



***how to
live life***

***by john
vorhaus***

**how to
live life**

also by John Vorhaus

Non-fiction

The Comic Toolbox
Creativity Rules!
Killer Poker
Killer Poker Online
Killer Poker Online/2
Killer Poker No Limit
Decide to Play Great Poker (with Annie Duke)
Decide to Play Drunk Poker
The Little Book of Sitcom
How to Write Good
A Million Random Words
Comedy Writing 4 Life

Fiction

Under the Gun
World Series of Murder
Lucy in the Sky
The California Roll
The Albuquerque Turkey
The Texas Twist
Poole's Paradise

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**how to
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thanks to those who helped:
maxx, jo, haynes, rick, gail

special thanks to my mom,
who's special

thoughtfully

purposefully

consciously

openly

that's how

1. where i get off

So, first question...

Where the hell do I get off writing a book called *how to live life*?

After all, I have no credentials in psychology, theology or any other -ology. Nor have I scholarship in philosophy, theosophy or any other -osophy. Indeed, I bear no academic qualifications of any kind, bar the lowly BA that got me my first job out of college and hasn't done much for me since. (Perhaps you have one like this; many of us do.) Yet with this book I seem to be claiming that I know something special about how to live life.

Pretentious much? I'd say so.

But before we throw me out on my ear, I'd just like to say this: Decades ago, back when I was breaking into Hollywood, I created a class on breaking into Hollywood. I figured who better qualified to teach it than someone trying to do it?

Now here's me, many years later, trying to live my life to the best of my ability. By that same loopy logic, who's better qualified to write this book?

Well, you. And him. Her. That couple. These families. That church group, obviously. But equally obviously those unaffiliated agnostics over there. Everyone who pays attention. Everyone who doesn't pay attention. All of us and each of us have the right to write this book because all of us and each of us have stories that follow the same arc: We're born, we live, we die. We all try to make the best of things along the way. Some of us just do it out loud. That's me. I'm one of them. I do it out loud. That's partly where my authority comes from.

But even before breaking into Hollywood, I knew that teaching something was a great way to learn it. I've used this strategy many times in my life to increase my understanding of songwriting, poker, comedy, creativity, sailing (that was dangerous), archery (that was worse) and more. I have come to believe that an inspired learner makes a good teacher. So that's the real source of my authority, such as it is: my gape-mouthed wonder at the fact of my existence, and my desire to know it more fully.

This book, then, is an intensely selfish exercise.

But I don't think it's all that pretentious, not really. No more than life itself is pretentious. I mean, here we are in the midst of this incredible, unbelievable experience, and something tells us that it should be even more incredible and more unbelievable. We should be... I don't know... painting pictures, writing poems, staring at the stars, communing with God, digging life's mysteries, getting down to the isness of it all.

But still we have to make the bed, pay the bills, walk the dog. We still have to do our jobs, sit in traffic, deal with difficult people, go shopping (or anything you hate as much as I hate shopping). All this crap. For something so profound as ever-loving life, man, much of how we spend it is pretty humdrum.

And this can be exasperating. One of the big problems I have with life – and perhaps you share this – is how it demands that I do so many things I really don't want to do at all. For example, go shopping. For example, grow old.

For example, floss my teeth.

In the name of good dental hygiene, I floss like a mad fiend, do it all the time. I was told that this would keep my teeth from falling out, and I have to say, so far so good. But I'll tell you one thing: The day I learn I have six months to live is the day I stop flossing my teeth.

What about you? What would you free yourself from if you knew you wouldn't have

to pay any price? It's an old exercise, I know, the Corn King of existential reverie, but for what this book is about – plain thought and plain talk about the lives we lead – it's as good a place to start as any. What would you never do again if you were suddenly free? Free from doubt, negative outcomes or shame; free from caring at all.

Make a list.

You'll hear me say that a lot, *make a list*. I'm a huge fan of lists because lists...

*Let us create without consequence
Give us hard data we can use right away
Are emotionally neutral; they don't judge
Yield much information for little effort
Put things where we can see them*

So here's a list of what I wouldn't do if I had just six months to live:

*Deny myself a donut
Suffer a fool
Worry about money
Change my oil every 3,000 miles
Wear a tie
Pretend to like people I don't*

Press 1 for more options

And here's what you wouldn't do.

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By the way, I conventionally use this convention...

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...to flag appropriate spots to make lists, jot notes or otherwise express your thoughts. Whether you do this or not is, of course, up to you. But I consider that the more you put into this book the more you'll get out of it, so I hope you'll not just read it but interact with it, either here on the page or in a notebook or other information-storage device of your choice.

Would it help if we called it homework?

Many people find that this helps a lot, this act of *externalizing motivation*. Any time our sense of responsibility to others pushes us past mental blocks or barriers, we're using this tool.

Students routinely use the pressure of a deadline – the formalized expectation of others – to overcome inertia and deliver their work on time. My writing students have “done it for jv” for years and if my expectations aid their productivity, I'm happy to serve in that way. So call it homework if it helps. Mine will be the willing arm elbowing you into the future.

There's no doubt that externalized motivation can be a positive force in our lives. To take one example, just think of all the early morning jogging partners who use each other's expectations to motivate their butts out of bed.

To take some other examples (*don't disappoint me now*)...

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Externalizing your motivation is a simple two-step process. First, make a promise. Second, keep it. Simple right? And with this approach you are now *using a strategy to pursue a goal*. You might not be accustomed to thinking about your life in so analytical a fashion, but that's something I hope these pages will change. Look, we're doing it already.

Your goal is to deepen self-understanding and your strategy is reading a book.

My goal is to gain your participation and my strategy is externalizing motivation.

What if my goal were to make my life rise?
What strategies could I apply to that?

Reach more people with my thoughts
Exercise and keep fit
Keep my practice of writing robust
Eat healthfully and consciously
Acquire new information
Make common cause with like-minded people
Be open and honest with others

What strategies could you apply?

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I imagine that part of you really wants your life to rise – and part of you doesn't. You're going exploring here, into the inner unknown, and such introspection can be thrilling but also harrowing. The truths we discover about ourselves may delight us or dismay us, and we won't necessarily know which until we get more deeply involved.

Upon going in, we may fear to go too far. Writers are quite familiar with this feeling. With every writing challenge we master, we want to tackle something tougher. But what if we've topped out on our talent? *What if this is where I fail?* That fear can cause the writing process to grind to a halt.

Or any process. Not just writing.

In the desire to self-discover it's common to think, "I want to know myself intimately, but I am afraid." In the act of introspection, where the emotional stakes and ego stakes couldn't be higher, we can expect to balk a

bit at going deep. Acceptance is called for here, the sense that whatever emotions we experience are fine, completely allowable, totally cool, no matter what they are. Without acceptance, we are afraid to approach ourselves. With it, we can appraise ourselves openly and honestly, without freaking out.

About a decade ago, my hip crapped out and had to be replaced. The new device didn't quite work, but for one reason or another it was almost two years before they could carve me up and set things right. During those two years, I had to accept pain with every step I took. Not a party with candles and cake for me, but a useful and object lesson in how to experience without judging. "This is not a bad thing," I told myself, "and it's not a good thing. It's just a thing that is."

I remember thinking that this awareness would probably come in handy when I had to face something tougher, like the death of a loved one or of myself, and so it has proven to be (except not the latter part yet). I got the hang of using acceptance as a tool, and have used it thus ever since.

That's what we're after here, using acceptance as a very simple tool:

I see me, and it's all okay.

Just to be clear, acceptance doesn't mean surrender. To accept means to process information with emotional neutrality. Acceptance provides an objective perspective where nothing is made worse by the editorial judgment that *this really sucks*.

How wonderful to be free from the feeling of *this really sucks*. You can be. It's a choice you get to make. Simply seek to acquire the habit of saying, and thinking, "I accept."

You don't gain acceptance all at once. It comes in stages and it comes through practice – a practice that begins with the modest decision to try.

Pick something on your list and say why you'd never do it again. If you encounter negative emotions or any form of self-reproof, try to push past these feelings with acceptance; acknowledge your reaction, then move on.

Me, personally, I'd never wear a tie again because I never liked them in the first place, and have never felt at ease in environments, especially professional ones, where ties are expected or required.

Plus there's the whole noose aspect.

Digging deeper I understand that I don't like people telling me how to behave, and if they're telling me how to dress, that's telling me how to behave.

Now you, personally...

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Okay, we're underway. We've established our respective credentials for co-investigating how to live life, and we already have some new approaches for that. Good for us. Hooray!

Needless to say, (yet somehow said), this book isn't for everyone.

Fundamentalists of all sorts may hate its stubborn open-mindedness, for there's nothing here that talks about the "one true" anything.

Likewise, for those who need my opinion (or everyone's opinion) to agree with their opinion, yeah, no, not their book.

I'm certain about uncertainty. No one's moving me off of that. So if you're looking for answers or absolutes, they will largely not be found around here.

Strict grammarians may recoil in disgust at the playful lack of initial caps in the title and chapter heads.

And anyone hoping for useful information on needlepoint, say, or the New York Islanders hockey team, will get no food value at all from this book.

Now I'm just being flip and – at the risk of sounding annoying – annoying. I apologize for that. Believe me, the last thing I want is an adversarial relationship with you, my partner in this voyage of discovery.

Yet it might happen. If I poke hard enough at your hidden assumptions, you may come to resent me, for no one adopts new paradigms without old ideas – perhaps cherished ones – getting squeezed or set aside. I think that’s healthy; I think it’s how we grow.

I always tell the writers I work with to make room for the new idea. Can I ask you to make room for a new idea right now? Here it comes:

Dismiss right and wrong.

For as long as this book lasts, imagine that there are no true or false answers, no good or bad ideas, no accurate or inaccurate appraisals of life, reality, anything. Say of nothing, “That’s a yes” or “That’s a no.” Say of everything, “What can I make out of this?”

This will give you a *platform for examination*, and upon this platform you can contemplate ideas without feeling like you have to commit to any of them in any way. Here again we find emotional neutrality; here again I think you’ll find it useful.

And I want to be useful. You know? Helpful. In some ways contentious. In all ways honest. I want to take you where strategy and honesty meet. I think it's safe to say that that's where I live. I can get you there, too. I've got it all Google-mapped. Don't worry, I'm not going to sit on the secret. Here it comes right now.

Go off in all directions at once.

Go off in all directions at once. You're bound to get somewhere, and in the great game of self-encounter, anywhere is as good as anywhere else. You're never going to get to the bottom of you, so your exploration is free to be boundless, unburdened by preconceptions and shot through with acceptance.

One way to go off in all directions at once is just to ask questions. Simple questions, like *what, why, when, how.*

Hey, jv, what's dear to you?
My wife.

Why?
She comforts me.

When?

When we're sharing a bed.

How?

By making me feel part of something. My wife is dear to me because she makes me feel connected.

Wow. In just four questions I got down to the core of why I love my wife. That's pretty powerful. That's a pertinent discovery for me.

And that's how discovery happens, just as simply as that.

Discovery happens when you ask and answer some questions.

Got any questions you'd like to ask yourself? Just ask. Just answer. Explore. Don't judge.

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As you may know, I've written many books on writing. People have told me, and I

humbly accept their favor, that those books serve by providing strategies both for writing and for having a writer's life.

