What if the months following the 2019 election saw the New Democratic Party going about the business of openly redefining itself? What if this redefinition was so fundamental it positively changed politics and the province in the process? What if the party conceived the most basic policy possible, boiling down the entire process to one fundamental issue? And what if the NDP succeeded in appropriating the political process in Newfoundland and Labrador right out from under the Conservative and Liberal parties? It is my contention that this can be achieved in no more than two terms, quite possibly in just one. But only if the party's leadership and brain trust are thoroughgoing in their redefinition of the NDP in the province.

This redefinition needs to begin with the adoption of a radically new course, based on an entirely new, stripped-down platform. The platform would have only one plank: constituency representation. But it would be a special and unique brand of unelected, constituent-centered representation, unlike anything the electorate in Newfoundland and Labrador has ever had the pleasure of experiencing. With a fresh, totally reimagined sense of purpose, renewed Democrats across Newfoundland and Labrador would be looking past the coming election day, regardless of the expected results. They would be looking ahead to the first day of the new government's four-year term, secure in the knowledge that what they will be accomplishing over the course of those four years will be ensuring their election in the *next* election. Their success will depend on the extent of their daily dedication to the NDP's new principles and platform during the term.

Imagine, if you will, one enthusiastic and energetic New Democrat in each riding, preferably a long-time resident of the area, committed to be the party's candidate for that riding in the next election, with one daily purpose – to be a consistent and unrelenting constituency watchdog for the term of the present government member. She/he would begin by informing constituents, regardless of party affiliation, that the elected member will be challenged, criticized, and hounded throughout the term, and that she/he will be vigilant in championing only the best interests of constituents. The role of each constituency watchdog would be anything but passive, with a full set of duties and responsibilities to carry out on behalf of constituents.

Each riding's renewed Democrat would shadow the elected member daily, passing judgement on everything the member says or does; calling out what is wrong, as well as pointing out what is right, developing a reputation for honesty. The NDP watchdog for each district would take equal time in the press to respond to all the members statements and activities; and during periods when the member is not using the press, the watchdog would take advantage of this to expound on the NDP's new approach. By the time the next election rolls around, constituents will know that the NDP watchdog will have spent more quality time in the press over the last four years than the member.

The recruitment of the right NDP watchdog and future candidate for each riding should begin in earnest on Day One of the new term, with each one put in place as soon as they are identified. There should be no public announcement of the plan until all ridings are covered; and, in the meantime, each NDP constituency watchdog will simply begin working their riding according to plan. When the full slate is filled, which needs to be achieved within the first four to six months or sooner, the party's announcement of the plan can be made. This would be a pithy, constituent-friendly version of this

document's stated strategy, pointing to examples of what has been already going on out in the districts, which will explain and verify for voters what they have been experiencing since the start of the term.

The role of party leader in this plan would also be stripped down and redefined. Instead of engaging in the usual tit-for-tat with other leaders, the leader of the NDP would rise above all that and remain aloof, busy coordinating the plan, maintaining consistency, delegating, and keeping all watchdogs on task. But also, gradually introducing and outlining the kinds of policies voters can expect from the next government - an NDP government.

Politics, and everything the voters have come to detest about it, will be left to the other parties; and the shadowing of the elected members by the NDP representatives in the districts, in the interests of better government, will make the NDP stand out from and above the other parties as never before. What's more, the NDP's unwavering and unrelenting daily focus on "policing" the elected members will double as the party's ongoing cost-free campaign for the next election.

When the official campaign for the next election does begin, the NDP candidates that have been keeping the members honest for the duration of the previous term will already be well-known and respected by voters. The entire thrust of their campaign will be to simply point out all they have been doing on behalf of voters all along, all without remuneration or being elected - displaying an unprecedented dedication to constituents. With this strategy, even election campaigning will have been reinvented and redefined.

With the political process effectively distilled down to pure constituency representation, the original principles of the NDP will emerge as a matter of course. Championing the cause of minorities and the underprivileged follows logically from any determined effort to make certain constituents are well represented, and this arises out of the pursuit of issues near and dear to the hearts of the people in each district. When it comes time to vote again, voters will remember that it was the unelected, dedicated representatives of the NDP, and their determined efforts to ensure good constituency representation over the course of the previous term, that made all the difference.

