



Tomichan Matheikal

LIFE

24
Essays

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ESSAYS

Tomichan Matheikal

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Preface

This book is an anthology of essays on life written for the Blogchatter A2Z Challenge 2021. While all of the essays were published in my blog on the scheduled days in the A-to-Z order of their titles, some have been edited for this edition and the order has been changed for the sake of continuity and cohesion.

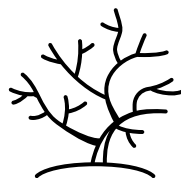
These essays are meant to throw light on the intricate affair called life. What is life? Does it have meaning and purpose? How can we make it a happy experience? Philosophers and religions have spent much time on these questions. The results are multifarious. Every person is unique and hence universally acceptable answers to these questions are impossible. While religions satisfy some and philosophy appeals to many, literature and arts enlighten others. This book looks at life from various angles. You will find philosophy, literature, and religion mingling with each other seamlessly in this volume.

These essays are written for ordinary readers and not for scholars. The style is simple and lucid so that any

lay reader will find it easy to read and understand though the topics are not commonplace.

I acknowledge my gratitude to the Blogchatter Team for their crystalline vision as well as unstinting support to the bloggers who accept the challenge. I thank them also for providing a platform for carrying this book to potential readers. A book has no life without readers.

Life, that is what matters in the end whether it is a person or a book. “To live is the rarest thing in the world,” as Oscar Wilde put it. “Most people exist, that is all.” It is my fervent hope that this book will live and not merely exist by adding more meaning and zest to the lives of many readers.



1. Absurdity

One of the characters in Kerala's folklore is Naranath Bhranthan or the Lunatic of Naranam. He was too wise for the world of ordinary mortals. His wisdom is what made him appear insane to the less wise ones. His most eccentric and conspicuous habit was rolling a huge boulder uphill and then letting it go down as he stood there atop laughing loudly. Once a goddess appeared to him and offered him a boon. "Shift the elephantiasis from my left leg to the right," he said. The wish was granted.

He did not ask the goddess to remove the disease. For an ordinary person, his request is a clear sign of his insanity. The wise man knows that there is no ultimate escape from evil. Evil is an integral part of human existence; it may change shape.

Human endeavours are as absurd as one's rolling of a boulder uphill with no purpose other than the rolling itself. You wake up early in the morning, cook food, prepare children for their school, send the children by their school bus, travel to your workplace in a crowded suburban train, endure the jostling of sweaty passengers, sit in front of the same computer

and do the same work till evening day after day, endure another suburban train journey back home, cook, wash, go to sleep... Day after day, year after year. The children will grow up and the routine will change a bit. But no substantial change. The shape of the boulder may change. But you have to keep rolling it uphill forever.

You did not choose this lifestyle, perhaps. But did you have any choice at all?

Naranath Bhranthan chose his lifestyle. He was supposedly wise though people thought he was insane. He has a counterpart in Greek mythology: Sisyphus. Sisyphus rolled his boulder as a punishment from the jealous gods. Sisyphus knew he had no choice but roll the boulder which the gods would push down invariably. But he never despaired. Rather he defied the gods. He forged the meaning of his life in that act of defiance.

Naranath Bhranthan created the meaning of his life in living out its sheer absurdity. How different is the absurdity of his choosing to roll a boulder uphill and then push it down from our routine everyday acts?

Life is absurd. It has no meaning other than what we write into it. Our career, children, and the

intermittent entertainments. Often they don't make much sense. So we bring in a god or two and some rituals to provide some sense to this senseless routine. And then some of us – perhaps those who fail in the more normal areas of career and family – choose to add even more sense to our lives by deciding to defend our gods. Then the human race is blessed with holy wars and jihads and crusades and terrorism and whatnot.

Gods and religions are harmless as long as they stay put in the private worlds where they should belong – temples and mosques and churches. Or, better, people's hearts. If gods really resided in the believers' hearts, they would have engendered a veritable paradise on the earth. Instead they keep creating hells. Absurd.

Life is absurd with or without the gods and their religions. There are exceptions, of course. There are thousands of people for whom life becomes far more bearable because of their gods and religions. We should not grudge them their little consolations. On the contrary, if something helps you to live fuller lives, better lives, why not go ahead with that? Even if that is illusory!

Yes, illusions have their deep comforts. That is another absurdity of human life. Illusions help us to disguise the emptiness within ourselves. Illusions can fill up that emptiness. Have you noticed how sad it is when an illusion of ours dies?

It is not a bad idea, however, to live without illusions. If you have the guts to do that, you can choose to confront life with total integrity. Look into the very heart of life and see it for what it really is. Naranath Bhranthan's boulders. Your career and its routine. A pandemic. What do they really mean?

Nothing. Nothing more than the brief flutters of the butterfly's wings. Nothing more than the mimicking gestures of an ape in a zoo cage. Maybe as good as the warbling of a skylark.

We have the freedom to shape our actions into the skylark's warbling instead of the ape's mimicking. We have the freedom to confront our own life on our own terms without succumbing to the idols of the marketplace. We can refuse to capitulate to the demagogue's vindictive slogans. We can rewrite the narratives of our own lives.

We can create the meaning of our own existence. We should. We shouldn't let others do that job for us. We

shouldn't sell our souls to the politician and the priest, the upstart and the rabblouser, or the rewriter of history.

Your soul is your property and your destiny. It is your burden and your joy. That is the ultimate absurdity of life. Face that absurdity. Take over its challenges. Work with those challenges with unconditional integrity. In spite of your frailty which is humanity's frailty itself. In spite of your limitations which are humanity's own limitations.

Your life will become much richer and happier if you can do this. You will be able to live intensely and delightfully in the present though you will possess Sisyphus's tragic, lucid and defiant consciousness.



2. Rebel

Anyone who loves life genuinely cannot but be a rebel. You will rebel against the all-pervasive evil that appears in the forms of diseases, natural calamities, and manmade disasters. You will rebel against malevolent bacteria and viruses. Your blood will boil when you see innocent kids dying because of any reason whatever. You won't be able to accept a fraction of the injustice you see around you. If you love life. As Ivan Karamazov tells his fervently religious brother, "I don't accept this world of God's... I don't accept it at all. It's not that I don't accept God, you must understand, it's the world created by Him I don't and cannot accept."

This world is a terrible place where, in the words of the Bard, fair is foul and foul is fair. A lot of great people have tried to change that terrible situation. What else were the Buddha and the Christ and the Prophet and the Mahatma trying to do? And what did we get because of their efforts but more evil in the names of their respective religions? Should we go on accepting this world as it is?

We needn't if we choose. Rebellion is a refusal to accept the evils and a simultaneous affirmation of the good. Rebellion is saying No to certain realities and saying a louder Yes to better alternatives. Rebellion is throwing out the junk and bringing in dignity.

Every act of rebellion is a nostalgia for innocence, said Albert Camus. Only those who have traces of innocence left in their hearts can actually rebel. The rest can at best only shout hollow slogans and throw vacuous fists in the air. Rebellion is a genuine longing for a better world for everyone.

Rebellion is a sign of deep awareness. Every rebel knows that he is just a lamb being fed by hands that will slit his throat tomorrow. Every rebellion is an attempt to redeem oneself from tragic fates.

Rebellion may fail. Indeed often it is condemned to fail. It will be suppressed. Remember the great rebels of the past? Even god-incarnates had to end up on a cross or a burning stake. Vested interests win at any rate. That is how the world is. And that is why the rebel must live. Even if he does not win. If only to become what your soul was meant to become. You don't rebel for what you can achieve, but for who you

are at heart. Rebellion belongs to the heart.
Rebellion runs in the veins.

*

There were rebels even in India as far back in history as seventh century BCE. One such school was Charvaka whose doctrine was known as Lokayata. Very little information about them has survived to our day. No copy of their central text, the Brihaspati Sutra, which dates from 600 BCE, is available now. It is assumed by historians that the Lokayata texts were systematically destroyed by the Brahmins whose authority was questioned by these texts. But, rather ironically, the works which argued against the Lokayata texts were preserved and thus we have sufficient information about this rebellious doctrine.

The adherents of this doctrine, the Charvakas, rejected life after death. They considered such beliefs funny. Thinking and feeling are part of our physical system and in the due course of time they wear out and die. Nothing is left to live on after death. The ancient play, *The Rise of the Moon Intellect*, has a character who ridicules religious believers as “uncivilised ignorant fools” who expect fruits to hang

from trees growing in air. This character supported the Lokayata doctrine.

Truth is obvious, according to Lokayata. You can perceive it through your senses or reason. Entities like gods are creations of the imaginations of crooked people whose intention is to deceive others.

The Charvakas thought of the ascetic's approach to life as sheer waste. We have just one life, this one here on earth. It is our duty to enjoy it as much as possible.

The Charvakas were highly critical of religious approaches to life. They considered the Vedas as fraudulent. The Vedic faith in a higher system of justice was particularly questioned by this school. The Vedas cheat people, according to Lokayata, by imposing absurd rituals on them. There are some interesting arguments given by the Charvakas. The Vedas say that the animals slain in religious sacrifices will ascend to heaven. If people really believed that, surely they would sacrifice their parents and thus give them an express ride to paradise.

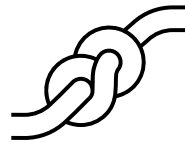
Lokayata obviously did not believe in gods or heaven. They believed in hell which, they insisted

rather gleefully, is here below. We create the hell with our actions and frustrations mostly. If we exercise our intellect properly, we will do things to avoid pain and increase pleasure. Virtue belongs to the intelligent, in other words.

Religion is both foolish and fraudulent. The Sarvadasana-samgraha cites the Charvakas as saying that the Vedas are “tainted by the three faults of untruth, self-contradiction, and tautology.” The Charvakas ridiculed the Brahmins as people who used religion as a means of livelihood. Death was the best for them. There are so many ceremonies associated with death.

Interestingly, Lokayata and its adherents did not survive for long. What they considered irrational, absurd and ridiculous survived and flourished. Why? This is what Lokayata should make us wonder about. Why do we still – nearly three millennia after the Lokayata doctrine – keep killing people for the sake of divine entities whose existence is not even certain? Why are we so irrational and absurd though we keep claiming that we are rational and capable of great wisdom?