Interestingly, my poker books have drawn a similar response. Readers frequently express surprise that books which seek to explore something about poker end up exploring something about the self.

None of this is by accident, for self-awareness is indispensable to both writing and poker, and it bears close examination in those contexts.

Beyond that, though, transformation is always on my mind; transformation – being who I am and becoming who I'll be. To me that's where the fun is, the fun I want to share with you.

Words are my tool for sharing, and I'm asking again that you make them yours. It's okay to just think about things, but if you really want to bring your ideas to life, take the time – okay, and the nerve – to write them down.

For instance, name some things you know you want, but maybe rarely dare to want out loud.

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Writing draws out your inner desires and places them where they can be seen and acted upon. Words – simple words – can illuminate you and set you on the path to your goals.

They don't have to be pretty words, or well organized ones. They don't have to be "the right" words. They just have to be what they are: another tool you can use.

So be liberal with them. Don't just read, participate. You may have bought this book for my words, but yours will be the ones that matter in the end.

2. the perfect party

Let's talk about the perfect party. You know the one I mean: the one you're about to go to. The one where – *this time for sure!* – you'll meet your one true love, your new best friend or, if your ambitions lean that way, Steven Spielberg.

The myth of the perfect party is an entrenched idea in Hollywood, where young strivers of every description pump bubbly optimism into the notion that the next party will be the one that opens all doors, and Changes Everything Forever. When I was

seduced by this hope it made me unhappy because the parties never lived up to my inflated expectation. This wasn't their fault. Parties aren't nirvana, and when I stopped expecting them to be, life got a lot better for me. But let's look at the starry-eyed wonder that buys into the myth in the first place.

You know what? It's not a bad thing.

We're sensible people, you and I. We know fact from fantasy. We know that the next party probably won't be much different from the last. We're realistic. Yet we put on our cool clothes and comb our hair (those with hair) just right. And our hearts unaccountably race at the prospect of what lies ahead. We have hope, and hope fuels us. It flings us into the future.

Even if it's completely unfounded!

And even when we know it's unfounded!

Our goofy enthusiasm is the engine that drives our dreams. It gets us writing if we're writers or painting if we're painters. It gets us out looking for perfect parties or partners. It helps us get things done. It may

be the key to getting things done, for without hope, how would anyone ever apply for a job, start a business, go on a date, or even just get out of bed?

But it's a lie, right? Unfounded. False hope. Refuted by evidence. No party is the perfect party. They're all just parties. So where does this leave us? We need hope to drive our bus, but we worry that it's false hope. What do we do about that?

Here's what to do: *Don't care*. Let your unfounded enthusiasm drive your bus even as you acknowledge that it is, or might be, unfounded. Understand your hope as your fuel, in and of itself, without any connection to future events. This is expectation properly used as a tool.

You want to be an artist? You better make some art and not care too much about whether it's good. That's true for any change you might make. Make it; and don't care. Your goofy enthusiasm will carry you past every block.

What do you think would be easier to do if you really didn't care about the outcome?

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I could get a new agent. Even at this late date, I could get a kick-ass Hollywood agent who would Change Everything Forever.

Now here's a secret you may not know. The mere act of trying to make stuff happen makes abundant stuff happen. You change. You grow. You meet some goals. You see yourself doing these things and come to respect yourself for the formidable force you are. Eventually, unfounded enthusiasm turns into founded enthusiasm, and your life becomes rich with the sort of work you wanted to do all along.

Support your dreams with goofy enthusiasm. That's the first – easy – step toward making them come true. The second step is believing they will – whether you believe it or not.

What does this mean in practical terms? You might want to be a stand-up comic, but you can't take the stage because you're too afraid to fail. Detaching from outcome – not caring if you fail – is what makes the outcome possible. Otherwise, I don't think you ever go up.

Can you think about a time when fear of a big negative outcome kept you from taking a chance? How do you feel about that now?

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When we finally arrive at these parties of ours, we often meet people who ask, “What do you do?” by which they generally mean, “What do you do for work?”

You may have used this tame ice breaker yourself. You may have noticed how it doesn't exactly set a conversation ablaze, for if you get an answer like, “Well, I'm a podiatrist,” and you have no strong interest in feet, where can you go from there?

Nowhere. Dead end. Next!

Worse, the question tends to focus people's attention on their jobs, an area of life that many find less than luminous. If it's Saturday night at the perfect party and you're putting everyone in mind of Monday morning, you'd do yourself and everyone a huge favor by, you know, not.

Here's a question I much prefer: "What do you do that you like?" You should see how their eyes light up. Get people talking about their passions and they become, well, passionate.

"What I really like to do is jump out of airplanes! It scares me to death, but oh the adrenaline rush!"

So much better than, "I wait on (or calculate actuarial) tables."

This question is a gift. How can it not be? Every time you ask it, you send someone to their happy place. Try it when you get a chance. With someone you know is okay, but a stranger is better because *oh the adrenaline rush!* You can call it homework if

they ask, but they probably won't. They'll be too busy thanking you for the gift.

And now I can reveal my super-secret strategy for making people feel good about you:

Make them feel good about themselves.

Works every time, you'll see.

In fact, I challenge you to see. The next three people you meet, make it your goal to make them feel good about themselves. I don't propose this as an exercise in seduction, though it is very seductive. People end up looking at you and thinking, *wow, that's a person who makes me feel good about myself. That's someone I want to be with.*

Here's what I do that I like.

Eat Chinese food. Write. Drink champagne in bed. Play ultimate frisbee. Watch movies. Contemplate time travel. Let dogs lick my face. Get massages. Tell jokes. Tell stories. Play games on my phone. Visit places I've never been. Read non-fiction. Drink coffee. Play poker. Listen to music. Make clever

conversation with clever friends. Check my email. Make up words. Sit at my desk all day. Wear cotton. Teach.

As it does for people at parties, the question focuses your attention on the best parts of your life. What's not to like about that?

So, then, what do you do that you like?

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Quick story: I'm in Stockholm, Sweden, round about 2001, looking for this backstreet poker club I've heard about. I come up from the subway and find myself standing in the middle of a busy five-way intersection. I have a smudged street map in one hand and the address of the club, in Swedish, in the other. As I turn in slow circles, trying to letter-match the Swedish on the street signs to nearly illegible names on my map, the thought suddenly hits me, *I am in bliss!*

Well, why? Why was I so buzzed? Because I was trying to solve a puzzle with incomplete

information. All my life I've loved that, whether we're talking crosswords or writing or poker, but at that moment in Stockholm I happened to make myself aware of it, and that made a huge difference. Now I can treat myself well. I can intentionally place myself in situations of incomplete information, just for fun. I don't have to stumble around in Stockholm until I start to feel good.

Same for you. Know what you do that you like so that you can do it more.

And now know it more deeply. Pick something you like and drill into why.

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Why do I like to wear cotton? Well, it's comfortable. And I've always worn it, so that's the comfort of tradition, too. I think the fabric suits my mentality; it doesn't take itself too seriously. Plus it breathes. It drapes without clinging. Mostly I'm just a guy who wears cotton, and when I encounter environments

which can't accommodate me in that, I know where I won't be spending much time.

Ah, see, now that's something I just learned – learned by drilling – cotton's not just cloth to me, it's a lifestyle choice.

What did you just learn by drilling? What do you know about yourself now that's new?

In a sense we're like detectives following a suspect, only the suspect is us, too. Sometimes my suspect leads me astray, into bad neighborhoods where I think about, "What do I do that I hate?" It's a bummer question, but it begs to be asked. If we're going to explore all truths around here, that has to include the bummer ones, too. We may know this, and admit it, yet still not want to look at ourselves in a critical light. That's something that takes getting used to.

And it starts where we start: with a list.

What do I do that I hate?

I hate being bad with my hands. I hate marketing myself. I hate waiting in line. I hate running in pain. I hate having bad judgment. .

I hate wasting money. I hate letting my emotions rule my actions.

So I'm honest with myself about all this and I find that it's okay. I'm not thrilled to acknowledge my bad hands or bad judgment, but what else can I do? They're mine. I have to become comfortable with that.

It's hard to look at our negative side. It's especially hard to look at stuff we fear we're stuck with – so hard that we'll go to some lengths to avoid it.

Say I hate commuting – but I have to commute for work, and I have to work and always will; oh by the way in a job I hate. Now what do I do?

Now I turn up the music and think of other things, right?

I distract myself because I can't stand to think about what I'm thinking about. That's called a *process block*, folks, and it's a doozy: The fear that a problem can't be solved keeps the problem from being addressed. Not a load of progress there.

To get past this process block, just attack the problem in two parts. First, assess the situation. Second, address the situation. You can't do the second part first, and you can't do the first part if you're worried about the second. So let go of that. Focus on stating the problem. Worry about solving it later. You can't do both at once, nor is it realistic or useful to try.

Problems: You have to see them to solve them. But it's hard to see clearly or think productively if a situation feels hopeless.

Possibly you already know this. You may have a job (or relationship or habit) that you desperately want to shed. And you may feel like that's impossible right now. If this feeling is strong enough, it snuffs out all thoughtful reflection. Night descends and the spirit quails, brought low by the assumption of future failure.

But that's an assumption you can't make! You can't say that the problem has no solution – not when you haven't even stated the problem yet.

So do that first.

You don't need to fix a problem the minute you see it. (*Yikes! I'm in a bad situation! Must flee!*) And you don't have to assume that it can't be solved. You can choose to look at your circumstances frankly and gently, with acceptance. Once you have the hang of that, you can start to investigate how to make change.

So what do you do that you hate?

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At a book fair once in my home town I wasn't pushing much pulp, and that annoyed me. I decided to distract myself from all my books that weren't selling by asking every passerby, "What's the most important thing you know?"

The answers were delightful, everything from "Put down the toilet seat after" to "Keep your heart where everyone can see it." At a certain point I acquired a wingman,

who watched for a while, then pronounced my survey question, “the greatest pickup line of all time.”

I hadn't really thought of it in those terms, not having needed a good pickup line since the Reagan years. The way he saw it, the question was marvelously self-selecting. Someone who could engage it was worth engaging with. Otherwise, *Hello! Lights on – nobody home!*

Eventually my wingman left, but that wasn't the end of it. Some months later, I got a call from the guy, inviting me to an engagement party. Seems he went to a bar that night, used “the greatest pickup line of all time,” and met his bride-to-be.

Results not guaranteed for all users.

We ask questions and test others by their answers. Ask someone, “Know any good mosaic stitches?” and you can gauge their grasp of needlepoint. Ask them, “Do you believe in God?” and you find out if they have a spiritual life, how well they know it, and whether they're brave enough to share.

That's some profound dope on someone. It's not the only profound dope in the world, but it's already deeper – more salient, more real – than, “What do you do?” or even, “What do you do that you like?”

We can test ourselves in the same way. We can examine ourselves candidly in the light of what we consider important. What are some important things you know?

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Here are three important things I know, expressed as instructions to myself:

Surf strange waves.

Have new ideas.

Keep an open mind.

Taken together, they tell me that personal liberation is a focus of my thinking.

Taken together, what do your answers tell you about you? That you're into family?

Work? Fame? Money? Recreation?
Competition? Higher consciousness? Highs?

In a sense you're holding up a certain mirror to yourself or guiding the pointer on a rhetorical Ouija board. No matter what answers you give or get, something is revealed.