This will go a long way towards addressing voter apathy, as people become excited about a government that is truly of, by, and for the people. The party must then tap into a resource that provides the greatest chance for continued success on into the future: the province's youth. The NDP has yet to make any real inroads with the youth of our province. But with the aforementioned redefinition, we have a golden opportunity to infuse the party with a wealth of new ideas and a slate of bright young candidates; while, at the same time, effectively growing future NDP voters.

A New Democratic Party that succeeds in redefining itself and Newfoundland politics in the way I have outlined here can expect a great deal of success. Such a party will have used the term of the present government to reclaim the political process for the people and the party, to revive and re-energize the voter-friendly concept of constituency representation, and it will have given the people ample reason to believe that the election of an NDP government will ultimately mean the effective return of the political process to the people - in some ways for the first time. In so doing, the New Democrats will finally embody their name, as they lead the people back to the very roots of democracy - solid constituency representation. And anyone who knows the origins of the New Democratic Party, and the spirit in which it was formed, knows that Tommy Douglas would have wanted it this way.

The leader of the New Democratic Party of Newfoundland and Labrador must finally lead the party out of the political wilderness. She/he must do so by inspiring one person from each district to make a firm commitment to shadow the incumbent member for the term of the present government every day, and to be prepared to stand for election at the end of the term. In time, this new approach will inspire people and bring many more into the party. I contend that such a radical change is the only way to save our democracy from itself, and the best way to make the NDP what it was always supposed to be.

* * *

Though it may seem unrelated to the essay above on Catholic guilt, this next piece may nevertheless be an extension of it. Just as I watched and interacted with the Catholics I have loved in my life and their families, and eventually wrote an essay to capture their pain and help them discover what may lie behind it, I also wished to provide an account of all that awaits Catholics with a guilt-complex, should they manage to finally break free. This led me to consider all aspects of human existence, to find out how best to take stock of one's life, and to write this lengthy essay on the subject. It was an opportunity to use some of what I learned from my philosophy and psychology studies, and what I have read. As with everything I write, it is exactly as long or short as it needs to be to cover the issue...

The Value of Self-Maintenance

Bertrand Russell once said: "In all affairs it's a healthy thing now and then to hang a question mark on the things you have long taken for granted." Since hearing this, I have tried to do this regularly; and in the spirit of the adage, I humbly propose a guide for getting the most out of one's life. I call it an informal study in self-maintenance.

A human being's life may be broken up into seven aspects/categories: (1) geographic location; (2) lifework; (3) health; (4) relationship(s); (5) sex life; (6) spirituality; and (7) extra-curricular activities. I will take them one at a time and, in so doing, try to identify areas one may need to work on, and make a commitment to oneself to do something, however small, to better the situation in each category. Rare is the person who cannot improve their lot in each aspect. Everyone has work to do, and it should be a labour of love.

Toward this end, we should not forget to balance ourselves by acknowledging our strong points. We must remember to celebrate what we're doing right. This is vital to self-esteem, self-respect, confidence, and a general feeling of well-being. Don't forget to give yourself the credit you deserve, because in doing so you demonstrate to yourself that you value yourself. This is the spiritual fuel which drives your personality and life force, so don't deny yourself this. Add in the awareness that you have a real plan to improve your life and are taking steps to carry it out, and it will be hard to deny how good you feel as a direct result of simply beginning to take control.

Never cease realizing that you are just as valuable as anyone else, no matter what your station in life. You have just as much right to be here, and just as much right to achieve a measure of happiness for yourself. Don't let anyone tell you or make you feel any different, and nobody can make you feel inferior without your permission. Remember Desiderata: "You are a child of the universe/no less than the trees and the stars/you have a right to be here/And whether or not it is clear to you/no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should."

(1) Your Geographic Location

This category is the most straightforward. Simply ask yourself if you are living where you want to live? Is it the best place on the planet for you? If the answer is 'yes', consciously realize that you are where you want to be and take comfort in this. If the answer is 'no', ask yourself if you are taking any steps to identify where you want to be. Once you have identified the best place for you to live, determine if it is possible, and what steps can be taken to put you there.