There is a dearth of rebellion in the world. That is why the irrational and the absurd flourish. We may not be able to eradicate the irrational and the absurd as they are integral parts of existence. Yet we can live such a way that sense or meaning is woven out of the intricate mess that life essentially is. Weaving that sense is the rebel's mission.



3. The Bandwagon Effect

The Bandwagon Effect refers to the general human tendency to acquire a particular style, behaviour or attitude just because everybody else is doing it. You will find a lot of young boys adopting a bizarre-looking hairstyle just because the other boys are doing it. Quite many people begin to support one particular leader or party merely because that leader or party is popular currently.

Beliefs, ideas or fads acquire force in proportion to the number of people who accept them. In other words, as more people come to believe in something, others hop on the bandwagon regardless of underlying evidence of its veracity.

People do this because of the general human tendency to conform. In politics, people tend to vote for the most popular party just because it is the most popular party. In fact, it may be the worst party for the future of the country. But people want to be on the winning popular side, whatever the side actually is. Popularity has a diabolic appeal. It enchants and blinds people. Otherwise Hitler would not have been able to extinguish millions of lives so easily.

The bandwagon effect works not only in politics. Economists tell us that people buy a commodity just because many others buy it. Recently the jewellery stores in Kerala were crowded with people who wanted to exchange their old ornaments with 916-hallmarked ones. They ignored the threats of a pandemic and rushed to the jewellery stores just because their neighbours were doing it. Some clever jewellers had let loose a rumour that old gold would not be of much value sooner than later. Creating a bandwagon is as easy as that. A rumour is enough.

You can get a whole lot of people to drink the urine of an animal or eat its dung merely by convincing them that the excreta has medicinal values. Better, speak about the religious sanctity of the faeces. Bandwagons are led by clever clowns.

The bandwagon was a carriage for a band during a parade or in a circus. In 1848, a famous circus clown named Dan Rice used his bandwagon to gain public attention for his political campaign when he contested for the American President's post. The bandwagon didn't carry him to the White House but it was very popular during the election campaign. It became so popular that many other politicians

strove for a seat on Rice's wagon if only to draw the attention of the gazing public.

American presidential election campaigns are much like circuses, says renowned American philosopher Barrows Dunham. They require the candidates to be acrobats, clowns and medicine men. The 1944 campaigns had some additional ingredients, thanks to Hitler's fascist bandwagon. "There was a wildness in the acrobatics, a malice in the clowning, a mendacity in the medicine selling."

On one of those days Dunham was attending a dinner party. "Yes, they get in everywhere," the guest next to him said. A lady responded to it saying, "They all want jobs in industry nowadays. They don't know their place anymore."

"Who?" Dunham asked. The lady refused to answer that and looked at the philosopher pityingly.

"Yes, they get in everywhere," another guest said.

"Who?" Dunham repeated his question.

"Why, Jews, of course. They get in everywhere."

"Is there any reason why they shouldn't get in?" Dunham asked.

Absolute silence followed. A pregnant silence. Cowardice and hatred.

America had hopped on to the Hitlerian bandwagon of hatred.

Most political bandwagons are fuelled by hatred of a particular people. Hatred is one of the most potent and bewitching of all human emotions. People love to hate those who are different from them in some ways. Politicians know this truth and use it effectively to create marauding bandwagons.

Hatred is the weak person's most convenient tool. It conceals the underlying cowardice, the fear of the other. As Bernard Shaw put it, "Hatred is the coward's revenge for being intimidated." Hitler was a blatant coward. Unpublished letters and a diary written by veterans of Hitler's wartime regiment, along with many other documents available now, reveal the Fuhrer as a man driven by cowardice that wore the mask of hatred. His fellow soldiers in the regiment shunned him as a "rear area pig" who kept himself as far away from danger as possible. Hitler would have done better for mankind if he had carried a whisky flask in his belt instead of race pride in his ruthless bandwagon.

There are many bandwagons that march gloriously on our own highways and byways. There are enormous populations that have suddenly realised that their religion or nation or culture or something of the sort is in danger from a perceived enemy. Scratch their nationalism and you will find cowardice and hatred bleeding out.

We alone can solve this problem of bandwagons. We should refuse to jump on to bandwagons without assessing their worth and utility. We should know that bandwagons are often led by clowns in motley with vested interests. We should be stern critics of the antics on display in bandwagons. Most importantly, we should not sync the filth in our own hearts with that on display in the bandwagons, however charming the exhibit on the bandwagon may look.



4. Chiquitita's Sorrows

It is not always the villains out there that bring us our sorrows. Quite many of our sorrows are our own creations.

Back in the 1970s the illustrious pop group, ABBA, sang about Chiquitita's sorrows. "You're enchained by your own sorrow," the song went. Chiquitita was always sure of herself. But now she is a broken person. The song counsels Chiquitita to accept life's inevitable heartaches and the scars left by them. She should dance again as she used to do and the pain will end.

Chiquitita dear,

It aches my heart to see you depressed especially because you are a buoyant personality by nature. You liked to fly like the butterfly savouring the honey in each flower on the way. And you thought that you were entitled to all the honey in flowers. You seemed to assume that the flowers secreted honey just for you.

You were the centre of the universe in your own weltanschauung. Ah, that's a big word I have used. I

don't like big words. But you do. You did, at least. You loved all the big things in life. Big words and big theories. They made you feel great. Live life queen-size was your motto. You were a queen, no doubt. People showed deference to you. Do you know why they did that, however? You deluded yourself into thinking that you were as great as you pretended to be and others granted you to be. It was just pretence both ways. Self-delusion on your part and condescension on theirs.

You were intelligent enough to know all that. Yet you chose to be blind to the reality. Rather, it was not your choice. You were rendered helpless by your self-loathing. You hated yourself for I know not what. You are intelligent, more so than most people I know. You are pretty and any man would turn his gaze once more to look at you. You sing like an impassioned rebel and dance like a whirling dervish. Yet you loathed yourself for I know not what.

You were discontented. With yourself and the world around you. You thought the other people as silly creatures who did nothing more than eat, mate, and sleep. You hated life for its inevitable filth. You couldn't accept even the sweat and shit of human beings, let alone their greed and envy and lust and all

that stuff which make up the creatures called homo sapiens. You held yourself and others in a divine contempt.

You thought you deserved to be a goddess.

Now you are a broken person. The bubble of greatness that you had blown up around you has crumbled. You see how commonplace a person you are. Just another Mary, Rita, or Samantha. You will learn to accept yourself, Chiquitita, dear, as you are. You will then see your real beauty. And you will love it too.

You will turn your attention from yourself to the world outside. You will admire the beauty of the flowers as they offer their honey to you in celestial chalices. You will add a new music to the caressing breeze and the rippling stream. You will sing once more like you never did before. Your new dance will mesmerise the best among the dervishes.

You have learnt to own your feelings. You have learnt not to blame others for whatever has happened though they all have their own roles in the catastrophe that befell you. It's no use blaming others or even yourself. Blaming never achieves anything. You need to own up and take charge of

yourself. Take responsibility for what has happened.
And move on. Act and not regret. Sing and dance.

Your song doesn't have to be perfect. Nor your
dance. Let the song jar at times as it will. Let the
dance wobble. Sing you must and dance you must.
You are your song, Chiquitita. You are your dance.
How can you be not yourself?

PS. You can listen to ABBA's Chiquitita song [here](#).



5. Delusions

“Whom did you lose first, yourself or me?” Draupadi asked Yudhishtira when the latter lost her as a stake in a gamble. Yudhishtira had lost himself first, in fact. He was not his own master when he staked his (as well as his four brothers’) wife. Even if he had not lost that game and even if he was the sole husband of that woman, was he her owner who could stake her like a material possession? Is the wife a property of the husband? Is a ruler the owner of what he rules over?

Most rulers behave as if they are the owners and masters of their territories and people. That is one of the most common delusions of those who wield power over others. All of us nurture some delusions even if we don’t have any power over other people. Perhaps human life is impossible without some delusions.

Duryodhana, the man who started the game that eventually led to an epic war, was actually envious of his cousins, the Pandavas. “An enemy, however tiny, whose might grows on is like an anthill that eventually destroys a mighty tree.” Duryodhana

masks his simple human envy with great philosophy. He cloaks his envy with the rationale of self-defence even when his father assures him wisely that there is no such danger from the Pandavas. Duryodhana is deluding himself to mask his envy and perhaps greed too.

What is a delusion? It is a belief that is maintained in spite of data, argument, and refutation which should reasonably be sufficient to destroy it. Duryodhana had much wise counsel against what he was going to do. But his delusion had blinded him. Delusions necessarily blind us. Delusions make you think that you are the master when you are in fact the slave.

Why do we delude ourselves? “One person’s delusion may be another’s salvation,” as the *Penguin Dictionary of Psychology* says. Delusions are self-defence mechanisms. They help us to avoid certain unpleasant or painful truths about ourselves or about issues that matter vitally to us. [Religions are the most universal examples of delusions. They act as exceptionally effective palliatives and panaceas. Religious delusions may lead us to our salvation.]

We have ingrained tendencies to shut our ears to all major truths about our deeper selves. When we are confronted with certain truths about ourselves, our religion and its gods, our culture, or whatever we regard as sacrosanct, **we choose to be deluded.** We pretend not to understand. We pretend to be hurt. Our sentiments which are otherwise as sensitive as the toilet seat now become highly touchy. We would prefer to do anything other than take in information that could save us. We would also choose to forget inconvenient truths.

Those who wield power over others tend to make use of delusions for a variety of purposes. Chinese novelist Chan Koonchung's science-fiction novel, *The Fat Years*, is an extraordinary illustration of this. Published in 2009, the novel is set in 2013 and shows us how a government keeps an entire country deluded with drugs and falsehood.

The month of February is missing from the Chinese history of 2011 in the novel. The missing period coincides with the collapse of the world economy and the Ascendance of the Chinese Golden Age. The people of that country tend to forget certain things and remember certain other things. There is selective memory, in other words. The Tiananmen

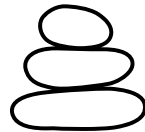
Square massacre of 1989 is not in the history or people's memory anymore. The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962), and the Civil War (1927-1951) are a few of the many events deleted from history and memory. Those who remember them won't live long. Books not in accordance with the Chinese Communist Party's historical discourse are banned. Fang Caodi, one of the characters, says that "certain collective memories seemed to have been completely swallowed up by a cosmic black hole, never to be heard of again."

