

## **The View from Ninety-Two**

“The View from Ninety-Two” is virtually unchanged from “The View from Ninety,” set forth below, except that I’ve decided that it’s good idea to have a checklist and hold it in mind. I’ve constructed one and added it as a page to this website. I wish I’d had it several quarter-centuries ago.

## **The View from Ninety**

My view from ninety is a lot different from the one I had at twenty, fifty, and even eighty. To explain this, I have to go back a ways. When I thought up the idea of a book in which “you” are the main character and make decisions from time to time leading to multiple plot lines and endings, I realized that, as the story moved along, I ought to give readers plausible choices as to what to do. The idea was that they would have to think about the pros and cons of each possible choice and analyze which would be best. It wasn’t until many decades later that I realized that the way life plays out doesn’t just turn on conscious decisions made at key junctures. Rather, the paths you take are determined largely by chance and by what kind of person you are. Countless things about you, such as your genetic makeup and life experiences, change dynamics and produce situations in which you fail to perceive options or unthinkingly dismiss them and seize upon one that looms large in your consciousness, and events seem to be happening in rapid sequence before you can assimilate them, so that you have little or no sense of making decisions, and in fact you are not — you are traveling through time as if floating downstream on a river raft, poling now and then and sometimes hanging up on a shoal, not paying proper attention, maybe falling asleep, and finding yourself almost on the opposite bank, where the wind took you, which is not where you meant to be, all the while missing something, and you may not even know what it is.

At least that’s the way it was for me while I was growing up and after growing up. I was sleepwalking through life, and as a consequence making a lot of bad decisions. Looking back, I’m appalled by much of my behavior, decade after decade. In no situation did I think that an action I was contemplating would be immoral and therefore I must not do it; nor in any situation

did I think that an action would be immoral, but decide to do it anyway. Considerations like these never entered my mind, and that was a major problem.

Reflecting decades later on my long succession of bad decisions, as to each of the most important ones I asked myself, *How could I have acted that way? What was I thinking? Why wasn't I thinking?* This line of inquiry led me to an insight: When you face a choice in life, particularly an important one, whether you choose wisely or unwisely isn't likely to depend on how good your powers of analysis are, but on your state of mind: Having the wrong state of mind is conducive to making wrong choices. Having the right state of mind is conducive to making right choices.

For much of my life, my state of mind was sub-optimal by a wide margin. Reviewing my worst decisions — the absolutely most momentously disastrous ones, particularly those relating to my career and my relationships with other people, particularly women, in every instance my wrong choice resulted from having had the wrong state of mind.

A few years ago, I had a transformation of consciousness. I don't mean to imply anything mystical or noble by that. It's simply a metaphor for a change in perspective such that, as well as living within yourself in what can become a self-centered bubble, you're also living beyond yourself, awake, aware, and able to view events and situations from a relatively objective perspective, and as a surprising and happy consequence, largely freed from fear, anxiety, and vulnerability to irresponsible impulses.

Sometime ago, the word “woke,” took on special significance in the sense of awareness of racial injustice and carried with it broader implications as well. That was a useful concept and all to the good until the word became corrupted and inverted to a degree such that one can only welcome its oblivion. In any case, to experience a transformation of consciousness — to transcend yourself, as I think of it — is not just to be “woke” (alert and sensitive) to a particular range of situations or issues, but to be consciously aware of and sensitive to every aspect of your life that affects or may affect others as well as yourself.

I didn't set out to achieve a transformation of consciousness. It happened fortuitously in the course of weaving the following strands of thought together:

## **Sleepwalking; Self-Deception**

Sleepwalkers are people who proceed through the day as if on autopilot. Thoughts pass through their minds, but they fail to consider their import, implications, and likely consequences. I spent most of my life sleepwalking, and I know all about it: When you are sleepwalking, you fail to consider what the purpose is of what you're doing and how your actions and failure to act will affect you and how it will affect others, and how they may react to your behavior. Sleepwalkers can go off the rails and stay there unless they luckily stumble back on track.

Sleepwalking doesn't necessarily diminish mental acuity, though I think it invariably affects judgment. Many sleepwalkers hold positions of power. Christopher Clark's *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War* (2014) is a detailed examination of the manifold and complex causes of World War I. In each of the primarily responsible countries, men of imperious bent and puffed-up notions of honor prevailed over wiser and more thoughtful ones in formulating and implementing national policy. Almost without exception, those responsible for making fateful decisions proved incapable of weighing the risk of a staggering continent-wide catastrophe such as was about to unfold. For example, referring to Austria-Hungary, whose leaders were determined to act forcefully after the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand, Clark says that the decision-makers had preconceived notions of how events would play out, though they had no basis for their assumptions. They didn't bother to think about the effect their actions would have on others, which would have led them to consider how others would react.

Sleepwalking and self-deception are intertwined. They are ways of shielding oneself from inconvenient, challenging, and painful realities. The brain workings of Charles Swann, a principal character in Proust's novel *In Search of Lost Time*, provides a perfect example. Swann is intelligent, cultivated, and socially adept, but when he must confront a particularly unpleasant fact if he is to make a rational decision, the narrator comments that a "mental lethargy, which was, with him, congenital, intermittent, and providential, happened at that moment to extinguish every particle of light in his brain..." When you are sleepwalking or deceiving yourself, your brain is unlit. Keep it up long enough, and a day will come when you act in a way such that, were you in an awakened state, it would be

obvious to you that if you continue your present course of action, or inaction, a catastrophe will ensue.