We have no control over time, our age, or our past. When it comes to our place, however, we have more power to choose. This may seem obvious, but it is difficult to achieve a measure of happiness in a place you don't want to be. So, be completely honest with yourself – Are you where you want to be?

(2) Your Lifework

Survey after survey reveals that a large portion of a person's sense of contentment and fulfillment is derived from her/his employment situation. We spend a great deal of our time working, so it stands to reason that having a job you enjoy will go a long way towards helping you feel complete and contented. Is your job giving you the satisfaction you need? Can you see yourself working in the same job five years from now? Do you look forward to going to work, or do you dread it? Maybe you are indifferent to these matters, but I doubt it.

There are a lot of factors that go into choosing a profession. Most people don't put near enough thought into this incredibly significant aspect of one's life, and many who do are motivated by things that only lead to disappointment in the end. Material gain, for example, is an empty promise. True, having enough money can give a person a variety of options; but all too often the result is an accumulation of material wealth for its own sake, and this leads to a shallow and ultimately unfulfilling existence.

You must ask yourself a deceptively simple question: Is this what I want to do with my life? This sounds simple enough, but it is a challenging question that requires no small amount of soul-searching to arrive at an honest answer. If this question is posed seriously, it gives rise to more specific questions which also demand answers. What do you enjoy doing most? What are your best qualities and talents? Does your present level of education allow you to pursue your long-term employment goals?

Those of us who put real effort into determining these things may lay claim to some degree of happiness. These people, having acquired the education and skills needed, end up working at that which they do best and enjoy most. And this is no accident. They have put a good deal of thought and effort into choosing their course, and it pays off. They have put themselves and their virtues ahead of financial remuneration. Do this, and the financial rewards will follow; they will come, but they must not be put first.

It is not hard to see how much stress can result from spending hours, days, weeks, months, and years slaving away at something one really doesn't enjoy, simply to get money. Earning and spending become the desperate acts of a person with no real direction or goal other than to acquire things. But when you embark on a voyage of self-discovery, an exciting and rewarding

activity in and of itself, you move forward with a confidence that arises from knowing you are doing what you do best and enjoy most. Such people most often rise to the top of their field because of it. Your life becomes one you approach with relish and vigor, and it is a life you can be proud of. This is so valuable as to defy monetary worth. It is priceless.

(3) Your Health

Health is something we tend to think we are fortunate to have, as though it were out of our hands. While it is true that certain afflictions befall us through no fault of our own, it is equally true that, for the most part, we have the power to determine our general state of health. Failing to exercise this power is to be a sitting duck for every threat to health that comes our way.

Few people enjoy perfect health. I doubt such a person exists, for nobody is perfect. But what does this mean? Does it not mean that we are supposed to be flawed, and that we must have something to overcome to be truly human? After all, this is said to “build character”. Do we really mean these statements of truth, or do we merely pay lip service to them? I submit the degree to which a person copes with and works to reduce his/her shortcomings in a civilized manner, is the degree to which that person succeeds in demonstrating all that is good and noble about human beings. You must decide which kind of person you want to be.

Human health is usually divided into the two realms of mind and body. I believe it's a lot more complicated than this, but the distinction is helpful in determining certain key areas for consideration. We will deal with the body first; not because it is more important, but because the discussion in which we are engaged demands that we move from the outer world of the body to the inner sanctum of the mind. Thoughts and feelings reside here, and they must be studied in their natural habitat.

The body is something which this society puts great stock in, and it has throughout history. Of late, however, this corporeal obsession has reached a fever pitch. We are bombarded with media imagery and messages extolling the virtues of “looking good”, when what really matters is how we look to ourselves and how we feel about it. Cleanliness and a healthy self-image are prerequisites to a healthy body. This does not need to be elaborated on, but a healthy self-image is another matter entirely.

You must honestly ask yourself: Am I pleased with how I look? Is my approval of my own appearance based on what I think, what others think, or what society thinks? If the honest answer is what you think, and you are truly unconcerned with the opinions of others and society at large, then a healthy self-image has been achieved and the issue of the body has been sufficiently

addressed. If, however, you have been honest and the answer is what others or society thinks, there is work to be done.