The government projects the country as the best in the world using all available means such as the media and other propaganda. The economy is boosted through such fraudulent means as conversion of the people's savings accounts to expiring vouchers, deregulation, crackdowns, supply of counterfeit goods, misinformation, and price controls. Truth is fabricated through expedient rewriting of history.

Nevertheless, the people are happy in the country. Not just happy, they are buoyant. They have a sense of gratification. They are proud to be citizens of the greatest country in the world though they have no

individuality. There is no independent thinking. The Chinese Communist Party is “great, glorious, always correct.”

The government has a simple strategy for keeping the people so buoyant. Small doses of Ecstasy (a drug) are added to the drinking water supplied through pipes. There is euphoria in the country. What else do you want?



6. Ego Integrity

The greatest blessing one can have in old age is a sense of fulfilment. And that won't appear out of the blue when you retire from your job.

Life is never easy for anyone though many people are lucky to be born in circumstances that support healthy growth and development while quite many others have to endure much agony to get stray ecstasies. A lot of things that happen to us – right from our parents – are beyond our control or choice. We are born not because we want to be. A lot of people come in and go out of our lives irrespective of our likes and dislikes and not without leaving deep imprints in our psyche. Teachers, for example. Religious people like priests who may shape or distort our entire perspectives irreversibly. As we grow up, we will definitely come across a lot of unsavoury people and situations. They all affect our personalities. Yet in the end, what we are is our own responsibility in spite of all the knocks and kicks we receive all along. Finding fulfilment in the end is our responsibility.

Psychologist Erik Erikson calls that fulfilment ego integrity. Ego integrity is what a psychologically healthy old person will experience in his/her late 60s and thereafter. It is a feeling that your life has been quite a rewarding experience. You feel that you have accomplished something worthwhile in your life. It is a sense of contentment. There is some wisdom bubbling in your soul while life is subsiding in your nerves.

Erikson defines wisdom as “a detached concern with life itself, in the face of death itself.” You know that your time is running out. You know that the inevitable end will catch up with you soon enough. But that does not deter you from being happy. Despair is nowhere in sight.

Despair is the opposite of ego integrity in Erikson’s psychology of personal development. If you don’t achieve certain things at the right time in your life, you are likely to end up with some despair instead of the feeling of contentment that arises from your ego integrity or a feeling of wholeness. [One meaning of integrity is wholeness.] You feel like a fragmented person in the end. How can we avoid that fate?

There are certain qualities or virtues that we should acquire at certain stages of life. Our infancy should teach us the virtue of trust. The love and care we receive in the first 18 months of our life determines how good our trust is. Those who are fortunate enough to have a nurtured infancy are likely to grow up to be optimistic adults who can trust other people as far as they are trustworthy. Without that nurture and affection, they become mistrustful and negative. The trust we learn in the first 18 months of our life is practically the cornerstone of the psychologically healthy personality.

As we grow up, we need to acquire certain other virtues like a sense of autonomy and initiative in childhood, identity (understanding one's place in the world) in adolescence, intimacy (ability to establish healthy relationships with others) in young adulthood, and generativity (making your mark in the world through your accomplishments) in middle adulthood. If a person does not acquire these virtues at the right times, he/she will grow up with a sick personality marked by serious deficiencies such as mistrust, shame, guilt, inferiority, confusion, isolation, stagnation, and – finally, in the old age – despair.

Erikson considered integrity as the wholeness that develops in us as we grow up with a healthy psyche. But integrity is not an end result of a process; it should be there in us at every stage. We should be whole at every stage of our growth. **Wholeness** and health cannot appear at any stage all of a sudden. For example, the ability to form healthy relationships will not appear from nowhere in young adulthood just by getting help from a counsellor or a religious guru or anybody at all. Healthy growth is a gradual process. Others can definitely help us at different stages in relevant ways, no doubt. But integrity (wholeness) should be there in us at every stage if we wish to be really healthy.

This integrity is what is lacking in quite many people in today's world. The world teaches us to pretend be whole instead of being really whole. There are quick-fix solutions for all problems today. You are not happy with your hair? Go to a hair stylist and get the problem fixed. Not happy with the shape of your nose? Plastic surgery is simple and affordable too. Not happy with your partner? Dump him/her.

Perhaps it would be much better to accept your unruly hair and your snub nose and the limitations of your partner as unavoidable parts of our reality. If

we can accept certain things without having to modify them restlessly, we may be able to avoid fragmentation of our selves to a great extent.

Acceptance of certain aspects about ourselves is a sign of our self-love. We need to be good friends of ourselves first of all. Without that you can never be anybody else's good friend. If you keep pitying your hair or your nose or whatever, you will never be a whole person. When someone insults you, do you feel hurt and carry the hurt for a long time? [We are living in a country where a whole lot of people seem to be carrying certain insults from some 500 years ago!]

We need to explore our own minds regularly, especially the dark corners, the troubled areas. We need to come to terms with our own folly, envy, sadness and confusion. We need to heal our own fragmentations. We need to sit by the shore of a calm sea and put certain pieces together, pieces of our own souls.

Occasionally we need to put our disappointments into words clearly enough for others to understand our point of view instead of slamming the door and falling silent. And of course, instead of gathering

other disgruntled elements for lynching perceived enemies.



7. Fictional Finalism

Is your life driven by your past or more by your future? Psychologist Alfred Adler argued that our goals and ideals (which lie in the future) motivate our actions much more than our childhood and other past experiences. Some of our goals and ideals may be far-fetched. Yet these future possibilities guide us more strongly than all our past experiences.

Life is never an easy process. It is a protracted pain with occasional bouts of joys and excitements. We accept all the pain as natural and inevitable. It is like a long train journey in India. The dust and filth in the train as well as outside, the noises and delays and tasteless food and umpteen other unpleasant things are accepted as normal part of the journey. But the tender coconut that comes when the Warangal sun is boiling your innards is a memorable delight. The sight of the rear end of the train as a bend in the rails is being negotiated may animate the child in you. We have a natural affinity with joyful experiences though such experiences are rather ephemeral. Life becomes bearable because of those small little joys.

Our goals and ideals serve similar functions in life as those small little delights do during the train journey. These goals and ideals make life appear purposeful. They add hope to the depressing realities around. They add charm to the ruggedness of the journey called life.

Moreover, they make us feel that we are the masters of our lives rather than puppets dangling on strings pulled by mysterious forces. They give us the consoling impression that we are the causes rather than effects of what is happening in our lives. They convince us that we possess the freedom as well as ability to forge our future. That we are not just a bundle of scars.

There is something fictional about it all. The scars are more real than the goals. But we need the goals more.

Later Adler modified the phraseology. He replaced 'fictional finalism' with 'guiding self-ideal'. Either way, it means an individual's visualisation of what he/she wants to achieve in life. It gives sense and purpose and direction to life. It gives us the power to choose what we will accept as truth (truth is not as fixed and definite as we are often told by peddlers of

absolute truths), how we will behave and how we will interpret events.

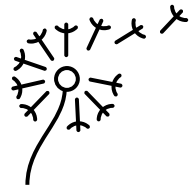
However, our guiding self-ideals can be unrealistic and non-adaptive. It really is fiction, in other words. Psychologically unhealthy people nurture unrealistic and non-adaptive self-ideals. Healthy individuals have realistic and adaptive goals and ideals.

J D Salinger's classical protagonist, Holden Caulfield, is an example of those with unrealistic and non-adaptive self-ideals. Holden is a 16-year-old boy who has a messianic ideal. He wants to protect the innocence of children from the perversions of the adults. He wants an innocent world, in other words. His 9-year-old sister tells him that he is chasing a chimera. His favourite teacher counsels him that it is better to live humbly for ordinary causes than die heroically for a large cause.

Religious fundamentalists and messianic figures abound in our world in spite of all the progress we have made with the help of science and rationality. These are people driven by impossible goals and ideals. Driven by sheer fiction. Just like Holden Caulfield. They are chasing chimeras.

One of the characteristics that separate the sane from the insane is the honest, personable and accurate grasp they have on how realistic, how achievable, their goals are. Are the goals of religious fundamentalists and self-anointed messiahs realistic and achievable?

Fictional finalism is good. We all need guiding ideals and goals. But these goals and ideals should be realistic and achievable. They should not be meteors in the heavens for whose sake we sacrifice our fellow beings.



8. Naïve Realism

“The offence of sedition cannot be invoked to minister to the wounded vanity of the governments,” declared the judge who granted bail to 22-year-old Disha Ravi recently. Disha was arrested on charges of sedition. She was supposedly working with Greta Thunberg to undermine the Indian government! The only thing that she did which provoked the government was to support the enduring farmers’ agitation.

Disha is just one among hundreds of people being victimised in India merely because they have wounded the vanity of the government. The vanity of the present Indian government comes from what psychology and philosophy call naïve realism.

Naïve realism is the belief that one’s view of events is unbiased and correct and when others disagree they must be wrong. Naïve realists assume that those who disagree with them are uninformed, irrational and biased. A whole lot of politicians in the ruling party in India now seem to be naïve realists with vanities wounded by the ghosts of history.

“Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, sedition charges have been deployed as a clear tool of intimidation,” *The Washington Post* [wrote](#) while discussing Disha Ravi’s bail. The *Post* added that “96 percent of sedition cases filed against 405 Indians for criticizing politicians and government officials were registered after 2014, when Modi assumed power.”

The naïve realists of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party have degraded Indian democracy to such an extent that the [latest Freedom House democracy report](#) listed India as a “partly free” country. Indians are not free in Modi’s regime, not even free to express opinions, let alone eat what you like or wear the dress of your choice. The BJP has a simple worldview in which India is the greatest country, Indian pantheon has the only true gods, and Narendra Modi is the saviour of the country and its gods. Anyone who questions that is a traitor. As simple as that. As naïve as that.

We know – or should know – that reality is never so simple as to bestow all truths to any one individual however long and white his beard may be growing. Reality is an intricate complexity. Mysteries inside enigmas, if one may borrow Churchill’s analogy.

Anyone who approaches reality with the notion that his own view is the only right view is fit to be in a lunatic asylum though he may be sitting in the king's throne. For all sane people, perception must be marked by two qualities: openness and awareness.

The moment you blindly believe certain scriptures written centuries ago as the foundation of all truths, you have closed your mind to living truths. How can any awareness enter into a mind that is closed once and for all to new realities, new possibilities, inevitable changes?