Know what you consider important. Know why it's important. Be precise and unblinking. Really pinpoint your thoughts.

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An important thing I know is: *When in doubt, always act in a manner that is beyond reproach.*

As to why I think it's important, I often find myself caught between what I want and what I think I can get away with. At such times, I feel myself becoming confused, unbalanced and unhappy. Guided by *always act in a manner that is beyond reproach*, I move not so much toward morality as

toward safety: a place where I can trust my choices more. This helps me keep my innate sneakiness at bay.

You don't think I have innate sneakiness? Oh, man, innate sneakiness is my (very clumsily stated) middle name. Note that I can reveal this to you. I can reveal unpleasant truths about myself and not die.

You can reveal unpleasant truths about yourself and not die. Try that. Tell yourself an unpleasant truth about yourself. It may hurt a little, but that's okay. We're working on making the hurt hurt less.

>>

You can further refine this investigation by asking what's important in separate, specific areas of your life.

You can ask what's important in the workplace or what's important at home.

You can ask what was important five years ago or speculate on what will be important in ten.

You can think about what's important to you alone and what's important to you with others.

Every time you reframe the question, you invite new answers, usually more precise ones, but in any case always different – and always beneficial in terms of simply articulating yourself to yourself.

Open and maintain a moderated dialogue with yourself. Ask yourself questions, answer them honestly, and keep an eye on the underlying assumptions that guide you.

It's a lot to ask, I know. It requires that you track several thought processes at once, to say nothing of the emotional underpinnings that will want your attention, too. But this is where practice begins: with, uh, practice.

So get used to thinking hard, even when the thinking is hard. The harder you think, the faster you grow and the sooner you become who you are.

3. the boss of the brain

Comic characters in comic stories typically act in service of their self-image at the expense of their self-interest. From Shakespeare's Sir John Falstaff denying his cowardice to *The Big Bang Theory's* Sheldon Cooper flouting his genius, in the name of feeling good about themselves they do hilariously self-defeating things. We don't mind. We enjoy watching them. They're comic characters. That's what they're there for.

This single-minded narcissism does give them something you and I don't have, and that's a pure and unitary point of view. When they filter reality, there's no question which filter they use: With comic characters, it's all ego, all the time. The rest of us – real people in the real world – muddle along in some confusion, trying to figure out who, really, is the boss of our brains.

Five minutes ago, I set out to write this paragraph, but just before I started, a song came on that I really like. So I stopped to listen to the song, and played five minutes of a computer game to go along with it. Now you tell me, what did I want: to write the text, hear the song, or play the game?

I think I probably wanted all three, all at the same time. If I dig a little deeper, I can probably think of a few other things I wanted, too.

I wanted to write the text successfully – to communicate my ideas effectively and clearly, with a minimum of typographical errors. I also wanted not to fail at that. That is, I feared to write unsuccessfully. At least

partly under the influence of that fear, I distracted myself with a song and a game.

At the same time, I genuinely wanted to beat the game – I mean *crush* it. I wanted the rush of that. I wanted all those little endorphins pinging around inside my brain.

I also wanted the memories associated with the song. I really like those memories and the feelings they evoke. I liked wallowing in them for awhile – yet I also absolutely *hated* wallowing in them for awhile. It made me feel guilty to be farting around with a song and a game when *there's work to be done around here!*

So it's a complex package. We drive our actions through multiple – often conflicting – emotions and motivations. To open such a package, just think about something you do – anything will do – and list all the reasons why you do it. Let your honesty take you by surprise.

>>

A man is going home to a woman he wishes he loved more. He sees a pub advertising happy hour, and thinks that maybe a discount drink or two will accomplish that goal.

Does he want to go home? Yes and no. Does he want to stop for a drink? Yes and no. Does he have clarity about his actions and intentions? Not yes and no. Just no.

The healthy mind starts by acknowledging that it's not of one mind. Inner conflict – conflicting desires generated by conflicting orientations – is bound to be our norm.

These subsets of ourselves are not to be avoided or averted, but teased out, strand by strand, and understood and embraced.

One such strand is *action controlled by intention*, something we might call an instruction set or how-to program. Though we count on such programs to guide us in everything from shaking hands to baking pies, we don't use them – we're not even aware of them – unless we need them. How often do you think about baking pies except when you are baking pies?

Alongside our how-to programs are memories. Some of these are available on demand but others await hidden triggers. To show you what I mean, I'm going to ask you to recall a certain event from your past. Until I ask, you can't really do it. The instant I ask, you can't not.

Ready? Here it comes.

Remember your first kiss.

Boom, there it is.

The memory jumps right out of your brain. You can't summon it and you can't stop it. Weird. Here the brain doesn't seem to be entirely in charge of itself. It invokes some things, like instruction sets, when it needs them, but invokes other things, like memories, whether it needs them or not.

Still, we have instruction sets and memories, and look, the two share files. My *home handyman* file contains the complete and shocking memory of how I once tried to rewire a lamp without unplugging it first. And within that memory is now embedded a

permanent instruction: *Unplug everything first!*

We can think of our mental resources like Russian nesting dolls, with memories packed inside programs, and feelings packed within memories. When you thought of your first kiss just now, what feelings did that memory evoke? Fondness, perhaps, for the person you kissed? Regret at the time gone by? Thoughts of other loves you've had? Or what?

Name your feelings. Articulate them. Move past vague nostalgia to the vividly descriptive. This is yet another strategy you can use to know yourself well.

>>

So here's the feelings part of our brain: a rowdy region where emotions crowd around, maybe uninvited.

I'm in the supermarket checkout line. The fellow in line in front of me is writing a check.

A check? In this day and age? Thoughts – feelings – splash out of my brain. Impatience mostly, but also scorn for this fellow, this “last float on the clueless parade.” My sense of smug superiority annoys me somehow, so now I’m angry at the world, at the customer, and at myself. And all because of a transaction that I have nothing to do with! At this point I’m thinking that my brain has no boss at all.

What feelings come to you unbidden? Where and when and how are you when this happens?

>>

I have feelings that I can control and feelings that I can’t. If I look out the window right now, I see a bright, sunny day. I feel sad that I’m not out there enjoying the day, but also happy that I’m in here writing – and conflicted and slightly pissed off because I can’t do both. Which of these feelings are conscious constructions? Some? None? All? Are these thoughts “me” or just “part of

me?” Who’s transmitting them and who’s receiving them? Me again, and me again?

At this point confusion sets in. I need a sorting system, some way to organize and identify all the metaphorical voices in my head. Maybe a tighter metaphor will help. “If my brain were a royal court,” I ask myself, “what courtiers, attendants or advisors might I expect to find?”

My *chancellor* will be there, full of practical advice, and specific instructions on how to tie my shoes or run for the bus when I’m late.

My *seer*, or spiritual advisor, will shape my beliefs, formulate my morality and ethics and, if I’m so inclined, make my lucky lottery picks.

My *court historian* tends to my memories and makes them available on demand – or sometimes, as we’ve seen, not on demand.

My *prime minister* issues orders in my name, everything from setting an alarm to planning a vacation. That’s a rational, self-interested voice, but is it the boss of the brain? I’m not prepared to say yes yet.

What other courtiers can you name? If you prefer, create a whole other image system for parsing your brain parts.

>>

Do you have a *shadow minister*, insidious, with a defeatist agenda? Mine always asks, “Weren’t you supposed to be rich and famous by now?”

Our *rogue minister* is the voice that keeps our habits happening. Mine loves buttermilk bars.

Is there magic in your mind? Do creative gifts come to you unbidden? That’s the *wizard* of your royal court. Want to give the wizard more clout? Collaborate with the historian.

When I do this – when I think of my “history of magic” – I see that I work most effectively in the morning, when my mind is fresh. Memory of successful creative sessions guides me to new successful sessions. That’s

the brain giving itself a practical boost, through partnership between parts.

And that's a positive partnership. Can you think of other positive partnerships that emerge when your brain cooperates with itself?

>>

I have in my brain a *lord acceptor*, who keeps me cool in traffic by calling upon the historian's cautionary tales of road rage fatalities, and upon the wizard's amusing distractions. Thanks to my lord acceptor and his allies, my wrath ebbs unspent.

If there are positive brain partnerships, there must be negative ones, too. Can you think of ways that your courtiers might conspire against your best interest? I can think of many.

I can imagine a shadow minister who feels unworthy of love. Get that minister together with the rogue minister and they're going to

make all sorts of mischief, sending instruction sets on a downward spiral of bad choices motivated by low self-esteem, leading to worse choices and lower self-esteem.

Yuck, right? Yuck. But for the moment, that partnership is the boss of the brain. It's calling the shots.

And with that we're suddenly onto something. Who is the boss of the brain?

The boss of the brain is the voice that makes the choice.

When specific parts of us make choices, those parts take charge. To take an extreme example, when an addict only answers to the voice that chooses to use drugs, addiction is the boss of that brain. What we seek is a healthy boss, a boss who acts in our best interest.

Decision-making, then, can be thought of not as choosing an action but choosing who chooses. When you put that healthy boss in charge, it's not a matter of discipline or

denial but simple self-awareness; knowing who's in charge, and then *taking* charge.

I let my ministers talk. I listen attentively to what they have to say. They may be loud, those voices, but they don't have the last word, not one of them. The boss of the brain – the “me” that I've been looking for – is the voice that listens to all voices, and then acts in my best interest. It sits me down here to do this work, because it wants me to learn and grow. It says no to buttermilk bars because it wants me to eat well.

Who is the boss of your brain? What do you think about that?

>>

Do you wish that some of your voices were silent? Man, who doesn't? For me it's the money one. Ooh, the money one for sure.

It's hard to think about the stuff that's hard to think about. The stuff that hurts, I mean. Remember to use your acceptance; it's not a

good thing, not bad thing, just a thing that is. Let all your voices be heard, even the ones you don't feel good about. Even the ones that scare you.

Scary voices scare us less once we realize that they're just voices. They're part of who we are, but they don't *define* who we are.

Here again we see the simple utility of a strategy in service of a goal.

My goal is to act in my best interest.

My strategy is to empower the part of me which serves that goal.

My tactics include concretely considering all points of view, even the difficult ones.

The boss of the brain should see all points of view, but sometimes, as it were, you can't see what you can't see. The stuff underneath, the ugly stuff, it all has to be dragged to the surface somehow. Try to reach a point where you can look at the ugly and not say, "Ugh, ugly," but rather, "My, look at that interesting ugly." That helps. That helps a lot.

Let's recap.

A healthy brain has many points of view; many competing “voices.”

The voice that makes choices is the boss of the brain.

Consider all voices and choices.

Explore difficult issues with acceptance.

Take action in best interest.

That seems like a pretty simple way to put a healthy boss in charge, and it is; but don't worry if it doesn't all gel right away. It can be hard to take action in best interest. We may lack clarity and we may lack motivation. We may yet lack courage. That's okay. It's all okay. At this point it's enough just to establish the goal and move toward it.

The growth is in growing, not in having grown.

4. consensus reality

Even with a healthy boss in charge, there are still plenty of places in our minds that we'd rather not go, or even can't go. Maybe it's a thing about work. Old, haunting regrets. Bad relationships. Unrealized ambition. Health. Money. Family. Ugh. Plenty of stuff not to like. Plenty of black holes to avoid. Can you name some of yours?