If we are not pleased with our appearance, often it is either because we put too much emphasis on the observations of others, or we are simply not fit. The issue of self-esteem will be dealt with in consideration of mental health, but if we give control of how we look to other people it is usually because we don't feel worthy of the job ourselves. Oddly enough, this tends to result in a lack of fitness as a self-fulfilling prophesy. In my own case, food became a form of pacification, and eating was little more than self-medicating escapism. Reduced levels of physical activity and complete disregard for what I put into my body further added to the problem, feeding my insecurity and impoverished self-image. Something had to be done, and no one could do it for me. I had a great deal of work to do.

Maintaining one's healthy body must not be a matter of fad diets and media conceptions of the ideal physique. It must become a way of life. The first task is to adopt a program which will bring you to some extent closer to fitness (i.e. "ideal weight"). Once this has been accomplished, a new lifestyle keeps you that way; a lifestyle that involves regular activity and respect for the "temple". This goes hand in hand with one's mental health and self-respecting attitude. While it is true that a healthy mind makes a healthy body, there is also a lot to be said for the impact a healthy body has on the mind.

There are no shortcuts to physical fitness and a healthy self-image. It takes effort and the ability to visualize a goal and move towards it. But the rewards are incalculable. It is always more successful when it is part of an overall vision of oneself and one's life in a new light; a light that reveals the gift that life is, and the inherent value in each individual life. It takes dedication and determination, but the return is tenfold.

Mental health is a much more elusive thing to define, and I believe humanity has yet to define it properly. All things being equal, we find ourselves sane, as well as free of psychosis and its tendency toward the unreal. But we all have some degree of neurosis which we may or may not be dealing with adequately. What upsets us, our idiosyncrasies, our preferences and tastes, our lifestyle - these all reveal our own peculiar way of dealing with reality. But they are not as beyond our control as you might think. Attitude is a good place to begin.

Attitude is simply the choice to be positive or negative in your interactions with the world and those we share it with, and in our interactions with ourselves. Attitude is the first active step in building real and lasting self-esteem. What is regarded as mental health is largely determined by attitude, and it is usually measured with respect to the kind of attitude one adopts to

handle the situations of human life. This is up to us. It does no good to bemoan the fact that other people have more to be happy about than you do, for we all know of people who are much worse off than we are; and it often seems like they still manage to have a more positive and healthier outlook than we do somehow. It really is up to us.

This brings us back to self-image. We can become addicted to feeling lousy and negative, and many of us do. But it is just as true that when we take on a more positive approach to our lives, we can become addicted to feeling good. When this happens, problems are more like challenges, and it becomes a matter of pride that you won't let anything get you down. There will always be something that comes along and succeeds in darkening our mood to some degree; but being a good human being consists in keeping this to a bare minimum. The self-image is therefore healthier, and the effort needed to become fit and stay fit is found in great supply. Mind and body work together to make us healthy, instead of at cross purposes, which results in mental and physical dysfunction.

Some of us have the added responsibility of shouldering what has been termed "mental illness". I use the term 'responsibility' because I wish to emphasize the pro-active approach and promote the dignity in keeping oneself "maintained". People who suffer from severe psychoses need special attention and they are not who I am speaking to with this paper. Those of us who cope with mood disorders such as clinical depression, or any of the wide variety of psychological conditions, are naturally more challenged by their own state of being than the average person. But these are also the people who have an opportunity to learn and grow the most by dealing with life on a level closed off to most people. The question is how.

To begin with, we should set out to learn everything we possibly can about that with which we are afflicted. To defeat an enemy, you must get to know that enemy. In the process, you are essentially asking yourself if you have tried and are doing everything in your power to address the issue. This involves seeking and accepting professional help, and not being satisfied until you find a professional who does the best job of treating you personally. Demand it.

It also involves a fact-finding effort, and perhaps some time spent relating to others with the same problem to compare notes and help one another. This, too, takes dedication and determination. But think about it: Is there really anything better to do with your life than go about the business of living it as best you can with what you have? Remember that the feeling that you are doing something about it is no small thing, and it supplies the inspiration to continue.