Writing about naïve realism decades ago, Bertrand Russell observed, "We think that grass is green, that stones are hard, and that snow is cold. But physics assures us that the greenness of grass, the hardness of stones, and the coldness of snow are not the greenness of grass, the hardness of stones, and the coldness of snow that we know in our own experience, but something very different."

Reality is not what we think it is, in simple words. Reality is not just what we perceive. Truth is multi-dimensional. If you insist on looking through a peephole at a minute fraction of a colossal entity and claim that what you see is the only and entire truth...

well, you need to check your vanity for the number of wounds on it. At least.



9. Just-world Bias

Human beings have infinite ways of deluding themselves. 'Just-world bias' is one of them. It is the belief that we live in a just world which rewards us for our good deeds and punishes for the evil ones. In other words, we believe that there is a moral order in the world or the universe by which our actions merit just consequences. You get what you deserve. What you are reaping is what you sowed. What goes around comes around. Karma. Most religions believe in the just-world concept in one form or another. In religions, a god or some divine entity controls this system. Many people who are not religious believe in a universal force that maintains this moral balance.

The naked truth is that there is no such force or divine entity dishing out justice to us from somewhere out there. The death of an innocent child due to a pandemic alone should be enough to make us realise that the heavens are not a bit as fair as we would wish them to be. We can choose to hoodwink ourselves with beliefs such as punishment for the sins of one's previous birth. The child is paying for the sins of its previous birth. Dharma is religiously

vindictive. Or you may believe that the child is paying for the sins of its parents. “If the fathers eat sour grapes, the children’s teeth are set on edge,” says the Bible.

When the coronavirus started killing thousands of people, many religious leaders ascribed it to God’s way of punishing us for our sins of commission and omission. “Thank God for the coronavirus” was the title of a sermon preached by Omar Ricci at the Islamic Centre of Southern California when the pandemic had started extracting its toll. The coronavirus was Allah’s gift to mankind, according to this religious leader. Many Christian and other religious preachers said the same thing in different words: God is reminding us of our need to repent and mend our ways.

It is very convenient to have a god sitting somewhere up there and serve as the Great Arbiter of human actions. It gives a heavenly bliss to some people to believe that the meltdown of the World Trade Centre was a divine retribution for the American sins.

Whether it is a natural disaster like a pandemic or a manmade evil like a terrorist attack, the just-world bias can justify it easily. The just-world bias is an

acceptance of evil, so to say. The psychology department of the University of Kassel, Germany, conducted a research on the correlation between belief in just world and dishonesty. The research showed a strong link between the belief in just world and antisocial tendencies. It is easy to convert your wicked deeds into holy ones if you can give your deeds a moral sanction coming from a god or religion or something as holy as that. Were the crusaders of the Dark Ages saints or antisocial elements in religious garbs? What about the religious terrorists of today? What about the nationalists of present India?

You can convert your wickedness into holiness just by convincing yourself and a significant number of others that your act is a divine retribution for the wrongs done by any community. The Kassel University research found strong correlation between the just-world bias and religiousness on the one hand, and antisocial tendencies as well as exploitation and victimisation of others, on the other. That is, those who believe in the just-world notion tend to be religious and antisocial and exploitative.

To sum up, the just-world bias is a self-delusion. It gives you the comfort of thinking that the other people deserve the calamities they are suffering. It is also an indirect way of patting yourself on the back that you are better than them and that is why the calamity did not visit you. What's more, it makes you feel that none less than god himself is on your side.



10. The Good Child

“Good children do their homework on time; their writing is neat; they keep their bedroom tidy; they are often a little shy; they want to help their parents; they use their brakes while cycling down a hill.” [*The School of Life: An Emotional Education* by Alain de Botton et al]

The world wants good children. Moulding good children is apparently the only purpose of the very existence of parents and schools. This is one of the gravest injustices done to children.

The excessive need for compliance shown by the good child, the eagerness to please others, and the unquenchable thirst for appreciation are signs of a subdued existence. The good child is a bud that won't bloom. It is a nestling that won't fly, at least not far enough. The good child is a bland breeze that carries no tang.

The good child chooses such compliance maybe out of love for a depressed parent who makes it clear that she couldn't cope with more problems. The good child may be trying to soothe a violent parent. The

good child is being good for somebody else. The good child is being somebody else.

The good child is often a sponge that absorbs a terrible lot of unpleasantness on behalf of parents or others who matter. The goodness is the silence of the cemetery.

The good child is a storehouse of secrets and mysteries. When he grows up he may say lovely things, things that mesmerise huge audiences. His words may have the power to sway the trees and move the mountains. But there will lie a whole raging ocean deep within his being, an ocean whose rage will be visible to none, until one day the buried thoughts and feelings will erupt in God knows what forms.

The rage may not explode in some. They will continue to live like automatons programmed by somebody, doing things mechanically. Even the basic human urge for sex will hesitate to approach them. Purity is one of the integral elements that make up the good child. Sex has its natural and necessary extremes that lie at the other end of the spectrum of goodness, the wrong end. So the good children will disavow their desires and detach

themselves from their bodies. Or perhaps they will “give in to their longings in a furtive, addictive, disproportionate or destructive way that leaves them feeling disgusted and distinctly frightened.” [Alain de Botton et al]

The good children will grow up physically and go to work like others. They will face more problems at work than others. As a child, you could manage to be good by following the rules, not making trouble, and avoiding provocation of any sort. It is impossible to go on doing that in the adult world. The adult world is a world of Brownian movement. Every moment you are knocked by somebody or the other. And usually knocked the wrong way.

“Almost everything interesting, worth doing or important will meet with a degree of opposition,” as the authors cited above put it. Even the best plan of yours will be subverted by somebody in your office. (Don’t be surprised if that ‘somebody’ turns out to be your best friend.) Every noble ambition has to face and overcome disaster and ignominy. The good ‘child’ can’t endure all that. So he will succumb to a mediocre existence. He will try his best to keep other people pleased so that his mediocrity does not become another problem to himself.

Come on, you don't have to be so good.

Come to terms with imps and demons that haunt your psychological innards. Your parents or other people have put them there. They were helpless too. They had their own inner monsters to deal with. Isn't life largely about dealing with demons and monsters – some within us and others out there?

Yes, maturity is nothing short of fixing up a frank and bold relationship with your inner darkness.

You don't have to be so good. You have every right to live your life happily without having to sprinkle rose petals on the paths of the others. What makes you happy may not please the others. Never mind. You be happy. Without having to steal the air from their inflated balloons, of course.

Do you want a genuinely good life for yourself? You deserve it. But it is your choice. If you really want that, you may have to be bad sometimes. Be fruitfully and bravely bad. No great inventor or philosopher was a physically grown 'good child'.

11. Kafka's Prison

The world in Kafka's fiction is a veritable prison in which you are not free though you are allowed the illusion of being free. As the police Inspector tells the protagonist of *The Trial*, "You are under arrest, certainly, but that need not hinder you from going about your business. You won't be hampered in carrying on in the ordinary course of your life."

Carry on in the ordinary course of your life. Eat, sleep, mate, and do some job like all other normal people. That is the ordinary course of life. If you dare to do more than that, the authorities will tell you in no uncertain terms that you are crossing your limits.

What are those limits, however? Kafka does not make it clear. His protagonists fight invisible forces. The so-called authority lies beyond the reach of the ordinary mortals in Kafka's world. In *The Trial*, for example, it is the Law that determines the protagonist's fate. What is the Law, however?

Joseph, the protagonist of *The Trial*, admits his ignorance of the Law to the officials who came to arrest him. He does not even believe that such a

thing exists. Then one of the officials tells the other, “See, Willem, he admits that he doesn’t know the Law and yet he claims that he’s innocent.”

You can’t be innocent unless you know the Law, apparently. But ignorance of the Law is not the crime for which Joseph has been arrested. Moreover, knowing the Law isn’t quite possible either. Towards the end of the novel, a priest who is the prison chaplain of the place tells Joseph the story of a man who wanted “admittance to the Law.” The doorkeeper blocks him saying that his time has not come. The man waits for days for his time to arrive. Days pass into years. The man grows old sitting there waiting for his time for admittance to the Law. His eyesight is weakening now due to age. In the darkness of his failing vision, he can perceive a radiance that streams immortally from the door of the Law. His life is ending, however. As he is dying he asks a final question to the doorkeeper. “Everyone strives to attain the Law. Why is it then that I am the only one who has been waiting here for years to gain admittance?”

The doorkeeper answers, “No one but you could gain admittance through this door since this door was intended only for you. I am now going to shut it.”

Every person has a unique entrance to the Law. But everyone does not get to enter that mysterious Law. Does anyone manage to enter the Law at all? Well, there is no clear answer in Kafka's world. Are we all living in the prison where necessities matter more than truths? "It is not necessary to accept everything as true," the priest counsels Joseph, "one must only accept it as necessary."

Kafka's world is a post-truth world. In post-truth world, truths don't matter; necessities do. Those who can't accept the necessities (created by the authorities) are condemned to imprisonment, if not death. Joseph, in *The Trial*, gets death in the end. He does not know what his crime is even when he is taken by the agents of the authorities to his ultimate end.

The executioners take Joseph out of the town to a bleak, deserted stone quarry. Joseph is stripped half-naked. When he shivers involuntarily, he is given a pat on his back by one of his executioners. The pat notwithstanding, Joseph knows that his end is imminent. Yet he longs for a helping hand. Can help come now? Were there some arguments in his favour that had been overlooked? Of course there must be. That is logic. But logic doesn't help beyond a point.

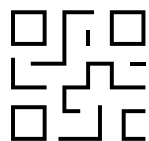
What more could be done, however? Joseph had spent a whole year doing his best to save himself. He could not even discover where the Judge sat, let alone see him. Where was the Court? Joseph was utterly helpless.

One of the executioners holds him by the throat. The other thrusts a knife into his heart and turns it there twice. Joseph's vision flails. He can still see his two executioners watching him die. "Like a dog!" Joseph mutters. The novel ends with this sentence: "It was as if he meant the shame of it to outlive him."

What shame is Kafka speaking about? The shame of the death? Or is it the shame of life itself?

Some of us are on a relentless quest throughout our life. Most of Kafka's characters were on some quest or the other. The ordinary life of eat-sleep-mate-work doesn't satisfy them. Life has to have some meaning beyond those animal acts. What is that meaning? Like the man who died in front of the door to the Law in the priest's story, after waiting for years and years for his chance to enter the door that was meant only for him, the seekers of greater truths than those created by the earthly authorities are condemned to a canine shame in the end! That tragic

state of affairs is Kafka's prison. Are you living in one such prison? Your answer implies the nature of your quest.