### **Buddhas**

The best way I know of to emerge from a sleepwalking state is to become a buddha. I'm not kidding. In his book *The Art of Living*, the revered Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh makes it clear that becoming a buddha doesn't require believing in the Buddha, or years of meditation, or sessions with gurus, or prayers, or visits to sacred temples, much less subjecting yourself to rueful introspection. All that's needed is to be awake and aware and compassionate and loving.

What does it mean to be awake and aware? It means that you are tuned to the concerns of both yourself and others and to the implications and possible consequences of how you are about to act or not act. Being a buddha doesn't involve adhering to a set of rules or achieving enlightenment. "It's not so difficult to be a buddha," says Thich Nhat Hanh, "Just keep your awakening alive all day long."

### **Purpose**

In his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, Dr. Victor Frankl, a psychiatrist imprisoned in a succession of concentration camps by the Nazis, describes the effects of the horrors his fellow prisoners endured and concludes that there are three ways to find meaning, or purpose, in life: (i) constructive work; (ii) love and caring for others; and (iii) courage and resolve in the face of suffering. This third way Dr. Frankl refers to was inspired by observing concentration camp victims who steadfastly affirmed their humanity despite the cruel and inhuman treatment inflicted upon them. He concluded: As long as you have the capacity to think, you can find purpose in life.

With this example in mind, I set about inventing a purpose for myself. I settled on (i) have fun; (ii) spread joy; and (iii) make the world a better place.

If you don't feel you have a purpose in life, it's probably a good idea to invent one and assign it to yourself, keeping in mind that transforming your consciousness— getting the right state of mind -- can't happen if your purpose is nihilistic or destructive. In at least a modest sense, it must be virtuous.

## **Spirituality**

You don't need to be religious to be spiritual. So said Joseph Campbell. He abandoned the Roman Catholic faith in which he had been brought up, but in explorations of mythologies of myriad cultures, he came to understand the importance of spirituality. He emphasized that having a spiritual sense is essential to living a full life. Throughout the ages, religious faith has been the prime source of a spiritual sense.

Suppose you never had a religious faith, or you abandoned it? In that case, Campbell asserts that you need to "set up your own spiritual field." I think that's right, except I don't think a spiritual field is something you can set up. It's already there; you have to sense it and be drawn to it.

From Walter Isaacson's biography of Albert Einstein, I learned that Einstein believed that behind what we can experience there is something beautiful and mysterious that our minds can't grasp. I think that a non-religious person can be spiritual, if only in being in awe of the great mystery of the origin and character of the universe and of our existence in it, and at how, in Jesus's words in the *Gnostic Gospel of Saint Thomas*, "The kingdom of God is spread out upon the earth."

Anthony Gottlieb, in his book *The Dream of Enlightenment: The Rise of Modern Philosophy* (2016), says that the 17th century philosopher Benedict de Spinoza believed that through greater understanding of yourself and the world, you can "enjoy a taste of divine bliss." Letting go of material fixations lifts the mind above the reach of inglorious thoughts. Spiritual awareness is integral to transforming your consciousness and attaining the right state of mind.

## **Morality**

Be "honest" and "warm-hearted," says the Dalai Lama. "What you want . . . on a raft," says Huck Finn, "is for everybody to be satisfied, and feel right and kind toward the others."

## **Self-Confidence**

You can't *will* yourself to have greater self confidence. So what does it take? The Dalai Lama knows: All you need to be self-confident, he says, is to be honest and truthful and have an attitude of kindness and compassion. Self-confidence doesn't come from having superior skills or a record of impressive achievements. It comes from being good and true.

### **Self-Constitution**

Harvard philosopher Christine Korsgaard defines a self-constituted person as one with integrity, who is responsive to a built-in moral compass rather than a “heap of impulses.” If you are self-constituted, you are resistant to opportunities for rationalization, self-deception, and impulses that assert themselves in your particular heap of them.

It’s generally good to be guided by one’s moral compass, but suppose that you are self-constituted, but your moral compass is faulty? Korsgaard calls that “self-constitution -- *badly done*.” The self-constituted person may not necessarily be one that, as the Dalai Lama counsels, has an attitude of love and respect for others and acts responsibly, qualities which are requisite to self-transcendence.

### **Self-Transcendence**

The process by which you transcend yourself doesn’t occur through exercise of will or obeying rules. It doesn’t involve self-abnegation or self-deprecation, or embracing asceticism or any other depressing or distressing diminution of pleasure and joy in life. When you transcend yourself, you don’t cut loose from your self. You remain engaged and in action, but spiritually elevated because you have a sense of responsibility, you are compassionate, and you aren’t dragged down by anxiety and fear. What I’ve written above largely reflects Buddhist thinking that I’ve absorbed. It resonates with Spinoza’s view as well. He strove for ethical perfection and to understand life and the world. He rejected asceticism and endeavored to avoid pain and negative emotions, like hatred, fear, envy, and melancholy. His attitude, one I’m happy to adopt, was that there can’t be too much joy.

What is the best way to live? What is the right way to be? The answers are simple enough. They inhere in the writings of a variety of thinkers, expressed in a variety of ways, but if they are to have practical effect, it’s not enough that they are noted, or even that they are imprinted in memory. They must be assimilated and become integral to one’s psychic state. In his book *Think Least of Death: Spinoza on How to Live and How to Die* (2020), Steven Nadler says, “The quest for a better, more rational, more satisfying life does not require any kind of causal gap... All it takes...is some event — or perhaps some edifying and inspirational reading — that draws the curtain

aside and reveals both the undesirability of what is and the desirability of what can be.”

E.P.

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References: Except where page numbers are cited below, brief phrases quoted above are from my memory or notes, and I haven't been able to locate a particular source. For some, there are probably multiple sources.

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