(4) Relationship(s)

Putting a question mark after relationships we depend on everyday can be a scary prospect, for it calls into question that which we are not, under normal circumstances, supposed to question. Even so, it is a necessary exercise if we are to be true to ourselves, no less to those with whom we have relationships. Let's break them down into relationships with our family, friends, significant other, children, and strangers.

Relationships with members of the immediate family are fraught with difficulties, and they are probably the hardest to keep in a state of good repair. Maybe familiarity breeds contempt and absence makes the heart, but I think it is more complicated than that. Our brothers, sisters, parents, and children tax our ability to be on consistently good terms for many reasons. First, you love them, and they love you, and this brings with it a few expectations, some appropriate, some not so much. You need and expect more from these people than you do from anyone else, but you also complain to them more than anyone else. You know more about each other than anyone, so it is more difficult to mask your true self in their eyes, and there is an undercurrent of resentment due to how well they know you. And you also have shared certain experiences with family that continue to colour your relationship(s) on many levels, making for a complex dynamic.

The reason we put a question mark after them, however, is not to wonder whether we wish to continue to have the relationship, but rather to ask ourselves whether we are doing right by our family, and if they are doing right by us. We wish to keep these relationships in good standing. If we are honest with ourselves, we know that the question mark makes us vigilant in the cause of familial authenticity and, hopefully, harmony.

Having learned a great deal from our interactions with our family we move out into the world and attempt to forge other relationships. We encounter strangers, and if we are fair-minded at all we give them the benefit of the doubt until otherwise shown. This is not only a nice way to behave, but also wise. In so doing we make it possible to establish the means to a more substantial set of relationships which may result in friendships.

If a friendship is achieved, we must ask what we are doing to give this relationship a special status. Do we give more of ourselves to our friends? Shouldn't we? If not, what is the distinction between a friend and a mere acquaintance? Once again, we question these relationships to remain authentic and to do the best job we can of nurturing and maintaining them. There is nothing overly complicated about that, but it takes real effort to do it consistently well. To ignore this aspect of one's life and take it for granted is to

court disaster, and difficulty in our relationships with others is virtually always due to this kind of neglect.

Our relationship with a spouse is one that deserves special attention. Sometimes we are fortunate enough to find a friend with whom we are compatible, and we are thoughtful enough to keep a relationship with that person going. When this happens, we should be sure to enjoy it for as long as time and circumstances will allow, and be grateful that we are loved. When we place a question mark after this kind of relationship, we almost always end up confirming it, and we carry on confident and encouraged by the reaffirmation. This is especially important. Realizing when things are right is every bit as important as identifying problems.

Sometimes, however, we are in a relationship now for different reasons than when we entered it. The unexamined life does not realize this, and months and years of confusion, misunderstanding, stress, and mutually inflicted pain are the result, until the relationship is honestly questioned. Then it may be seen that time has shown you that your partner isn't fulfilling all your needs, and/or you are not fulfilling theirs. This is frightening when it is first faced, but ignoring it is far more dangerous.

Life is too short to do without a solid romantic partnership if you have found one, but it is also too short to spend it with someone who is either incapable of meeting your needs, is not suited to you, or doesn't have your best interests at heart. In cases like these you must have the courage to face the facts of the matter and move on. No material involvements or unrealistic obligations can be permitted to stand in the way. You loved this person at one time, and they deserve to have your honesty and your courage to do the right thing for all concerned, even if the right thing is the termination of the relationship. Short term pain for long term gain is always preferable to the other way around.

As for relationships with our children, they are the most significant of all for society as a whole. Honestly questioning these relationships on a regular basis is one of the most important things we will ever do. We do so to find out if we are being good parents. Are we passing on our best qualities and most valuable lessons, or are we passing on our prejudices and ignorance? It cannot be overstated: we are questioning our parenting today that we may build a better tomorrow.

It bears mentioning at this point that we have not forgotten our relationship with ourselves. In fact, this entire exercise is a tangible way to open a dialogue with oneself, the better to improve our relationship with ourselves and give purpose and direction to our lives.

(5) Sex Life

It may be asked why the subject of sex life was not addressed in the treatment of our relationship with a significant other. However, the issue of one's sex life is far too important and substantial not to be dealt with in and of itself. By giving it a segment of its own, I hope to underline the fact that sex is often given short shrift, being either portrayed as unidimensional or sensational. Neither do the matter justice, and we would do well to give it special attention.