>>

When I see my black holes, I want to blow them up. I don't want there to be anywhere in my mind that I can't go. This is not entirely realistic. My issues have mass, gravity, history. I can't just pretend them away.

Or can I?

Suppose I imagine a place where the things that bug me so much don't bug me so much – a parallel universe, if you will, where my many black holes don't exist. In my parallel universe...

I envy no one

My hip doesn't hurt

I'm satisfied with what I have

I remember everyone's name

I never waste time

I don't have a problem with money

I don't resent anyone for anything

I learn a lot about me by looking at this list. I learn where I hurt. And I learn how to look where I hurt without hurting. Here in my parallel universe, I can unpack any black hole and explore it in depth.

In a parallel universe I don't have a problem with envy. I can hear about someone's best seller and have my stomach not churn. In a parallel universe, I'm always happy for others' success. No coveting here, Jack, nuh-uh. Nothing but tranquil acceptance and peace of mind. Here in this place, I have no obsessive need to achieve or compete or compare. Here in this place, I can relax.

Does this resolve my issue with envy? No. But it lets me relax for once. Isn't that progress? It is for me, and it might be for you.

Give it a try. State your problems as if they weren't problems and see how that makes you feel. If you don't have anything better to tackle, tackle resentment. For some reason it's a subject that responds well to this approach.

>>

In a parallel universe we think about the unthinkable and explore or examine behaviors that we wish we had. We try them

out in an imaginary space, become comfortable with them, then copy/paste them back into the real world.

I don't want envy. I don't need envy. I see no use for envy in my life. If I can just experience myself as someone without envy, I can discover the thoughts and feelings that such a person enjoys. I can become familiar with those feelings, train myself on them, and draw upon them when I need them. This is how I move away from envy. This is how I dissolve the black hole.

Does it concern you that this space we're talking about isn't real? I don't consider that a drawback. A thing doesn't have to be real to be of service. It can be a *useful fiction*, something known to be a lie, yet taken on board for the sake of the benefit it brings.

I frequently work with young writers in situations where they're doing difficult new kinds of writing and feeling quite stressed. They often ask me, point blank, "Do you think I can do this job? Am I any good?"

Well, that puts me in a tricky position. I don't know if they can do the job or not – that's what we're here to find out. But whatever doubt I feel can't do them any good. It would undermine their confidence just when they need it most.

So instead I lie.

And I confess my lie.

“I have every confidence in your ability,” I say. “I don't know if I'm right, but I do know that my faith in you will help, so here it is. Use it to energize and support your work, and then we'll both know if I was telling the truth.”

So that is a *self-fulfilling prophecy*. By the tool of useful fiction, my belief in a writer's good outcomes helps those outcomes come true.

It's the same trick I play on myself. I have no confidence that I can win my war with envy, but displaying confidence advances me toward my goal, and lack of confidence stalls me out. What choice have I but to display confidence, whether I feel it or not?

Can you think of circumstances where you use useful fictions?

>>

Right now I'm thinking of when I am required to attend functions I don't want to attend. Even for a tie-hating, cotton-wearing guy like me, it happens from time to time. If I go into those situations with the belief that, "I can't stand this," I lose. But if I go in thinking, "I can easily stand this," – *even if I know I'm lying!* – then I have a chance. It's like giving myself a head start in the race against my bad attitude. Weird that it starts with a lie.

Or maybe lie is the wrong word. Maybe all I'm really doing is believing in something I can't see.

Which, of course, I do every day.

I believe in a thing called *justice*, say. I can't apprehend it with my senses – can't see, hear, smell, touch or taste it – but I know it's

real. I can detect its impact. Judges dispense it, the rich buy it, the poor demand it, and the Pledge of Allegiance swears to it, along with liberty, for all. Though I can't get it from a gumball machine or hang it on a wall, my thoughts and actions can be informed by it. And that's what's called *consensus reality*.

A five-year-old believes in the tooth fairy. Her parents know better, but they encourage her belief just the same. They see the value in the useful fiction. Maybe it will ease the trauma of losing a tooth. It sure puts a positive spin on events. Plus, it's part their microculture, the family's shared mythos, and they get to bond over that.

But look how much consensus it takes to make the arrangement stand up! There's the tooth fairy, for starters – doesn't exist until we create it. Next, we have to agree on what a tooth's worth: a shiny, new quarter when I was a kid; more now.

And on that quarter are the words *In God We Trust*, so add *God* and *trust* to the list of intangibles we collectively and

collaboratively define within the tooth fairy paradigm.

And the value of a quarter? Well, that's determined by all our prior experience of exchanging money for services or goods. Money isn't money until we invite it into our consensus reality. *This note is legal tender for all debts, public and private.*

Yeah? Says who?

Says us.

And the minute we stop saying so, we start to have a problem that none of us wants, so we double down on the shared belief that money is worth what money is worth.

Now this five-year-old takes her tooth to the corner store and tries to swap it for some gum. Her logic is impeccable. She knows that the tooth is worth a quarter when the tooth fairy comes, but that's not till later and she wants gum now. She's cutting out the middleman is all, but try getting the store owner to sign on. Or try getting the gumball machine to take a tooth.

Then there's this: If a naïve child tries the gag, it's cute and adorable; if you do it or I do it, it's strange, criminal or daft, because part of our consensus reality is a (roughly) common understanding of behavioral norms. The rules that apply to us don't apply to kids.

To show how the rules inform our behavior, and what happens when they're changed, I'm giving you an assignment I give every class I ever teach:

Between now and tomorrow morning, go out and do something – anything – that you've never done before.

It doesn't matter what. Almost anything you can think of will place you outside of consensus reality, and there you will experience the rush of playing by rules that no one but you understands.

Years ago in Rome I had a student who embraced this assignment with particular zeal. He spent his bus ride home reading a hard core porno magazine as if it were a newspaper. At first, he said, he was terrified,

because he knew he was breaking a big taboo. Then he noticed how everyone was giving him lots of space, and that made him feel powerful. By the time he got off the bus, he just felt high.

That often happens when you do something new. At first you're afraid, then you feel powerful, then you're just high.

Consensus reality is all around you, but it doesn't have to constrain you. Step outside it, and seek to feel comfortable out there. Report your findings here.

>>

It's fun to mess with consensus reality. We can't do it all the time, of course, or there would be chaos, but here in our world within, it's anything goes – and once anything goes, all kinds of good growth can take place.

You know, I could have just said, “Set yourself free and keep setting yourself free,”

and let it go at that. That's the goal, after all, and there are a million ways to achieve it. But I don't really feel like I'm doing my job if I present just the goal and not the strategies, too – any ones I can think of.

So I give you useful fiction *and* parallel universe *and* consensus reality. I'm aware that these strategies overlap – with each other and with many, many others. Setting oneself free is a process, and part of that process is repeated scrutiny of interconnected ideas.

We want to get down to the good stuff. We want to get down to the hard stuff. If we can get there through playful imagining, or by changing the rules, or by any other means that you or I might think of, I think that's fine.

And if consensus reality doesn't agree, well, consensus reality is wrong.

5. Monsters

As you already know, I suck at supermarket checkout lines. I'm pretty much a disaster any time my time is at the mercy of others. Be it in a doctor's office, an airport, or the remorseless clutches of telephone customer support, I just don't wait well.

I know that a lot of people wait impatiently, but with me it goes beyond garden-variety impatience – way beyond, all the way to borderline freak out. Even a short wait will set me off; it's never too long before the cartoon version of me takes out a big

cartoon hammer and starts whaling away on the ATM nitwit who can't figure out where the deposit goes.

It goes in the stupid slot, you stupid, stupid slot-head! Arrgh!

I do much better if I have something to read. Words save me and soothe me. They distract me from the angst of standing there doing nothing while idiots and incompetents strip-mine the precious seconds of my life.

I sound like a nice guy now, don't I? I'm telling you, we all have our monsters. The sooner we cop to them the better.

I used to carry crossword puzzles in my wallet, prophylactically, for emergency use only. These days my cellphone provides my diversions. I can't count the times that Angry Birds saved me from being, well, an angry bird.

Do I sound unhinged? Deeply in need of Prozac? Don't be alarmed. I'm really not that bad. I'm painting a picture with a cartoon-colored brush to make a point:

The things that drive us nuts will drive us a lot less nuts if we just start to own them.

I own that I'm impatient. I wish I could sit or stand and stare off into space for as long as waiting requires. Others can; I can't. So I have this limitation, this monster, this thing I would like to see changed.

As I set out to change it, I feel a twinge of fear. After all, I'm asking myself to face a limitation here – *a bad thing* – and what will that do to my self-image? “Ouch, my feelings!” I fear to hear me say. Maybe it's best not to look.

That's what some people think. They find self-inspection too painful. So they lie and deny and they don't come clean. It's a natural feeling – who likes to admit that they're wrong, or lacking, or weak? – but it yields no strategy for slaying our monsters.

We can't slay them; at this point we can't even see them.

When denial clashes with self-awareness like this, we become, weirdly, self-antagonistic. We believe we shouldn't have flaws – *flaws*

are bad, flaws are wrong! So we ignore them or disclaim them. We sweep them under the rug, while simultaneously staring off into the middle distance saying, “Rug? What rug?”

Thus we create an adversarial relationship with ourselves, and it’s tough to find peace when you’re engaged in a war within.

Honestly, do you even need to fight this war? Why not just subtract pain from the equation? Get neutral with your feelings. Tell your monsters that they neither scare you or scare you not; you don’t think in those terms.

Through practice of this you’ll develop a solid place to stand – outside ego, outside pain – where you can start to say frank things to yourself, in depth and in detail, and have it not hurt. Go on, give it a whack. See how it feels.

>>

I’m impatient. I have a crap memory. I’m flabby. I get careless and make mistakes, and

then I get angry, and then I get more careless, and make more mistakes. Sometimes I lose my temper over nothing at all. I'm selfish. I'm useless with tools. Can't change a tire. I'm easily distracted. And I'm cheap. Goodness, what a cheap bastard I am.

Did it kill you to confess things about yourself to yourself? Hey, you only talked about you to you. I barfed my beastly secrets all over everywhere: to readers, reviewers, total strangers, my friends, my wife, you. But I didn't die. In fact, I felt quite good. Free, at least, of the fear of you finding out. (Too late! You already know!)

It's not like any of this stuff is news, after all. I've seen me trying to change a tire. I know how ridiculously bent out of shape I get. What's news is viewing my monsters dispassionately and not feeling threatened.

Once I do that, I can start to have a real dialogue with them.

“Okay,” I ask myself, “Why do I go so batcrap crazy in a checkout line?”

I'm feeling blocked, that's why – blocked in my immediate progress through life. I'm standing here doing nothing, so nothing is getting done, which means that I'm wasting time and therefore I... I...

Good God, I'm falling behind in my existence!

Wow. Did I really do that? Did I really draw a connection between a half-minute hiccup in a checkout line and the net productivity of my life? Am I that addicted to a life of doing? Am I that afraid to just be?

With all due respect to me, how messed up is that?

Neither messed up or not messed up, right? It just is. I just define my self-worth in terms of my achievement, which, okay, drives me, but also leaves me feeling very uncomfortable in situations where other people can just be chill.

An uncomfortable feeling, by the way, that I can now start to get comfortable with, just through the act of owning it.