12. Humanism: Celebration of Life

One of the best philosophies of life is humanism. It is an attitude to the world that is centred on human experiences, thoughts and hopes. Our rational faculty is the foundation of this philosophy. Our reason can tell us clearly why certain actions are good and others are bad. Our reason can tell us why we should choose the good and avoid the bad and hence can be the solid foundation of our morality. Our moral code does not require other trappings like gods and religions.

Humanism asserts that we have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to our lives. This noble philosophy aims to build a more humane society through an ethic based on human and natural values in the spirit of reason and free enquiry.

The American Humanist Association defines humanism as “a progressive philosophy of life that, without theism or other supernatural beliefs, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfilment that aspire to the greater good.”

It is informed by science, inspired by art, and motivated by compassion.

Every word in the above definition deserves attention. We *can* and we *should* live ethical lives. Religions also tell you the same thing. But religions posit eternal reward or punishment as the ultimate motive which apparently does not convince most believers. We are asked to be good in order to merit heaven and avoid evil in order to escape hell. Or something similar to that. It may be rebirth instead of heaven and hell. Whatever it is, religion's offerings lie somewhere out there, far away in the realms of faith. The world has not become any better a place for all that. Humanism tells us that the benefits of being good and doing good lie here itself. By being good and doing good, we create a better world here itself. Heaven can be here itself; there is no need to wait for death.

Humanism does not accept truths from books merely because they claim to be divine or inspired. Humanism wants reasons. It relies on reason and science for proofs. Not everything can be proved in science labs. Why we should choose good and avoid evil, for example, cannot be proved using test tubes and chemicals. But our reason can tell us clearly why

we should do that. But there are a lot of other situations where science can assist us to separate truth from falsehood.

Art inspires us and teaches the finest lessons of life. Humanism relies heavily on art for the attainment of nobility while most ordinary mortals rely on religions and gods. Human history shows us that gods and religions have not been able to create a humane world so far though they have been with us for millennia now. If we keep on doing the same thing, we will keep getting the same result, as Einstein said. If we continue to place our trust in gods and religions, we will keep getting more crusades, jihads, and other holy wars. Just think of the millions of lives extinguished brutally in the name of gods and creeds. Humanism never snuffs out lives for the sake of entities supposedly living on some other planet or somewhere in the outer space.

Humanism is all about your dignity and liberty. You are worthy of respect just because you are who you are and not because some god created you in his image. You have the freedom to think and act so long as you don't encroach on the freedom of the next person. You have the freedom to create something new using your imagination and other aesthetic

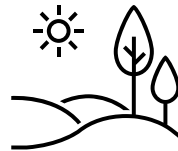
faculties. You have the opportunity to create a better world.

Think rather than feel, humanism tells us. Have well-informed thoughts. That is what can make the world a better place.

Appreciate the arts, literature, music, crafts and other such creative outputs of human beings. They enrich our lives.

Take responsibility for your own life by seeking new knowledge and exploring new options.

Humanism is a quest for more truths and a better world.



13. Quest

“A university student attending lectures on general relativity in the morning, and on quantum mechanics in the afternoon, might be forgiven for concluding that his professors are fools, or that they haven’t talked to each other for at least a century.” Physicist Carlo Rovelli wrote that in his recent book, *Reality is not what it seems*. “In the morning, the world is a *curved* space-time where everything is *continuous*; in the afternoon, the world is a *flat* one where *discrete* quanta of energy leap and interact” [emphasis in original]. Einstein’s physics and quantum mechanics perceive the same reality differently. Yet both hold good in scientific models. Both are true though they are contradictory to each other!

“With every experiment and every test,” Rovelli goes on, “nature continues to say ‘you are right’ to general relativity, and continues to say ‘you are right’ to quantum mechanics as well, despite the seemingly opposite assumptions on which the two theories are founded. It is clear that something still eludes us.”

Science accepts its limits and limitations. Science also knows that there aren't too many ultimate truths. Truth has to be discovered at each turn on the way. And truth can be bizarre sometimes. A thing can be a particle and a wave at the same time! Yes, science does tell us that. You need to know a bit of quantum mechanics to understand that.

The most knowledgeable scientist knows that his knowledge is not ultimate. A lot of things remain elusive, beyond the understanding of science. "This acute awareness of our ignorance is the heart of scientific thinking," Rovelli says. Science is a perpetual quest, an endless search for truth. Einstein can disprove Newton, Heisenberg can disprove Einstein, and the process goes on. Truths are not fixed and sacrosanct in science. Science is open to any given reality, open to understand reality in new ways, open to accept new aspects.

That openness is the basic quality of any seeker of truth. "To learn something," in the words of Rovelli again, "it is necessary to have the courage to accept that what we think we know, including our most rooted convictions, may be wrong, or at least naïve: shadows on the walls of Plato's cave."

There is a fundamental humility in the way science works. Science does not trust anything with the blind hubris that often accompanies religions. Even the greatest of all scientific geniuses can be disproved at any time. The accumulated wisdom of our fathers and grandfathers is not so sacred that they cannot be questioned. “We learn nothing if we think that we already know the essentials, if we assume that they were written in a book or known by the elders of the tribe.” That’s Rovelli again. The scientist asserts boldly that faith in given truths kept people ignorant for centuries. Religious faith, for example, prevented people from learning new truths, from advancing on the way of knowledge.

Science is a quest for truth, a perpetual quest. But it is not only science that can discover truths. The scientific approach is one way of discovering and understanding truths. We can understand truths in other ways too. The Romantic poets of the early 19th century believed that imagination was the best means for understanding truths. Imagination and intuition can help us discover truths. The Christ and the Buddha and the Mahatma did not use scientific methods to arrive at their truths, and their truths

were as profound as, if not more so than, the ones given by quantum mechanics.

The quest has to be sustained. That is what matters. We should keep our hearts and minds open to new truths instead of clinging rigidly to a few pet ones. No one who is open to new truths can be a killer for gods. Every crusader, every militant bhakt, every jihadist, has a heart and a mind that died long ago clinging to pet truths like barnacles clinging to rocks.



14. Intelligence is not enough

Lewis Terman is a psychologist who put a high premium on intelligence. “There is nothing about an individual as important as his IQ, except possibly his morals,” he declared fervidly. He carried out a lifelong research on certain highly gifted children continuously until they grew up into adulthood. His research is the longest-lasting longitudinal study ever conducted.

In 1921, Terman sent a team of fieldworkers to California’s elementary and high schools with the mission of finding out the brightest students. Intelligence tests were conducted on the students suggested by the teachers. The top ten percent of the candidates were given another IQ test. Those who scored above 130 in that second test were administered a third test. Thus Terman selected the most intelligent students of California, no less than 1470 of them.

These students, who came to be known as Termites, were monitored constantly as they grew up. They were tested at regular intervals, the results were analysed, and guidance was given. Their educational

progress, married life, illnesses, psychological health and job records were all followed up meticulously. They were the most precious individuals in California as far as Terman was concerned.

Terman was convinced that the IQ geniuses would produce our great leaders in every field – arts, science, government, education and social welfare. He was delighted whenever his proteges went on to win various competitions.

Finally, after years of study, the records of 730 adult Termites were assessed. The top 20% were true success stories. They became eminent lawyers, physicians, engineers and academics. The middle 60% were just “satisfactory”. The bottom 20% did as well as any Tom, Dick and Harry. They were postal workers, struggling bookkeepers, or something as ordinary as that. A few of them were even jobless. One-third of them had dropped out of college. One-fourth had not gone beyond high school. Yet they had outstanding IQs as children.

Terman’s first premise stood disproved. He realised that intelligence alone was not enough for success in life. Further studies showed that success required many other ingredients like supportive parents,

conducive social environment, and personality traits.

Christopher Langan had an IQ of 195. You may recall that Albert Einstein's IQ was 150. "The smartest man in America." That is how the TV anchor of the show *One versus One Hundred* introduced Langan to the audience in 2008. Langan was the guest at the reality show in which he had to outsmart 100 intelligent adversaries to win up to a million dollars.

Questioned by the host of the show about his high IQ, Langan said, "Actually, I think it (high IQ) could be a hindrance. To have a high IQ, you tend to specialise, think deep thoughts. You avoid trivia."

Langan's high IQ took him to many TV shows and other programmes. One such TV show once hired a neuro-psychologist to give Langan an IQ test, and Langan's score was off the charts – too high to be accurately measured. Langan could read and understand academic books faster than anyone. "He got a perfect score on his SAT, even though he fell asleep at one point during the test," says Malcolm Gladwell in his book, *Outliers*.

What did Christopher Langan, the genius with the highest IQ in the world, become in life? A horse rancher. Yes, that is what he is today. He lives in rural Missouri on a horse farm. “I don’t think there is anyone smarter than me out there,” he told Malcolm Gladwell when they met a few years ago. That sounded boastful but in fact the man was defensive, says Gladwell. “Here ... was a man,” writes Gladwell, “a man with a one-in-a-million mind, and he had yet to have any impact on the world. He wasn’t holding forth at academic conferences. He wasn’t leading a graduate seminar at some prestigious university. He was living on a slightly tumbledown horse farm... sitting on the back porch in jeans and a cutoff T-shirt. He knew how it looked: it was the great paradox of Chris Langan’s genius.”

Langan didn’t know how to navigate the world of ordinary people. His high IQ made him unsuitable for that world. Gladwell says that Langan’s family background didn’t help any bit to make life easy for him. He belonged to a broken family and went through a lot of misery. That matters much however high your IQ is.

No one rides to the cliff of success alone. “Not rock stars, not professional athletes, not software

billionaires, and not even geniuses,” says Gladwell. Some social skills are essential for success anywhere. And some luck too – in the form of family background, opportunities, and so on. There may be exceptions, of course. But the general rule is that intelligence alone is not enough if you want to be a success. The world actually belongs to the mediocre.



15. Outliers

An outlier is an outstanding person. He does not belong to the herd because of certain qualitative characteristics like exceptional intellect or skill in a particular domain. Albert Einstein was an outlier, for example. Leonardo da Vinci, another example. Carl Sagan, yet another.