In a world of free love and sexual license, it is easy to assume that sex is finally out in the open, and we have reached a point where everyone has an open mind and a healthy appreciation for the role that sex plays in our lives. In fact, it is precisely during times such as these we must be careful not to be lulled into a false sense of security. Many of the misconceptions and hang-ups that have plagued past generations are still very much alive, and this is especially true of auto-stimulation.

Whether you call it auto-stimulation or masturbation, it remains an all too underappreciated aspect of a healthy sex life. You would be hard pressed to find someone today who seriously warns that masturbation will cause blindness, interfere with a normal sex life, or that it is evil or deviant behavior. It is now well accepted that it is a normal human activity. But having decided this, society seems to have concluded that there is nothing more to say on the subject. This closes the book on the issue just when we have matured enough to appreciate the role it plays in the life of a healthy human.

Auto-stimulation lies at the very heart of a healthy sex life, and it has much to offer the matter of overall mental and physical health. Straight-laced fundamentalists condemn the activity, not so much because it is wrong per se, but because they have come to regard their bodies as laced with sin. They have learned to deny themselves any such freedom in the name of self-righteousness, or at least say and pretend they do, and an overriding sense of unworthiness prevails. The person with little or no self-esteem is no less afflicted, for they also believe themselves unworthy of unconditional pleasure and self-love. It all begins with self-love.

You cannot expect anyone to love or respect someone who doesn't love and respect themselves. The activity of masturbation is an education in our own body, and a tangible demonstration to ourselves that (a) we are worthy of pleasure; (b) we are in complete control of our own bodies, minds, and lives; and (c) we are free. These are three particularly important things to believe. This is not to say that masturbation is the only way to demonstrate this to yourself, but it is one of the best ways.

Through auto-stimulation you let your mind run free, and you find a liberation in fantasy that is bounded only by backward notions and the limits of the imagination. You may posit any scenario whatsoever for yourself. Once you overcome the outdated constrictions of guilt-consciousness and begin to explore this realm of human life, you come to be comforted. You are secure in the knowledge that even if you don't have someone currently to give you pleasure, you have a right, even an obligation, to give it to yourself. We rest and find solace in the freedom given us by our autonomy and the full appreciation of it. Even people who are involved in active, satisfying sexual relationships continue to auto-stimulate. It is a place they have learned to go for grounding and validation that cannot be achieved in any other way.

Such a person is convinced, and is regularly reminded, that sex is a perfectly natural human activity, and that no one is more entitled to the playfulness of my mind and the pleasurable sensations of my body than I am. This spills over into sex with other people, for such people tend to know their bodies better. Sexually secure people treasure themselves more and thereby elicit a respect from their partner that is the cornerstone of a mutually beneficial relationship. If you don't believe in the product yourself, it is a lot harder to sell it to someone else.

The physical benefits of a healthy sex life do not end with the immediate pleasure derived from the activity itself. A regular level of sexual activity of any kind that brings one to orgasm reduces stress by releasing endorphins, giving relief and release from pent up tension. Moreover, in sex with another, the intimacy of the act itself gives us irrefutable evidence that we are loved, and that we are not utterly isolated from the world and the people we share it with. I do not believe that we as a race of people yet fully appreciate what a central part sex plays in a healthy lifestyle. We have been created with these capacities. Are we so hung up as people that we cannot simply accept the pleasure we can experience without detracting from it with irrational considerations of sin and guilt?

We may try to deny it, but a major part of who we are as human beings is found in our sexuality. We place a question mark after our sex lives because we want to be sure we are getting the most out of the experience, we want to make sure we are getting all the benefits that arise out of a healthy sex life, and we wish to provide the same to our partner. If your sex life is less than satisfying to you, there can only be two causes: either you are not embracing your own sexuality, or your partner is failing to take your sexuality into account. If the former is the case, learn to love yourself and experience the freedom of autonomy. If the latter is the case, look for a partner who is as concerned with your pleasure as you are. In the meantime, and beyond, auto-stimulate regularly and be nice to yourself.