I started out by accepting my impatience. This created the opportunity for a new discovery: that I self-define through achievement. Which I also get to accept.

Acceptance leads to discovery. Discovery generates acceptance. Further acceptance leads to further discovery. Thus can we peel back our layers and examine them with keen interest and without value judgment.

Follow this accept-and-discover circuit and see where it leads. Now is the time to go deep. They're your monsters. You've got to know what they are.

>>

So here's what I've learned about me: Any moment of inaction is a potential crisis. I truly do feel like I'm falling behind in my existence, and my self-image has a big problem with that. The impatience I project onto others is really, wow, impatience directed at me.

Ah, great, now I know what to do! Instead of getting all anxious and cranky, and thinking of swinging the cartoon hammer, I can simply turn my thoughts inward and make the moment productive by contemplating, if nothing else, my obsessive need to make every moment productive.

Now I'm not just waiting, and now I'm not just bored. I'm doing something. I'm introspecting. Watching myself exist in the world. That feels worthwhile to me. That feels like somewhere I might grow.

And even if I don't grow, I feel better about myself in the moment.

Moment to moment, wouldn't you like to feel better about yourself? Now you know how. Just look at yourself honestly, figure out what's bugging you, and cook up any simple, small strategy to make it bug you less. Trick yourself if you have to. Use your useful fictions. They're based on a truth: the truth you revealed to yourself when you looked your monster in the eye.

Back in the old crossword-puzzle days, I denied my impatience through self-distraction, but that only papered over the problem. Once I owned my monster I easily found a way to turn antsy and bored into relaxed, confident and awesome.

It's so weird. We won't look at ourselves honestly for fear of feeling worse, yet every time we look at ourselves honestly, we end up feeling better.

Are we not paying attention? It's axiomatic...

To feel better about yourself, pass through feeling worse.

Expose yourself to your monsters, even though you might not be comfortable with them at first. Get used to their company. Then you can work on fixing them – easily, since you're no longer in denial of them. That's the control you've been looking for, and it lies, at its heart, in acceptance.

Of course, seeing a monster is not slaying it. There's still work to be done.

Let's help our cause by being super-realistic about that work.

Let's look for steady progress by small steps.

Let's plan to be on the path from who we are to who we want to be, and understand that being on the path is enough.

And let's appreciate that walking the path involves nothing more profound than just thinking about ourselves in attentive and intelligent ways.

Many writers hate being edited. They see every attempt to alter their work as a personal attack, and they mount an aggressive defense. This attitude changes once they understand that only through editing and vigorous rewriting can the work achieve its full potential.

What I want to do is edit my monsters. I seek to treat transformation of the self as a work in progress and I take pride in modest gains. Alas, in my heart of hearts, I do value-judge achieving as good and not achieving as bad. If I can let go of that judgment I am so much better off. And how do I let go? By taking

every opportunity to remind myself that it's okay to just be. Every time I do that, I come closer to making it true.

That's all that's meant by walking the path: making your you come true.

You can weaken your monsters. It's fun and productive, and it leads to real growth. But remember that you can't weaken a monster you won't let yourself see.

Am I asking you to accept unacceptable parts of yourself? Maybe, but so what if I am? You have the tools for it now. What monstrous unacceptables can you seek to accept? What strategies can you use to accept them a little bit more?

>>

Acceptance beats denial like rock beats scissors. Once you start seeing your monsters in the clear light of day, they become so ho-hum. And then you get the benefit of a positive feedback loop, where

the more you observe yourself engaging your monsters, the better you feel, and the better you feel, the easier they are to engage.

You have the means to tune yourself to your heart's content. You can make yourself pretty much always okay. All you have to do is accept.

6. the infinite (w)hole

My doctor is a real piece of work. He says that not only does evolution have no interest in keeping us alive past a certain age, it actively shoves us out the door to make room for the next generation. That's why (he says cheerily), "If something doesn't kill you, something else will."

With that said, he does have this pretty decent recipe for living a long and healthful life:

Exercise

Eat real food
Practice safe sex
Don't smoke
Don't drink and drive

To which we might add a recipe for living a life that's rich and meaningful, too:

Love others
Love your work
Find purpose
Keep learning
Have peak experiences

What other recipes can we write? What other aspects of our lives can we look at? Love? Career success? Throw any ingredient in. However you cook it, it's going to come out right.

>>

Good stuff, yeah? When you reduce existential reverie to recipes, I think you're onto something.

But even as I revel in recipes, I hear a little voice inside my head saying, *Hey, jv, what's the point? Who cares if you live a long life, or even a rewarding one? Your doctor is right: We're all going to die. Even you. Even him. Isn't that what we have to deal with first?*

Thank you, voice in my head.

Buzzkill.

You're right, though: death sucks. Well, can we make it not suck? We can certainly give it a try.

We can start noting that we cherish our lives, but that puts us in a bit of a bind, because the more we cherish our lives, the more we might grieve to let them go. It's the grief that we want to get past.

I call this grief my *bottom ache*, a sorrow so deep that it sinks below everything and – if I let it – draws everything down. Do you feel it in you? Can you blame you? How can you or I or anyone not be jealous of a time when we won't be around anymore?

Many strategies have been suggested for dealing with the bottom ache. Mine involves beer.

Not, perhaps, in the way you'd expect.

I like beer. Mostly what I like are new beers, ones I've never seen or sampled before. I've always felt that life's too short not to try new beers. Ah, but there's the rub. Life's too short. No matter how many new beers I try, I'll never get to try them all.

This is a problem.

It's not my only one.

I also like writing. With each book I finish I can't wait to start writing the next. Nor do I wait very long because, you know, life's too short. But projects pile up, and I know that there are some books I'll just never get to write. In dark moments, this brings me real despair.

New beers and new books, then, are two *unfillable holes* in my life. What are some in yours? What do you always want to experience with joy, but sometimes

experience with regret because you know it will one day end?

>>

If we love it, we don't want it to end. That just makes sense. We want as much as we can possibly get, but we can't possibly get as much as we want. What a trap of desire. How can we get free? Do we have to gnaw off a limb?

Not at all.

We just have to lower our sights some.

We're not here trying to "solve death." That's an unrealistic goal even by my Pollyanna standards. We just don't want death to spoil our mood. When we find ourselves inside a terrific life moment, we want to experience that moment with joy, that's all. That's our goal.

Our strategy for this is to consider death with the same emotional neutrality we used

to see our monsters more clearly. In contemplating death, we face – according to some – the biggest monster of all. Yet we invoke the right to call it no monster at all. Nor even a big deal. Just the thing we’re looking at now.

Now let’s check out that unfillable hole. What, exactly, does it look like?

Well, if it’s unfillable, that means it’s bottomless, plus sideless and topless, too. It’s everywhere in all directions – infinite, by definition.

Ladies and gentlemen, I hold in my hand a fresh new beer, one I’ve never tried before or even heard of. I drop it into the unfillable hole and it disappears without a trace. How can it not? Infinity is infinite, and nothing I add to infinity can make any difference. What a waste of beer. That beer had no point.

That’s a sad appraisal of the situation. It leaves me with an unfillable hole and a bottom ache. I don’t like that, and I don’t want it, so I’m going to change it.

My problem is that I've been trying to use a finite thing to fill an infinite hole, and that can't be done. But what if the thing itself is infinite, and therefore fills infinity completely?

This beer is all beers, jv? That's what you're going for here?

Yes. Exactly. Microcosm of the macrocosm: the part stands in for the whole. This next beer is all new beers. This next book is all the books I'll ever write. The one thing I cherish is all things I cherish.

The hole isn't a hole.

It's a whole.

If I say so.

Does that cure the bottom ache? No, but it's the start of a new practice: the practice of *interpreting reality in ways that serve our best interest*.

This practice helps us enjoy the moments we're in and cherish them for the peak experiences they are. It relieves us – if we let

it – from the burden of knowing that, alas, nothing lasts.

Interpret reality in ways that serve your best interest. It's not cheating. It's not even a useful fiction. It's just evaluation, an evaluation you are free to make as you choose.

Open your mind to the possibility that this one experience you're in right now can fill you completely and meet all your needs. This is how you step away from a regret you might otherwise feel.

Can you think of any celebration, activity or milestone in your life, or the lives of your loved ones, that might profit from this sort of treatment? If you changed your thinking from “this isn't fulfilling” to “this totally is” how would that moment look?

>>

Folks, I'm going to tell you a secret I've never told anyone, except all the people I've told:

Every time I fly, I make peace with the possibility of a plane crash. This is true. Every take-off, every landing, I remind myself that if the worst happens it's okay because I'm playing with the house's money, and have been for long time.

Part of this equanimity stems from an assessment of my achievements; I know I've done a lot with my life.

Part comes from knowing how the bottomless hole gets filled; having redefined what "enough" is, I now never worry or wonder whether I've gotten it.

And part, frankly, comes from knowing that if the plane goes down, at least it's not my fault. At least I won't have died doing something unutterably dumbass (as many have predicted I will).

A real benefit of this practice is how it lets me pay routine visits to the concept of my own mortality and become ever more comfortable with it. I don't imagine that all of these rehearsals will transform my experience of death when it comes, but I do

think I'll be more relaxed. I will arrive at the moment of my death with some practice at thinking the unthinkable.

It can be your practice, too, in just three steps. First, view death objectively. Second, redefine "enough." Third, rehearse your mortality. By these means you create for yourself the opportunity to feel peace where others may not.

I do believe that I'm playing with the house's money. But you know what? I don't have to just believe. I can demonstrate it to myself by means of my *whole-life résumé*.

On this list (of course it's a list) I include not the jobs I've held but everything or anything I've ever done in my life that's made me think, *Oh, yeah, that's the stuff. That's what's made this trip worthwhile*. Here's a portion of that list.

I played on a world-champion ultimate frisbee team.

I recruited and trained New Zealand's first generation of situation comedy writers.

I married the woman I love.

I owned an IBM PC Junior, the dinosaur of the computer age. It transformed me as a writer - the “delete” key set me free.

I was Santa Claus on stilts, even though I didn’t know how to walk on stilts.

I have grandchildren. I strive to be a good bad influence.

I made social-action television in Nicaragua.

I made a final table at the World Series of Poker.

I’ve visited many foreign lands.

I’ve written many books.

If you don’t have such a list, start one now. Keep it handy and keep adding to it as your life unfolds. It’s your record of everything you’ve experienced, accomplished, loved, learned or cherished that they can’t take away from you, even if you die tonight.

>>

Such a list is a light in the dark. It helps us realize that our lives have already been filled with many transcendent moments – more than we can easily count, once we sit down to try.

It also helps us focus on what comes next. For some, this leads naturally to that well-known list of things they want to try before they kick that well-known bucket. Items on my list include:

Write a big historical novel
Teach and train writers in Africa
Live on a tropical island
See the Northern Lights

And you? What do you want to do before the curtain falls? Believe it or not, acceptance is your friend here, too. Why? Because you might look at some things on your bucket list and think, *Well, that's not gonna happen. I'm never going to climb K-2, be a movie star, save the world.* And then you have to feel bad about yourself.

No. No, you *never* have to feel bad about yourself. All you have to do is think about

yourself, talk to yourself, find new ways of expressing yourself to yourself. The time and energy you invest in this unblinking assessment will pay dividends in everything you do, from connecting with your past to facilitating your future to facing your death.