Outliers stand out of the herd like a tall oak in a forest. Is it some genetic factor that shapes the outlier? Is his exceptional quality inborn? Well, not entirely. The tallest oak has its origin in a quality acorn, no doubt. But there are many other factors that contributed towards its healthy growth like availability of sunlight (no other trees blocked it), deep and rich soil, and not being espied by a lumberjack.

Bill Gates wouldn't have reached where he did unless his parents provided the conducive environment for his growth and development. When they realised that young Bill was getting bored of his school, they took him out and sent him to Lakeside, a private school that catered to the elite families of the place. A year after Bill joined it, the school started a

computer club. It was the year 1968. Most colleges, let alone schools, didn't have computer clubs in those days. Bill Gates was fortunate. He got to do real-time programming as an eighth grader in 1968.

Managing a computer club was a tremendous economic challenge in those days. Bill's school succumbed before the challenge in spite of the efforts by the rich parents to sustain the computer club. Bill was lucky to have a friend in his elite school whose father was one of the founders of Computer Center Corporation (C-Cubed) at the University of Washington. After the school, Bill attended C-Cubed and spent his evenings with computers.

C-Cubed went bankrupt eventually. Bill and his friends succeeded soon enough to latch themselves onto an outfit called ISI (Information Sciences Inc.) which agreed to let them have free computer time in exchange for working on a piece of software that could be used to automate company payrolls. Bill and his friends spent 1575 hours on the ISI mainframe in seven months' time. The computer became Bill's passion and the sure steppingstone to his success.

But was it just luck that led Bill Gates to his success? He was lucky to be born in a wealthy family that could afford him an elite school. He was lucky to get a friend whose father was a founder of C-Cubed. He was lucky to be taken on by ISI.

It wasn't all luck, however. The boy worked for whatever he got. He went out of the normal ways to get his opportunities. 1575 hours in seven months translates into 8 hours a day, 7 hours a week. He did that much work apart from his regular schoolwork.

Malcolm Gladwell, author of the celebrated book titled *Outliers*, propounds what he calls 'the 10,000-hour rule'. If you want to be a maestro in any field, you need to put in about 10,000 hours of hard work before you emerge a winner. Bill Gates did that. The Beatles did that. Every successful person or endeavour put in about 10,000 hours of preparatory labour before they became the stars in their respective domains.

Success requires both: the environment and your hard work. Hard work is your choice. Your environment is a gift, your luck. As Thomas Gray sang long ago, a lot of flowers are born in the desert

where their beauty and fragrance are lost to the desolate air. That is their fate.



16. Paradigm Shift

If we keep doing the same thing, we will keep getting the same result. Albert Einstein is credited with that saying. But Einstein's genius is not required to say something as obvious as that. Yet, in spite of the backing of Einstein's genius, we keep doing same things and keep getting same results. Our petty jealousies and violent spirituality, craze for power and race for wealth, idolisation of a Hitler or a Modi in the name of something as evasive as culture or race – nothing has changed over centuries.

We need a paradigm shift. Desperately so. We have messed up this world of ours terribly. We need to reshape our earth and our heavens. We need a paradigm shift.

One of the most influential philosophers of science of the 20th century, Thomas Kuhn, introduced the concept of paradigm shift. A paradigm, according to his definition, is a collective set of attitudes, values, procedures, techniques, etc that form the generally accepted perspective of a particular discipline at a point of time.

For example, the Ptolemaic system gave us a paradigm of the cosmos with the earth at its centre. That paradigm was very flattering for human beings because the sun, moon, stars, and planets all orbited the earth. The earth was a special planet, in other words. Religions, particularly the powerful Catholic Church, were mighty pleased with that paradigm. It fitted well with the Biblical paradigm of the earth being the chosen place of Yahweh and homo sapiens being the chosen race. [This chosen race narrowed soon to clutch only the Jews many of whom must have wished again and again to be liberated from God's special fondness for them.]

In the first half of the 16th century, the Ptolemaic system gave way to the Copernican one and that was a revolutionary paradigm shift. The earth lost its most favoured status and became one tiny nugget of a planet in a gigantic cosmos which had many other heavenly bodies that were probably far more charming. This paradigm shift meant much to religions, particularly the powerful Catholic Church. The Church's God could have lost His supremacy in the universe if all people accepted Copernicus instead of the Bible as a source of truth. Human beings would become insignificant creatures on a

very minor planet in a gigantic system. Priests would lose job. That didn't happen, however. The Church prohibited the Copernican theory and set in motion the bloodiest attack on truths. Inquisitions came into existence. Thinkers and truth-seekers were killed brutally.

Paradigm shifts are not easy affairs. Especially when gods come into play.

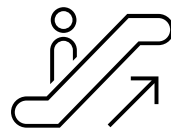
Genuine seekers of truth refuse to be deluded by gods. So we have had a lot of useful paradigm shifts along the way. Aristotelian mechanics gave way to classical mechanics in the 17th century. Later Newton gave way to Einstein. In psychology, cognitive approach superseded the behaviourist approach. In economics, Keynes turned an entire set of pet notions upside down.

Religion is one place where a paradigm shift was most wanted and that did not happen, alas. Our gods continued to demand blood and we killed fellow beings for them. We still do.

Religions claim to redeem souls from perdition but they are the most irredeemable entities. That's a terrible irony. Jesus came to redeem his religion (and presumably all religions) from heartless rubrics

and rituals. But his followers ended up establishing the most heartless religion with a whole range of absurd rubrics and rituals. The Buddha was a bold paradigm shifter before Jesus. He ended up as another blind squatting idol in the hands of his followers. More recently, Mahatma Gandhi tried to elevate the heart above everything else (like vindictive nationalism) and his country today stands diametrically opposed to all that he stood for and, irony of ironies, in the name of the very religion which Gandhi believed in.

We need a paradigm shift desperately today. It is obvious that religions can't bring about that. Even gods failed when they tried to do it by coming amongst us in our own shapes and forms. But we need a shift from our self-centredness to a cosmic outlook. Who will bring about that shift? You.



17. Spirituality

“Man does not live by bread alone,” Jesus said. “He needs butter too,” the wit added. But even with butter on it, bread will not satisfy the human being for long. His soul hankers after something, something that is not quite of this world. That hankering is what makes the human beings spiritual.

It is difficult to speak about the soul or the spirit because science has not been able to identify that part of the human being. The soul is not the mind. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts especially when we come to living organisms and all the more so in the case of human beings. Man is not just the body and the mind put together. There is something more to the person than the body-mind sum. That ‘more’ is the soul or the spirit.

It is the soul that makes a person a spiritual being. It is the soul that makes us feel that we are incomplete somehow and consequently puts us on a quest for completion. That quest for completion is what spirituality is essentially about.

To complete ourselves, we need something from out there. Some people find that something in God, some in religion, many in art and literature, quite a few in unique personal commitments.

It is a common misunderstanding that one needs religion in order to be spiritual. One of the most spiritual characters in fiction is arguably Dr Bernard Rieux in Camus's novel, *The Plague*.

Dr Rieux does not believe in religion and God. When the plague breaks out in Oran and people start deserting the quarantined city, Dr Rieux chooses to stay back and fight the plague with all his talent and strength. He does not see himself as a hero. He sees it as his duty to combat disease and restore health. He is a "true healer" in the words of a philosophical chronicler in the novel. He knows that disease is one of the evils that plague mankind and it should be combatted. All evils should be combatted. The internalisation of that superior consciousness is man's real spirituality.

Spirituality is not about suffering for a god, not dying or killing for a god. Spirituality is not uttering prayers in temples or churches. It is not even going on pilgrimages or donating to charity. Prayers,

pilgrimages and charity may help one to become spiritual. But spirituality is not those things. Spirituality is a realisation of our oneness with the cosmic reality whose evils we should mitigate as best as we can. The spiritual person knows that the evils of the reality out there are part of himself because he is a part of that reality. The same goes for goodness too. And so it become the duty of any spiritual person to increase the goodness and reduce the evil in the world around him.

Man-made entities like religion, nation/nationalism, race, class (socialism's working class, for example), and political party can never lead one to genuine spirituality because the moment you make any of these entities absolute you are on the way to totalitarian domination by some people over other people.

Spirituality has nothing to do with domination or subordination. Spirituality is about liberation. It liberates you from the clutches of narrow considerations that divide creatures into we-and-them or high-and-low or whatever. Spirituality enables you to perceive the sanctity where it does exist. Spirituality enables you to enhance that sanctity, to make the world a better place.



18. Tatvamasi

One of the most profound philosophies of life is Advaita Vedanta. The very word 'advaita' which literally means 'not two' summarises the entire philosophy succinctly. The Atman (self) and Brahman (God) are *not two* distinct entities; they are one and the same. *Aham Brahmasmi*, as the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad puts it: I am Brahman. The Chandogya Upanishad repeats the idea many times using the phrase "Tatvamasi" which means 'You are that'. You are God.

The distinction between Brahman and Atman, God and man, peters out as we move from the early Upanishads towards the later ones. As S Radhakrishnan (academic, professor, philosopher, and India's second President) puts it in his scholarly introduction to the major Upanishads, "God is not merely the transcendent numinous other, but is also the universal spirit which is the basis of human personality and its ever-renewing vitalising power."

God is not an entity lying somewhere in the outer space tinkering with the earth and its creatures or even with the cosmos itself. God is part of you, you

are part of God. Better still, God is you and you are God. If you take a drop of water out of the ocean, the drop is not the ocean and yet it is in a way. Throw that drop back into the ocean and it becomes an undistinguishable part of the ocean. You and God are similar to that drop and the ocean. Tatvamasi.

What a great philosophy!

This philosophy endows us with divinity. We are divine, no less. This divinity bestows upon us certain responsibilities too. We should behave like gods. We should strive to live like gods. We should become God. It is we who make up the reality of Brahman. Our perfection is God's perfection. And our imperfection too belongs to the same God. Tatvamasi.

Liberation or salvation lies in this knowledge, according to Advaita Vedanta. You don't need to wait for death to attain moksha. Liberation can be achieved while living here on the earth by attaining that high level of consciousness which rises above the illusions of all dualities.

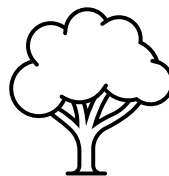
One of the biggest mistakes made by most human beings is to perceive God as a person with certain human characteristics at their best. Long ago

Aristotle said that we create our gods in our own images. More than 23 centuries later, we still keep creating gods in our own images. We still keep building enormous temples (churches / mosques / whatever) for these gods whom we create.