(6) Spirituality

If you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything, as the saying goes. This old saw indicates that spirituality is not optional. Some people feel they can get by without ever seriously dealing with the issue, but to do so is to miss a vital component of human life that informs all other aspects of that life. Far too many people give little or no thought to spirituality and end up losing themselves in the world of technology and material things. And more relinquish control over their spirituality and leave it up to someone else (e.g. priest, minister, etc.) to handle all such things. Such people make the mistake of equating spirituality and religion. This is not only lazy but, as the adage above points out, hazardous.

We must question our spirituality from time to time to find out what we believe. It is not necessary to figure out all the answers to all the big questions, but it is important to find out what your position is on this or that matter, even if the answer is "I don't know". So much can be learned by holding up a theory and testing it against the everyday vicissitudes of life. Your positions will change sometimes, for you are more informed about your world and what it means than you were in the past, and this calls for updating. The point is to think enough about what life means to arrive at a workable hypothesis of some kind. This gives one's life purpose, and we live and act in accordance with a loose conception of some kind, instead of wandering aimlessly through life with no real sense of what is going on in truth.

For my part, I am far too spiritual to be a religious person, which should remind us that spirituality is not religiousness. It is nothing more than the acknowledgement that we are creatures with minds that are meant to be used to give direction and meaning to our lives. Education, both academic and religious, fails miserably in teaching the most basic principles of spirituality. What you believe in is not as important as the fact that you believe in something; something which has a positive impact on your life and the lives of those you encounter. The effort alone makes life more interesting and rewarding. As Montaigne said: "No wind blows in favour of the ship that has no port of destination."

(7) Extracurricular Activities

So, you work, love, maintain your health, and you believe something. What do you do with the time you have left after all this? This is something that we need to question, for much satisfaction can be derived from these activities, and they say a lot about who we are and how we conduct our lives. Hobbies, leisure time, games, sports, pastimes – no matter what you call them,

they are a big part of a fully rounded life. Questioning this is a matter of asking yourself if the activity is fulfilling or still fulfilling for you; if it indicates something about my character or how much I am getting out of life; and if I do it because I want to or because it has become a habit. There is nothing wrong with doing something purely for the joy it gives, but we should be sure that this is the real reason we do it.

Extracurricular activities are opportunities to sample life, to try something to see if you enjoy it without the pressure of it being your job. If they are carefully chosen and started with the right attitude, they can open doors to new life experiences you would not have otherwise had and bring you in contact with like-minded people. Not putting any thought into what you do with your spare time cannot be expected to give the same results as making conscious choices. This is common sense, of course, but it doesn't seem to be common at all.

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These seven areas give us a way to know ourselves and get more out of this life. I do not presume to have all the answers. I don't. But I do know that things turn out better if we question. So many people bounce through life without a direction or loose plan, then they are surprised when things don't work out. But our lives change for the better when we take steps to become more in touch with ourselves and what goes on around us. This essay is offered as a suggested starting point; a way to help sort out a life, improve it, and feel better about it. All this gives confidence.

To summarize, you must strive to ensure that you are geographically where you want to be, or work on getting there. You must determine what work you are best suited for and enjoy most, and then acquire the education and/or opportunities that will put you into the position. You must feel sure that you are doing everything you can to bring about a healthy mind and body. You must nurture and expand on relationships that are working for you; and disengage from those that leave you hurt or unfulfilled. You must allow yourself a full and satisfying sex life alone, and partner with people who cherish you and your sexuality. You must find out what you believe and don't believe; and be unafraid to take a stand on an issue you have considered and feel strongly about. Finally, you must fill the rest of your time with rewarding, productive activities.

Remember, after questioning all these facets of our lives, there can be no question - there is always room for improvement, beginning with your understanding of yourself and who you are. It is, after all, your life. You may choose what seems to be the easy way out by doing nothing, but time will show that this is the more difficult route in the long run. It is up to you and

you alone to change your life for the better and derive a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment from it. In the end, it is you who must do it, but don't be afraid to ask for help along the way. We need each other.

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A stylized signature logo for Jeff R. Kelland. The letter 'J' is large and blue, with the name 'Jeff R. Kelland' written in a black cursive script across it.