Self-understanding, by every available means, that's what we're after here, and we arrive at it by one of the sweetest self-fulfilling prophecies there is:

By telling ourselves we are not afraid, we become, by degrees, unafraid.

So here's a challenge. Write a little snapshot of where you see yourself in five years. It's not that long a time. You'll be there before you know it – if you know where it is.

I'm walking on a beach in Aruba. I have a home not far from here, a two-bedroom bungalow that I share with my wife. I'm retired, but that doesn't mean much, because I'm still writing books and still flying all over the world to teach. I have a gig in next month in Zimbabwe.

>>

Think of such snapshots as a rope you throw into the future and then climb up after. I do. It's how I'll get to Aruba. It's how you'll get to your dreams.

7. information and purpose

Writer's block, I have discovered, takes place at the intersection of too much fear and not enough information. Whenever I find myself that malfunction junction, I never try to write. Instead, I go gather new information. Once I've tipped the balance back in information's favor, I find that my fear goes to sleep and I can go back to work. That's how I beat writer's block – not by trying to bull through it, but by using strategies to ease it out of my way.

I can use this same approach to address other issues in my life, be they personal, practical, familial, whatever. I don't try to solve my problems, per se. I just collect more information about them. This gives me practice at gathering and using information – never a bad thing – even as it equips me with new insights about the matter or matters at hand.

Get used to gathering data. Make it part of your practice, part of becoming more you. It doesn't matter what you look into, just that you have the habit of looking, a habit you can cultivate and enjoy as a positive addiction and a path to enlightenment for as long as you live.

When I tell you that gathering information is a path to enlightenment, I'm not horsing around. I know it from my own experience; you know it from yours. Enlightenment exists at the ultimate intersection of what you know and how you use it. Everything that advances you toward that goal is part of enlightenment, too.

But, my life tends to get in the way of my life, I can hear someone say. Between work, school, love, family, ambition, bills, pills and spills, who has time for big exploration?

Well, who said anything about big exploration? I'm not asking you to master Sanskrit. Start small. Pick a subject you can peck away at in the corners of your time.

What would you investigate, for fun or for insight, if you had time?

>>

I would investigate (I love this list): World War I. World War II. Contemporary art. Brewing and distilling. The works of many philosophers. The Boxer Rebellion. The Whiskey Rebellion. Tennis. Genetics. Metallurgy. Ooh, alchemy! The dawn of civilization. Myths and legends. Linguistic anthropology. Regular anthropology. Islands of the South Pacific. Astronomy, astrology and the Golden Age of anything.

Apart from the learning that's in it, such investigations will yield the added benefit of identifying you as a seeker and explorer in the eyes of two crucial constituent groups: you, and everyone else.

In terms of yourself, simply accept that you're on the path, and that advancing along the path will always be at least a part of what you do.

For the outer crowd, they need to know that you own your time – that there will be times when you drop everything and just go exploring because that's who you are.

What we're talking about here is using the yeast of new information to make our lives rise. You're doing it. I'm doing it. Not everyone around us does, but they need to respect that we do.

We live our lives among others, that's a fact, and people put demands on our time. Some demands are legitimate, and should be negotiated in good faith and good spirit. Other demands, though, may mask a hidden agenda; for while you're making your life

rise, you might be seen as a threat to those around you who are not. For fear of encountering their monsters in this area, they may want to – and try to – stunt your growth by sabotaging your time.

This isn't nice and it's not fair, but it does happen, and when it happens it demands action – bold action. You can't let others stand between you and the life you want to live. It won't make you happy and it won't make them happy, either.

But it's hard to take action toward change, especially the kind of change that involves removing people from your life. It's hard to measure that risk versus reward.

The yardstick I use is a hill.

Imagine that you're standing on a hill and in the distance you see a mountain. You know that you'd rather be on the mountain, but you're not sure if you can get there. The way is not clear. It leads downhill into fog – the unknown. All you really know for sure is that your first step off the hill is *down*.

Bummer. You're being asked to make a certain sacrifice for an uncertain gain. What kind of deal is that?

The only kind of deal there is, once you consider the alternative of just staying put. No growth there. No path. No progress. The hilltop is a dead end.

So your choices are these: the uncertain hope of improvement or the certain knowledge of no improvement.

It's hard to come down off a hill you're heavily invested in, and it's hard to come down off any hill if you fear you won't reach a better place. Having a clear sense of how things won't change unless you change can motivate that first, difficult downhill step.

I quit my job once using this logic. It was a good job with decent pay and prospects. It was even kind of fun. But it didn't let me own my time, and my mountaintop was to own all my time. I didn't know if I could get there (and not go broke or starve). I just knew that I for sure couldn't get there if I chose to stay

put. So I swallowed hard and walked myself down off the hill.

People use this logic to leave jobs every day. Leave home. Leave relationships. Leave addictions. Change careers. Become writers. Become artists. Become... whatever. They don't know if change will work. They just know that not-change won't.

What hill do you stand on? What mountain do you seek? What will you have to sacrifice to get there? What will it mean to walk down off your hill?

>>

If the people around you support you in your growth, then all is well. But if they're afraid of your growth, if they'd rather keep you down than rise with you, then you have no choice.

You're going to have to hill-climb their ass.

If you want your life to rise, it matters who's around. It's okay to share your time with others, but don't forget who owns it, and don't neglect to manage it like the non-renewable resource it is. Stand up to emotional bullies and demand your time and space to grow.

Or kick 'em to the curb.

Those are your choices.

Because failing to grow, that's not an option for us.

So, our goal is to grow and our strategy for growing is to gather information. Seems pretty simple, but what if you don't know where or how you want to grow?

That's fine. That's just the state you're in now. It's really one of only two states you can be in:

Either you know your purpose or you don't.

If you know your purpose, great, go rock your purpose. Direct your learning toward it, surround yourself with supportive allies, and

take positive steps toward your goal. You're in fine shape.

If you don't yet know your purpose, then it's simple: Your purpose is to *find* your purpose. Gathering information, learning, growing – if that's where you're at right now, that's exactly where you're supposed to be. You're in fine shape, too.

Now I'm going to ask you a question, and I'd like you to answer quickly, without thinking, to capture your unstudied response.

What is your purpose?

>>

My purpose is to teach. It was my purpose long before I knew it. Now that I know, I orient my actions and choices around it. I decide where and what to teach, and with whom to make common cause.

Back in the day, though, I floundered. I knew I was looking for something but I didn't

know what. So I kept looking. No one told me to. No one gave me permission or instruction (except such instruction as I took from books like this). It just seemed like something I should do.

I can't tell you the moment when the pieces all fit, but I can tell you what the key pieces were.

One was my awareness that a writer is a teacher. That took me a long time to figure out.

I also had to get past the self-stigmatizing *those who can't do, teach*, which delayed me in embracing my gift. That problem got solved when I understood that those who can do, do both.

Writing is my passion but teaching is my purpose. I became happy when I made room for both in my life. It was almost math to me: *passion + purpose = power*.

My current understanding of my purpose, then, is based on an unfolding set of discoveries in my life – discoveries gleaned through gathering and using information.

This is how I have achieved, so to speak, critical mass.

You don't know when you're going to achieve critical mass, or how. You don't know which one piece of information is going to change everything. So you just have to keep looking.

But good news: You get to keep looking, without expectation and without fear of a fruitless outcome. Remember, if you don't know your purpose, then looking for purpose *is* your purpose. That should take a certain load off your mind.

Now I'll ask the question again, in a slightly different way, and this time you can take your time to answer.

What do you know about your purpose so far? What steps can you take to know more?

>>

So now here's us, using the corners of our time to advance our understanding of anything at all. Maybe we have clear purpose; maybe not yet. Information bombards us from all sides, everything from tabloid headlines (*Angry Trucker Fires Five Shots into UFO*) to Twitter feeds (*today's oxymoron is largely small*). Most of it we don't even use, or try to use, we just defend ourselves against it.

Every once in a while, though, something cuts through the clutter, something resonant or relevant to our experience. For me, at one time, it was this:

Each of us is the center of our own universe, and we're of surprisingly little interest to the universe next door.

Reflecting upon this information reminds me not to over-invest in others' opinions of me, or get hooked on their validation. In this instance I'm using information as a message – part of the steady stream of such messages that I can anticipate receiving if I just stay open to new ideas.

I call such bits of received wisdom “grabs,” and I always keep my ear cocked for them. I recognize them by an inner voice that says, “That sounds like something. That sounds like the truth.” And then I ask myself what truth it sounds like, and how I might relate to it or profit from it.

Using new information to acquire a clearer understanding of yourself requires just three steps. First, receive relevant input. Second, apply it to yourself. Third, use what you learn.

Here’s a grab: “I dared to dream and, dreaming, I dared.” How would you apply that information to your life? How would it impact future action? (If this grab doesn’t grab you, grab your own. Or, hey, do both.)

>>

There’s something else the habit of learning gives you, and that’s the company and amity of people who, like you, are alive in their minds. They’re the ones you want in your life,

right? The ones who can say what's an important thing they know? Where will you find them? Why, looking at what you're looking at, confronting the same issues, asking the same questions, contemplating the same truths.

(Oh, I'm going to love this next sentence.)

To seek a seeker, seek what a seeker seeks.

(Yes, I was right, I loved it.)

If aloneness is an issue for you, this could be a way out of that bind.

So what do we have here, jv? How to hook up at museum lectures?

Maybe. And it might even work. But even if it doesn't work, you still come out ahead, to the exact tune of the information you gain that you didn't have before.

To better yourself, better your company. To better your company, better yourself. To accomplish both of these things, just keep doing what you want to be doing anyway:

eagerly engaging with the world and investigating any mystery it presents.

8. the big question

Here are some questions that have crossed my mind:

How come my shoelaces never break except when I'm tying my shoes?

Is smoking cigarettes a sin?

Is moral behavior a divine imperative or a survival strategy?

Why do some religions circumcise and others don't?

Is heaven above the clouds but below outer space?

Am I happy?

And here are some questions that have crossed yours:

>>

Some of these questions we can immediately answer with available information. (*Because that's the only time you pull on them, dumbass.*) Others we can't answer until we define our terms. How can we know we're happy if we don't know what happiness means?

Still, it's a good question, *am I happy?* It bears investigating. To start the investigation, I'll use a tool called *arbitrary choice*. This is another old writer's trick; when you don't know where the story's going, go anywhere, and figure to clean up the mess later on.

So I start by making an arbitrary choice: *Happiness is freedom from woe*. Okay, no woe here, so I must be happy.

Ah, but what if I make a different arbitrary choice? What if I say that *happiness is living my dreams* – and I happen not to be living my dreams? Then I guess I'm not happy after all.

These two arbitrary choices fight against each other, and we can probably think of many others that will also clash. So answering the question arbitrarily doesn't quite work. I need a definition of happiness that's lasting and universal, and harmonizes with (or at least doesn't negate) all other definitions of happiness I might choose.

Yeah, jv, good luck with that.

Still, a place to start is a place to start. Think of your own several definitions of happiness and write them down. Do any particular ones jump out at you and command your attention? (It's okay if they do or don't – this is an exploration only.)