Mahatma Gandhi refused to believe in man-made gods. "I have no knowledge that the Krishna of Mahabharata ever lived," Gandhi wrote in *Young India* (Jan 1, 1925). "My Krishna has nothing to do with any historical person." He went on to assert unambiguously, "I believe in Krishna of my imagination as a perfect incarnation, spotless in every sense of the word, the inspirer of the Gita." Gandhi could not believe that the Krishna of the Mahabharata could actually be an incarnation of God because of the many immoral things perpetrated by him to win the war. Krishna of the Mahabharata was yet another creation of fertile human imagination.

Gandhi's favourite god was Rama. Yet the Rama Gandhi worshipped was not the Rama of Ramayana. "My Rama," said Gandhi, "the Rama of my prayers is not the historical Rama, the son of Dasharatha, the King of Ayodhya. He is the eternal, the unborn, the one without a second..." (*Harijan*: April 28, 1946)

Gandhi's God was a metaphysical consciousness, perhaps the Brahman of Advaita. We can see the philosophy of Tatvamasi in complete practice in Gandhi's life. In fact, most saints irrespective of their religions believed in that sacred oneness of all reality.



19. Will, the Tyrant

Philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer described the human will as a “the strong blind man who carries on his shoulder the lame man who can see.” The lame man with vision is the intellect.

The intellect is conscious and hence will take sensible decisions. But beneath that sensible faculty lies the real driving force of human action: the will, which may be conscious or unconscious. Schopenhauer spoke of the will as ‘the vital force’, ‘striving’, ‘spontaneous activity’, and ‘desire’. It is the will that drives us onward in life. Most of the things that we do are driven by the will. We may like to think that our intellect is leading us on. Schopenhauer says that the intellect acts only like a guide who leads his master. Will is the master.

That is why we do a lot of stupid things. The will does not have the vision to see the whole reality. It goes by instincts and desires, partial perceptions and fractional understanding. The philosopher says that we want a thing not because we have reasons for wanting it. We find reasons because we want the

thing. The intellect comes to serve the master's needs.

Desires drive us in simpler words. And our desires are endless. Moreover, quite many of them are no good to anyone. So we create philosophies and theologies to give charming facades to the desires. The intellect is happy to serve again.

Nobody is convinced by logic, however. That is why philosophies and theologies abound, they sound great too, and yet they remain as effete as evanescent butterflies. To convince a person of anything, you must appeal to his self-interest, his desires – his will, in short.

Why does religion with all its dramatics and rituals appeal to human beings though most of the drama and the rituals are absurd even by the faintest of logic? Why does even a tinge of power sway people? Why does wealth enchant people?

People don't make much use of their intellect. Character lies in the will, says Schopenhauer. Not in the intellect. Character is the continuity of one's sense of purpose and one's attitudes. Purpose and attitude belong to the will, not the intellect. Just reflect for a moment: what helped Mahatma Gandhi

to win his struggle against the British? Was it his intellect or his will? What do we mean by Gandhi's character: his intellect which created thousands of pages of thought-provoking writing or his sheer grit and will?

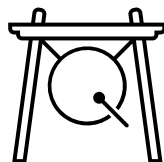
“Brilliant qualities of mind win admiration, but never affection,” says the philosopher. We admire geniuses for their intellectual prowess. But we love people for their character. The will needn't be a monster, in other words. A good will is profounder and may be even more reliable than a clear mind.

Schopenhauer points out that all religions (without any exception) promise rewards for excellences of the heart (will), but none for the excellences of the head (intellect). The will plays such a significant role in human life. The will can be a tyrant. And often it is a terrible one. Religions try to keep that tyrant under control.

Without some controls, the will is sure to be a tyrant. The will is restless in both the meanings: it does not rest and it is never at ease. It is always on one quest or another. The intellect gets tired and needs rest. But the will never rests, not even when you are asleep.

Even the animals and plants are driven by will. Throw a seed somewhere and watch it grow fighting against all odds. Have you ever watched an animal's struggle to stay alive even when there is no trace of hope left? They are all driven by will. The world is will, Schopenhauer asserts. That is one reason why there is so much evil in it. The will is blind, remember.

So if we wish to reduce the evil in the world, we need to control the will and cultivate the intellect. That is Schopenhauer's solution. The ordinary person is mostly will and little knowledge while the genius is mostly knowledge and little will, the philosopher says. As long as this condition prevails, there won't be lasting happiness or peace.



20. Violence

Violence is the choice of the incompetent. We were not born with fangs and claws like animals which need to resort to violence even for their food. We are endowed with a higher-level consciousness, a mind that can think rationally and find practical and amicable solutions to problems. We are not meant to be violent by our very physical structure and nature. Yet many of us choose to remain at the level of animals by resorting to violence.

Human evolution seems to have been one-sided; the brain evolved while the heart remained the ape's. Our intellectual faculties went on acquiring more and more finesse enabling us to probe the microcosmic world of subatomic particles and the mystifying infinity of the cosmos. We have created technology that can put the old gods to shame. We will achieve a lot more in the days ahead. Our brains will ensure that.

But what about our hearts? We are still primitive enough to hunt down other people just because they worship other gods, have different cultures, or are darker-skinned than us. A casual look at the 20th

century alone will reveal indubitably the monstrosity of our hearts.

The eradication of the non-Serbs by the Bosnian Serbs, the Ottoman slaughter of the Armenians, the Nazi Holocaust, Pol Pot's genocide in Cambodia, Saddam Hussein's destruction of the Kurds, the Rwandan Hutus' extermination of the Tutsi minority... Well, there are more. Every continent on the earth had it. Violence. Worse than animals. The victims were from a large spectrum of race and religion – Asian, African, Caucasian, Christian, Jewish, Buddhists, Muslims... Add to all those the two world wars.

Would any of those animals whom we call brutes indulge in such massive acts of violence?

We are worse than animals. Our hearts did not evolve at all. They still remain primitive and savage. If the animals could think half as much as we can, they would hang their heads in shame looking at our deeds.

The last chapter (Afterword) of Harari's bestselling book, *Sapiens*, is titled 'The Animal that Became a God'. 70,000 years ago our earliest ancestors appeared on this planet as remarkably insignificant

animals. 70,000 years is a brief period in the life of a planet that has been here for around 4,000,000,000 years. But in that brief period, that insignificant little descendant of the ape transformed itself into “the master of the entire planet and the terror of the ecosystem,” in the words of Harari. The author goes on to say that “Today it stands on the verge of becoming a god... (with) the divine abilities of creation and destruction”.

More destruction than creation, in fact. That is the contribution of the species that prides itself on its intelligence, ideology, spirituality, mysticism, and what not. Harari calls us “irresponsible gods who don’t know what they want”. Not knowing what we want, we went around wreaking violence on almost everything and everybody. We massacred and plundered. We raped both our women and our planet. We sent rockets and satellites penetrating the virginity of the outer space too. We did things that no other animal on the planet would ever do.

When will this violence stop?



21. Yale-New Haven Hospital's Monkeys

Are animals as stupid as human beings? Will they indulge in trading if trained? Will a dog exchange a bone with another dog for some favour like sex? Keith Chen, a professor of behavioural economics, wanted to know. So he conducted an experiment which came to be known as the Yale-New Haven Hospital's monkey experiment. He was shocked by the results. And the hospital had to ask him to leave the monkeys alone.

Chen conducted his research on a group of monkeys. His choice was the capuchin, which is a cute, little, brown monkey with a small brain that is highly focused on food and sex. (Not very unlike many human beings, you are tempted to think.)

Chen, along with Venkat Lakshminarayanan, worked with seven capuchins at a lab set up by psychologist Laurie Santos at Yale-New Haven Hospital. The monkeys lived together in a large cage. At one end of the cage was a smaller cage which was

the testing chamber, where one monkey at a time would enter to take part in experiments.

First, Chen and his colleagues taught the monkeys to use money. They gave them silver coins which they could use for buying food. Give the coin back to the researcher and the monkey gets the goodies. The monkeys learnt to buy the food of their choice by giving the coins to the particular researcher holding their choice food.

Then Chen experimented with price variation. How would the monkeys behave if he raised or lowered the prices of food items? To Chen's surprise, the monkeys behaved quite like human beings. When the price of a particular food rose the monkeys bought less of it and when the price fell they bought more. The monkeys were rational enough.

What about their irrationality? To test that, Chen set up two gambling games. Coin toss was the gamble. Head or tail? A very common human gamble. The monkey was shown a grape first. Depending on the coin flip, the monkey would get that grape or a bonus one as well. In the second game, the capuchins were shown two grapes and if the coin flip went against him one grape would be taken away.

In the first game, a bonus is won. In the second, something is lost. Actually there is no difference in the final outcome. In the both the gambles, the final average number of grapes won by each monkey would be more or less the same. Yet we all have a natural aversion to loss and an equally natural preference for gain. What about the monkeys? Yes, they behaved just like us again. The monkeys abandoned the two-grape gamble and gathered around the one-grape researcher. The capuchins behaved as if the pain from losing a grape was greater than the pleasure from gaining one. That is quite irrational if you understand that there is no real gain or loss in the game. Yet 'loss aversion' is a strong economic behaviour of human beings. And of monkeys too!

Similar experiments were actually carried out with men before Chen came to the conclusion. He studied the behaviour of intra-day traders at stock markets and concluded that the data generated by the capuchin monkeys "make them statistically indistinguishable from most stock-market investors."

The biggest surprise for Chen came soon enough. One morning the alpha male of the group did

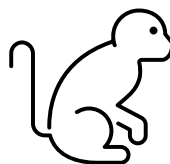
something unique. He scurried into the testing chamber as he had done many times, but on this day, instead of taking his 12 coins and going to buy food, he flung his coins into the main cage and ran after them. All the capuchins rushed to grab the coins. Each one, behaving just like normal humans, grabbed what he or she could. Chen and his colleagues were unsuccessful in their attempts to retrieve the coins from the monkeys. They had to give food in return for the coins the capuchins had grabbed illegally. The monkeys learnt that crime pays.

What shocked Chen, however, was not this. He watched one male capuchin going to a female with the coin he had grabbed. He offered the coin to her which she accepted and then immediately he had sex with her. What Chen originally construed as altruism was in fact “the first instance of monkey prostitution in the recorded history of science.” [The quote is from *Super Freakonomics* by Steven D Levitt & Stephen J Dubner which is the source of this entire post.]