>>

You could (one could) define happiness as *achieving goals* or *acquiring purpose* or *finding love* or *making love* or even *having a big screen TV*. Of course our definitions shift as our circumstances change. What made me happy in the past (seeing my name on a TV credit-crawl) is not what makes me happy now (exercising my hard-won freedom to write). What different definitions of happiness have you had in your past? What new ones do you think lie ahead?

>>

Well, this is a pretty pickle.

We can't know if we're happy until we define happiness, and we can't define happiness until we've sorted through all the possibilities that exist within our shifting desires and life circumstances, and across our past, present and future. Pretty soon it seems like we're lost in the question.

If someone held a gun to my head and said, "Define happiness!" (granted, a strange

thing to do) I would take my best stab at it with *happiness is enjoying my days*. But I wouldn't be convinced. I would know that I can't define happiness except as a function of something else, and I haven't come to terms with all the somethings else there are.

Which brings us to the Big Question, a question so big that it demands its own Initial Caps. What is the Big Question? That's a big question. Let's start small and work our way up.

Just now I asked myself, "Should I walk the dog?" It's an innocent enough question, but there's a lot that goes into addressing it, everything from the dog's mood to mine, the weather, even the possibility (in my neighborhood true fact) of coyotes on the street.

A few leaps later I find that I have jumped from, "Should I walk the dog?" to, "Should I brave coyotes," to "Am I brave?" to, "What is the nature of my character?" all the way to, "Who am I?"

“Who am I?” leads to, “Who are we all?” which leads to, “What is our place in the world?” and, “What is the world’s place in the cosmos?” and, “What is the cosmos’ place in infinity and eternity?” and, “How big is infinity, how long is eternity?” and, “What are infinity and eternity really?”

You wouldn’t think that walking a dog could be so complex.

And we haven’t even yet asked, “What is the nature of dogs?” “Why do man and dog relate to one another as we do?” “How does this fit into evolution?” “What is evolution?” “Is science right?” “Is religion right?” “Both?” “Neither?” “How does God figure in?”

We have gone, with a nod to the old joke about the dyslexic agnostic, from, “Does dog exist?” to, “Does God exist?” This tells me that any question I might ask is connected to the biggest questions I can think of.

What are the biggest questions you can think of?

>>

I've asked myself this question many times and have yet to find a satisfactory Big Question, because I think the Big Question must be the sum of all questions, just as infinity is the sum of all everything. Thus, no single question can be the Big Question because it's just one question... while meanwhile the Big Question over there is busy being an infinite number of questions, and I'm kind of hating it for not coughing up a single answer I can use.

But I've dealt with infinity before. I've seen how it informs the shape and size of my unfillable hole, and I've learned how to let the part stand in for the whole. As with the filling of unfillable holes, one question is all questions; any question is the Big Question.

Now I'm getting somewhere. Now I'm seeing the sublime in the everyday.

We tend to think of our practical lives and our spiritual lives as separate spheres. But

when we see the clear link between, “Should I walk the dog?” and “Should I walk with God?” we know that’s not true.

And that’s great news.

Because if the Big Question lies in everything, then I can explore it wherever I am. I don’t need a separate space or setting. I can have a rich spiritual experience right in the midst of my prevalent life. I can glean wisdom, insight and inspiration from everything around me. I can be like a radio that receives all stations at once. Imagine how turned on that is.

Now I’m getting somewhere else. I’m getting from the prosaic to the ecstatic. Can I really get there just by avidly asking questions?

I can. I see me doing it every day. Likely you can, too. Likely you already know it.

Our man Thoreau reminds us that, “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.” We choose not to, you and I. We understand that dynamically engaging ourselves with the question of what makes us happy will, in

a material sense, make us happy. Why? Because that's how we're wired. We have that need to know.

I want to stress this point. You're wired how you're wired. If you have a compulsion to ask big questions or ponder the isness of it all, that's not something that goes away, not something you "get over." For those who self-define as seekers, it's a life sentence. We spend our lives seeking meaning, at times in thrall to this tyranny, but often as our greatest joy.

Not everyone is like this. The mass of men in their quiet desperation aren't on our path, nor should they be; their happiness lies elsewhere. But if your happiness lies in asking questions to which there are no answers, then you'd better come to terms with that. Not knowing – never really knowing for sure – is part of the package you bought. Were it otherwise, you'd be satisfied with the first satisfactory answer that wafted by.

I can't know the unknowable – shoot, I know that. But I can keep asking questions, with

the confidence that any question is worth asking because it both illuminates my experience and enhances my ability to plumb those depths.

A seeker seeks that which can't be caught – and catches it by seeking.

Thoughtful writers come to understand that, “It’s the process not the product that counts.” To get any kind of good at writing, we must write without expectation, accruing the experience, craft and insight that will ultimately make our words worthwhile.

The same is true for artists of all stripes, and for everyone in anything. For eager investigators like you and me, the answers don’t matter. Even the questions don’t matter. Only asking matters – asking and asking until our skill at gaining insight grows and glows.

The journey is the destination.

The process is the product.

The question is the answer.

This perspective may not satisfy you completely; it doesn't satisfy me completely. But at least it gives me the luxury – the tranquility – of exploring without expectation.

Suddenly I don't have to understand anything. All I have to do is advance my ability to understand.

Which I will naturally and inevitably do through practice – any kind of practice at all. I find this idea totally uplifting. Now I really can go off in all directions at once, secure in the knowledge that the mere act of going anywhere will surely deliver me somewhere.

And somewhere and everywhere are the same place!

9. homemade faith

I was born Jewish, but not very.

I gave it up for good around age thirteen, for reasons having nothing to do with bar mitzvah and everything to do with climate.

Where I lived, in Southern California, the Jewish High Holy Days often coincided with the arrival of seasonal desert winds, the Santa Anas. Protocol required that I wear a wool suit to synagogue – on some of the hottest days of the year. Itchy, sweaty; impossible. And to me that's where the logic began to break down. The way I saw it, a

religion that couldn't even figure out how to dress for the weather had no custodial right to my soul.

As my nominal religious education unfolded, I found that I had little use for what I saw as improbably tall Biblical tales, and a smart aleck's delight in tweaking the noses of spiritual authority. You'd have recognized me in an instant. I was the one in the back of the class going, "Hey, Rabbi, did God *really* part the Red Sea or was that just, like, you know, an unusually low tide?" and, "Hey, Rabbi, isn't the Chanukah miracle of the sacramental oil lasting eight days really just a matter of a resource performing better than expected?"

My Christian wise guy friends, I knew, were asking similar questions. "Hey, Padre, what's up with the wedding at Cana? Was Jesus trying to get everybody drunk or what?"

This was our favorite – we loved to watch the heads explode – "If God created everything, who created God?"

Later, as I sought to be less of a wise guy and more wise of a guy, I tried to wrap what I considered to be a fairly open mind around the question. In good faith I pondered the classic imponderable: Can an omnipotent God build a bridge He can't destroy?

Well, sure, if He's omnipotent, He can build anything, including an indestructible bridge.

Ah, but if it's truly indestructible then He can't destroy it and if He can't destroy it, then He's not omnipotent, so now what?

Now it was my head's turn to explode.

Eventually I became persuaded that I couldn't solve God by logic, and that if I was ever going to make any headway with this God business, then I'd just have to tolerate the paradox of a God who could create Himself, and build and destroy bridges willy-nilly, as He saw fit.

Try knowing the unknowable, right? Like a fish in the ocean or a cell in the brain, I just couldn't get the overview perspective. Still having no faith in leaps of faith I kept pursuing the rational narrative. I envied

believers. I bet they didn't lie awake nights, as I did, wondering whether God existed, under what terms and conditions, and with what warranties expressed or implied. I couldn't see surrendering to God – this God I didn't know – without a coherent explanation that my skeptical mind could buy.

What I wanted – what I want – is the faith without the leap. I want a simple, logical, practical grounding for my belief system. I want a theology that satisfies the smartass in the back of the class waving his hand with malicious intent. I also want one that honors the sassy kid's right to mouth off. I want a religion that doesn't take itself too seriously, like I don't, and seeks to make inroads into understanding, as I do.

And I want to make it myself.

I see it as a handcrafted affair, assembled by this user for no other user than this user. I propose to design it in a way that's unassuming, functional, spiritually fulfilling... and utterly disposable. If it's doing its job, this purpose-built ism of mine, it will endow

my life with peace and meaning, and then die alongside its sole adherent.

If you're up for it, I'd like you to play the same game. Start with some things that you know for sure you would want your cottage religion to be. For me that would be things like *lucid, loving, and free*.

>>

If this exercise makes you uncomfortable or you're just not into it, I'll understand. For many people, their off-the-rack religions work perfectly well, and they don't need to go down this road. Others don't trust their own authority – *who am I to tell me what's true and right and real?* And for some it's just too scary.

But if you're like me, of a restless mind with a will to try things out, you'll want to know what your own religion would look like.

You can fill in many blanks just by thinking about religions or belief systems you're

familiar with (or investigating new ones, of course). Which of their precepts or principles appeal to you? Which would you adopt unchanged? Which would you adapt, and how?

>>

I like religions that don't try to tell you they have the one true truth. Mine will be one of those.

Now turn it around. Surveying what you know about how people behave in belief, which practices would you set aside?

>>

I'd do away with hell, first thing. I want nothing to do with a belief system that punishes or threatens to punish. To me that's just not nice. Therefore, "No hell!" say

I, to which I add, “Also no uniforms!” And I’m the boss of this belief, so what I say goes.

You’re the boss of your belief. What you say goes. What’s your take on hell or uniforms or anything?

>>

Religions have rules it would seem – guidelines or instructions. Here are some mine will have:

Think for yourself. Pay attention. Be patient. Contribute. Be generous. Make healthy choices. Speak your mind. Explore. Teach. Perceive. Self-define. Walk down the beach, pick up everything you find and turn it into a party hat.

Now my little windowbox religion is starting to take shape. I see that I’m less about harsh injunctions and more about gentle reminders.

Be tolerant. Don't be rude. Don't let your ego make your choices. Practice acceptance. Don't be disappointed when things don't go your way. Don't fear death.

What do your rules look like? Remember, this is a guide to your behavior, not anyone else's. How do you instruct you?

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If it seems like a struggle to think these things through or write them down, you may be attaching too much importance to your thoughts or your words. Remember, this isn't your manifesto, just the ideas you're having now. They form the basis for the ideas you'll have next. (*This next sentence is going to sound weird.*) You don't even have to believe in your beliefs. (*Told ya.*) Just try them on for size.

The final hurdle in this thought experiment is just one of will. How disposed are you to replace old programming with new beliefs? Is water-into-wine divine to you, or a case of

sleight of cask? How comfortable are you contemplating that the opposite might be true?

Be comfortable. Be completely comfortable. Try everything. Sample broadly. See what fits. Piece together your beliefs. Record them as you see fit. Seek a profound understanding of what you understand as profound. By these means you will build a body of contemplation that will – if you let it – last you and serve you all your life.

10. stewardship

In my passion to find a simple, logical, practical grounding for faith, this is the idea I'm having now:

I am a steward of my DNA.

This genetic package of mine (say I), comes to me from others, exists within me in unique form, and goes to others when I'm done. I have it on loan from the creator, and whether that creator is God or the evolutionary needs of my species, I know I don't know.

Good news, I don't need to know. All I really need to know is:

What sort of steward shall I be?

I could be a shoddy steward: self-destructive; self-destructed. I have been so at times, and I know others who are. My heart goes out to them for the wasted opportunity that is their life.

I could be an indifferent steward, as many are. For some it's a matter of circumstance – *who has time to think of such things?* But some just quit too soon, and my heart goes out to them, too.

Parents are literal stewards, reshuffling their forebears' chromosome deck and passing on new pairs to their kids. There can be no more direct service to our DNA than this. Without it, we would be lost.

Some among us are stewards of the spirit. Storytellers, artists, curators of knowledge, keepers of the higher mind. There can be no more direct service to our DNA than this. Without it, we would be lost.

Greedy stewards, evil stewards, they exist, too. How shall I feel about them? I don't want to support them, but their choice is their choice. I'd probably just tell them, *try to have fun*. I would try to lead them to joy.

What kind of steward are you? What kind do you want to be?

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Here's what I want: *I want to be a good steward.*

This is not a moral or a religious aim, but a practical one. When I make decisions, I want to be able to trust them, and by viewing them through the filter of good stewardship, I find that I can.

I can examine any choice and ask not, "Is this a good choice?" but rather, "Is this good stewardship?" That's going to keep me right on track toward actions that honor, respect and serve, and away from those that do not.

In other circumstances one might call this a moral compass, but to me good stewardship is more like a Swiss Army knife.

It does so many things.

It gives you the power to say no. When people crowd in on your time or trajectory, your stated stewardship gives you authority over your choices. *Sorry, brah, no can do. Violates my stewardship.*

It allies you with like-minded people. If you declare your stewardship for *POETRY!* why, you will soon find yourself in the company of poets. Is that not where you want to be? Among the like-minded? The like-inspired? The like-ignited?

Those people? Sheesh, I want them all around me. It's clear I'll have to be like them to attract them. Fortunately, that's what I want to do anyway.

Your stewardship can be like Moses' pillar of smoke by day and pillar of fire by night. *This is what I follow. This is what I serve.* A clear sense of stewardship can be a real difference maker in moments of truth, tipping the

balance in favor of a hard choice or radical change.

In a very small way you might say, “In the name of good stewardship, I will not fight with my sister.” In a very large way you might say, “In the name of good stewardship, I will cast loose and go be the artist I was intended to be.”

With stewardship you’re never alone. You’re always at least yourself and your stewardship. Instead of being a point in space, you’re a line, a double-star; you revolve around yourself. This is not narcissism or self-obsession. It’s awareness of yourself as two things: both your self and your service.

How would you describe yourself as both your self and your service?

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I am my self in my recreations. I am my service when I help others. When I combine these two

– by teaching or coaching ultimate frisbee, for example – then I am both my self and my service.

The next step with stewardship is the usual one: practice.

By now we know how this works.

By advancing our practice we become more adept at handling our mental constructs. We fear them less because they're familiar. And we come to trust our choices because they're well guided and well informed. That's how we end up being thoughtful, compassionate, engaged human beings. Through practice – practice of stewardship or practice of anything at all.

Many people productively think of stewardship in terms of impact. That's me. I'm one of them. I want to have impact, and the concept of stewardship propels me past my reticence to want such a thing. My stewardship helps me dare.

If you want to have impact, you have to own having impact. For instance, with this book I hope to have inspired you or empowered

you. I have to take ownership of the (dangerously egotistical) idea that there's something to be inspired by or empowered by here or I have no chance of achieving my goal.

Where would you like to have impact? What blocks of reluctance stand in your way?

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Many people do feel inspired when they spend time in my fuzzy pink world, and nothing gratifies me more. I love delivering that buzz. But one thing I know, *that buzz gonna fade.*

That may sound like bad news, but it's not, and it never was. I knew this as long ago as 1994 when I wrote in *The Comic Toolbox*:

A book can hit a reader with the force of revelation. While you're reading it, and for a short time after, you may feel pumped up, psyched, filled with the sense that anything is possible.

Great! Go with that feeling! It's included in the text at no extra charge.

But it will fade, for revelation always fades. Soon you won't have the feeling of enthusiasm but only a memory of that feeling and its hold over you will weaken exponentially. That's the way revelation works: One day you're Paul on the road to Damascus; next day you're just looking at slides from the trip.

So revelation fades. So what? There's plenty more where that came from. In your studies. In the thoughts of your own that you record. In intimacy with others. In books like this. In synagogue, church and madrasa. In recreation, for what is recreation, after all, but re-creation? Revelation is everywhere. There's no trick to keeping it alive in your life. All you have to do is want it there and it's there.

Today I define myself through stewardship. Tomorrow that will change. This does not mean that I'm fickle in my philosophy. It

means that I keep making room for new ideas, because the newness of an idea gives it a special quality with a special energy that I can tap (and you can tap) to feel centered and conscious and charged. That's all revelation is, really: a special energy powered by a new idea.

I'm about sixty years old. I have self-awareness, tranquility, patience (getting there), joy and love in my life, and no fear of death. I arrived at these things through the not very hard work of thinking about them from time to time, trying to understand them, and trying to bring them about.

Mostly all I did was age. The turbulence, angst, doubt and fear of my youth melted away as my self-understanding and self-acceptance grew. It's true: Much of what troubles us when we're young we simply outgrow. But when we're young, how are we to know that? Or believe it? I didn't. I couldn't. I hadn't been through it. I was where I was.

We are where we are, yeah? At all different spots on the same path. We advance along it

at our own pace and according to our own vision. That's all you have to do, really – just advance along your path. If you do that, you'll end up right where everyone else does: further down the path.

And that's where you belong.

I still think that the most rewarding philosophy one can embrace is home brewed. No one can speak to you in a voice as manifest and knowing as your own. Speak clearly. Listen closely. That's the path. That's the habit of growth.

I grew in writing this book. I understand my approach and my concepts better as a function of seeking to convey them to you. I see myself as having transitioned from, *I want to know more about life* to *I know a little more about life*. I have become more articulate in my philosophy, and much more comfortable with the challenges of expressing it and sharing it.

From my heart, I hope you've enjoyed similar changes. Here are some ideas that will help make them last:

Have an open mind. Seek a neutral platform for examination. There you may contemplate everything with equal equanimity.

Be honest with yourself. State your desires, beliefs, fears, strengths, limitations and intentions with precision, candor and generosity of spirit.

Break things down. If the problem is too big to solve, don't try. Break it down. Keep breaking it down until you find a problem small enough to solve.

Use strategies and tools. When you find a beneficial way of thinking or acting, study how you did it so you can do it some more.

Accept everything. Don't let the thought that something isn't true or can't be true keep you from using useful fictions.

Acknowledge your monsters. It breaks their hold over you.

Interpret reality to serve your best interest. You are always free to change filters.

Cherish your moments. Know what has made your life rise.

Gain information. Make your life rise higher.

Be on the path. It's where the cool kids hang out.

Articulate your beliefs. And let them evolve.

Set self-awareness as a goal. It's the one thing that fixes everything.

In a writers' room in Russia they called me Yoda. My students in Nicaragua honored me with *Maestro* (then mocked me with *Pelón*). I've been a guru to some that I know of and to some that I don't. As I said at the start, though, if I have wisdom, you have the same wisdom. I may be more articulate with it, because I have passion and long practice, but at the end of the day you are the guru of you. I guess you get that by now.

postscript: legacy

One last question, if I may: What's the best thing about you?

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When I ask some people this question, they deflect it with a joke, as if they don't feel like they're good enough to have a best thing. By this point I wouldn't expect you to deflect, or even feel the need. You're at home with

yourself now. You're prepared to own who you are.

For those who answer sincerely, replies range from "my sense of humor" to "I'm good with my hands." I've yet to hear two responses the same. I'm starting to think that there are as many best things about people as there are people.

The best thing about you is like a muscle that's particularly strong. It makes sense to want to exercise that muscle, and you should. Of course, the worst thing about you deserves your attention, too. That you can now explore both is another sign of your growth.

The best thing about me is my brain. Good ones run in my family and I've tried to use mine well.

The worst thing about me is my brain. It's already not what it once was. What if it goes completely south? To lose my best tool would be a real challenge of acceptance for me.

The brain is an ephemeral vessel. It's ours while it's ours, then it's not. Mine has

occupied itself with acts of creation for most of my life. If yours has, too, then I'm happy for you; we bask in the same warm glow.

If you're concerned that your acts of creation are yet in your head and not on canvas, page or stage, don't worry about it. There's plenty of time for that, plenty of time to realize your vision through craft. For now just know that all you really need to be is alive in your mind. Everything else kind of takes care of itself.

One thing that charges the creative experience is the question, "What will this mean?" We want to know that our acts have upshot, be they acts of creation or procreation or even just kindness. We want to know that we make some kind of difference around here.

Otherwise, why bother? Ya know?

Why bother living a good life? Why create? Why seek meaning? Why seek impact? It all ends in death anyhow, and what's on the far side of death is... anybody's guess.

I wish I had a good guess. I don't. I can only say this: I don't fear death. I've used the tools and strategies you find in this book, and I find that I have no fear. So I can't tell you what lies beyond, but I can tell you that to me it doesn't matter, and in service of living a joyful life, you can make it not matter to you.

Even so, I want a legacy. I confess that I do. I want my thoughts to be inspiring people and my tools to be helping people long after I'm gone. Some of what I've written I know will stand a certain test of time. *The Comic Toolbox* already has. But let's have no illusions. If the brain is an ephemeral vessel, then books and bytes are only slightly less so, as any mildewed paperback or corrupted hard drive will readily attest. Nothing lasts forever, and what's forever anyway?

No, I think legacy is something I have to think about in the now. What's my legacy right this second? How am I doing with that?

I'm being good to the people I love. I'm writing as much as I can. I'm taking care of my body. I'm embracing new experience. I'm present in

the world with self-awareness and empathy. I have offloaded information from my brain into bytes and books, and into other brains. I have had satisfactory influence on a satisfying number of people; I hope to have more. Most everything I've done has been for the good as I understand it.

You know what I'm going to ask next.

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When you're thinking about your legacy, there's a tendency to weigh yourself against a ton of what-ifs. Fight that urge. Spend no energy on regret, it blocks progress. Focus on the steps you take next.

Small steps are fine. Just have the practice of taking them and start taking them now. That's how you get to feel good about yourself: by constantly closing the gap between where you are and where you want to be.

You rise in ability. You rise in capacity. You rise in understanding. You rise in efficiency, and that's a big deal.

You rise in empathy. You rise in love; in your capacity to give it, accept it, understand it, nurture it, manage it, and keep it alive in your life. You rise in kindness. You steep yourself in kindness and soak others around you. Can they not help but soak you back? Does that not feel good?

You grow. You change. You become more sophisticated, articulate. One day you wake up and realize that you've become more relaxed. Your practice is doing its job. Your thoughtfulness and mindfulness are paying their long-term dividend of bringing you peace.

Writers want a practice of writing. Artists want a practice of art. You can have a practice of living your life, a practice that enriches you and equips you to share yourself authentically, intimately and fearlessly, forever. It's easy. Just keep your heart where everyone can see it.

As for your legacy, you're living it now. It's going to be great being you.

about the author

John Vorhaus has been a writer and a teacher all his life. His books on comedy and poker stand out in their fields, and his novels are his cherished children. He has taught and trained writers in 32 countries on five continents at last count. He lives in Southern California with his loving wife and at least one dog.