As soon as the copulation was over, the female monkey which had received the illegal coin went to Chen to buy grapes with it.

The hospital to which the capuchins belonged called a halt to the experiments. They did not want to irreparably damage the social structure of the capuchins.

The social structures are artificial constructs and they inescapably affect our behaviour patterns. Just imagine, for the sake of momentary delight, a social system in which people supported one another with understanding and empathy. Wealth wouldn't be a major value there. Greed wouldn't be a dominating vice. Selfishness and jealousy would be suppressed since they would make you look like hideous gargoyles on a majestic edifice. Not practical, you would say. Why? Because we have already been thoroughly corrupted by our existing social constructs with their warped notions.



22. Utopia

A utopia is an ideal place and who does not want to live in an ideal place? We create paradises and heavens in our myths and religious beliefs without ever giving serious consideration to the possibility of creating a utopia here with the only life we possibly have.

How can we create a utopia?

First of all, we should admit that people have different worldviews. Each individual has her own notions about what is right and wrong, good and bad, God and life, and so on. A utopia should accept that diversity not merely with an attitude of facile tolerance but with profound understanding.

Truth is nobody's prerogative. There is no individual, state or religion that can claim the possession of absolute truths. What is truth for one person may be a joke for another. Hence a utopia should never aim at imposing on its citizens a single truth in the form of religion or culture or anything at all. Instead a utopia should give freedom to its citizens to explore truth in their own ways. A utopia

should provide all the necessary infrastructure required for such explorations. Every citizen in a utopia should be empowered to make personal enquiries, pursuits and explorations which in turn should ideally add to the welfare of other citizens.

All reasonable people want to live in a society in which they can cooperate with their fellow citizens on mutually acceptable terms and conditions. We all want to grow into greater joy and prosperity. Reason tells us that it is better to grow together as a community rather than as individuals. Individualism will trigger rivalry, jealousy, and other vices making joy impossible. We should grow together. That is the only practical way of achieving prosperity with joy.

The state has a great role to play in a utopia even though the citizens are reasonable and responsible. The state should ensure that every citizen enjoys and freedom and equality. The state should ensure that the society is a fair system of cooperation. American political philosopher, John Rawls, regarded these three – freedom, equality and fairness – as the pillars of any utopia. He also argued, among a lot many other things, that the state should ensure that the citizens make effective use of their freedoms.

Now, is this practical? Well, you and I know that it is not impossible to practise these simple principles. But it doesn't work, however? Why? The human nature is such. We are self-centred. Utopias can't be built on swelling egos.

Hence we make certain compromises and live on in parodies of utopias. We proclaim that ours is the best civilisation, ours are the ideal gods, ours is the most sacred language, and so on. We pretend to be custodians of an ancient and divine heritage. We pretend to be whatever we are not but would like to be. We live in dystopia and claim it to be utopia.

There are noble people, however. All over the world. That is why the world is still going on without destroying itself. Liberal and reasonable people stand ready to pacify bullies and warmongers, defend core human rights, and to help struggling people to move on in spite of their governments and the henchmen of the governments. They live in their own utopias.



23. Xenophanes's God

If cattle and lions could paint, they would depict gods in their own images. And worship them too, of course. Xenophanes, the Greek philosopher, said that long, long ago. We create our gods in our own images. Xenophanes was disturbed by the behaviour of many of the gods in his religion. These gods had too many conspicuous weaknesses and vices. They were lascivious, jealous, scheming and cruel. They behaved just like the men who created them. Just like the mediocre Greek men and women.

Xenophanes, being a wide traveller, was aware of other cultures and their gods. In contrast with those gods, Xenophanes thought that his own gods were silly and childish. And very Greek to boot. Soon he observed that all the gods he knew were very similar to their creators. The gods of the Ethiopians were black and flat-nosed. The Thracian gods had blue eyes and red hair.

Xenophanes longed to replace the entire Greek pantheon with one God. He imagined a God without human shape and gender. Why would a God have a metabolic system and excretory organs? Why the

penis or the vagina? Xenophanes thought of God as a mind that perceives. A consciousness. A dignified one at that. Not a lecher like Zeus, for example. Not a vindictive flame like Hera. But a noble consciousness that had no desires or wants.

Xenophanes marked the beginning of a tradition of questioning popular beliefs. That was 26 centuries ago. Xenophanes lived approximately from 570 to 475 BCE. Mankind came a long way from those days. We moved by leaps and bounds from the perverted darkness of religions to the glaring brilliance of science and technology. From the blatant narcissism of theology to the disarming modesty of Enlightenment. And in the recent past we liberated mankind from its self-obsessions and put it in a sacred pursuit of eco-systems and the environment and heavenly bodies.

Yet some of us – too many of us, perhaps – still cling to the ancient idols for various reasons. Dominant among the motives is politics, apparently – nothing to do with religion really. Let us consider just one example. Sabarimala.

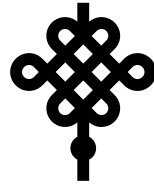
Sabarimala is a Hindu temple in Kerala whose presiding deity is Ayyappan who is a celibate. Being

a celibate (and very human-like), Ayyappan presumably does not like young women who may be potential threats to his chastity. A group of five women lawyers filed a petition in 2006 in the Kerala High Court challenging the same Court's earlier defence of the tradition. Ten years later the case moved to the Supreme Court of India and in 2018 the apex court judged against gender discrimination and allowed entry of women in Sabarimala temple. This was followed by massive protests in Kerala against the verdict. The BJP with the Congress in tandem opposed the Court's verdict and sought to perpetuate gender discrimination in the name of tradition. The Supreme Court accepted a review petition and a larger bench is studying the case further.

There is nothing to study. The case is obviously political rather than religious. Women of all age groups were actually entering the temple before this controversy started. In the first five days of every month, young mothers used to enter the temple for a religious ritual called 'rice-feeding' of the child. The Kerala High Court accepted this as a fact and evidence. The high priest (*tantri*) of the temple admitted that film shootings used to take place in the temple premises and female actresses not only

entered the restricted areas but also danced there for the films.

Kerala is a state that walked ahead of most other people when it comes to breaking traditions. Many evils practised in the name of traditions like caste system and child marriage were all eradicated from the state long ago because of a radical iconoclasm that runs naturally in Malayali veins. Yet what is happening now with Ayyappan? Why is Kerala walking backward towards the darkness which Xenophanes questioned 26 centuries ago?



24. Zorba's Secret

Alexis Zorba is the 65-year-old protagonist of Nikos Kazantzakis's celebrated novel, *Zorba the Greek*. Zorba is the happiest person in the entire world of that novel. Age does not wither him and routine does not stale his infinite charm. What is the secret of his happiness?

Zorba lives in the present. He belongs to the here and now. The young narrator of the novel, who is an intellectual trying to discover the meaning of life using books and contemplation, feels as he listens to Zorba that the world is recovering its pristine freshness. "All the dulled daily things regained the brightness they had in the beginning," the narrator says. Each day is a new day for Zorba, a new opportunity to start life afresh. Every morning the earth looks new to him. He sees everything as if for the first time. He does not really see it, he creates it.

In the words of the narrator, "The universe for Zorba, as for the first men on earth, was a weighty, intense vision; the stars glided over him, the sea broke against his temples. He lived the earth, the

water, the animals and God, without the distorting intervention of reason.”

Logic and reason won't bring you much happiness. They may bring you intellectual satisfaction. They may give you answers that satisfy your brain. But happiness is a matter of the heart. Unless you learn to see reality with your heart, you will never be really happy. The most essential truths are not revealed to reason.

Zorba sees with his heart. He is annoyed with the narrator who wants to *understand* everything. “You understand, and that’s why you’ll never have any peace,” Zorba scolds the narrator who is actually his boss. “If you didn’t understand, you’d be happy!” To arrive at a consciousness level that does not seek to understand everything, you need a touch of folly.

Even spirituality will not bring you happiness unless you have that quintessential folly within. Every person has his folly. But you need to admit your folly. You need to surrender to it. You will hardly find happy people in monasteries because amidst all the austerity and nobility there the soul is lost. The soul belongs on the side of your personal folly.

Zorba does not believe in God. Faith is complicated, he says. If you believe in God, you will have to believe in devils and so on. Yet he knows that both God and the devil are within us. Zorba gives the example of a monk he knew. Father Lavrentio believed that he had a devil inside him. He gave the devil a name too: Hodja. “Hodja wants to eat meat on Good Friday!” Lavrentio would cry beating his head on the church wall. “Hodja wants to sleep with a woman. Hodja wants to kill the Abbot. It’s Hodja, Hodja, it isn’t me!” Father Lavrentio would weep banging his head on the stone.

“I’ve a kind of devil inside me, too, boss,” Zorba says. “I call him Zorba.”

Accept the devil within ourselves. There is no escape from it. Accept it. Folly is needed for that too.

Zorba’s secret is the awareness of his personal folly. He doesn’t need to intellectualise anything. He understands everything with his heart. He lives life passionately. Life is a passion to be experienced, not a riddle to be solved.

Not everyone can be like him, of course. People are different. The narrator of the novel divides people into three types. There are those who eat, drink,

make love, and grow rich. They live their own lives. Then there are people who make it their aim not to live their own lives but to concern themselves with the lives of other people. They think they possess the real truths and want to enlighten others. Finally there are those who aim at living the life of the entire universe. They are the mystics trying to turn all matter into spirit.

Zorba is not interested in that classification. He cuts it short saying that one should not hurt other people's heart, that's all. If there is a God, that God resides in the heart. All the mountains and oceans and deserts may not be enough to contain God. But your little heart can hold him, boss. Take care of what you do to people's hearts. The rest doesn't matter.

That is Zorba's secret. Enjoy your life to the fullest. Eat, drink, make merry. Have a passion and live it. But don't mess with other people's hearts. This isn't hard to do. Just try it.



About the Author

Tomichan Matheikal is a learner and a teacher, reader and writer, blogger and author. He has published a number of books. *English Poetry* (literary criticism, 2001) was his first publication in book form and a novel *Black Hole* (2021) is the latest. Both are available at Amazon India. *Autumn Shadows* (2019) is his memoir which reflects his candidness as well as his waywardness. His short stories were published in three anthologies. He blogs regularly at matheikal.blogspot.com.