

Your Multiplicity



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When you say you are not sure what you think about something, you are revealing that the nearly universal but mistaken assumption that you are a singular person with a singular set of thoughts and feelings. In fact, your singular identity is a persistent illusion that arises at the very tip of an ancient pyramid of diverse neural activity. Much of your cognitive machinery is dedicated to selecting among alternatives, each of which must be represented more or less distinctly somewhere in your brain before it can become a candidate for selection. Indeed, there must be some neural mechanism that actively *advocates* each

possibility. These are the voices within you. Taken together they constitute your thinking. You are not sure what you think about something because you harbor every sort of thought about it simultaneously. You both love *and* hate your partner, your family, your friends and your career. Your task is to decide whether to stay or move on, and how. Reason and logic can be helpful here, but you should not expect them to relieve you of the ultimate decisions. You *do* have a singular literal voice, however; the one that comes out of your mouth. You can use it in conversation to explore, rationalize and decide in a more systematic way than is possible inside your solitary head. In conversation, reason and logic can play a larger role. Conversation is the exclusive vehicle of personal counseling and psychotherapy.

Like creative brainstorming in science, engineering and the arts, the best results can always be harvested from the richest field of possibilities and impossibilities. Ambivalence and multiplicity are good things, and even essential to a point. Creativity also requires a reliable executive mechanism for responsible decision making and effective action when the proper time comes. This is a manageable process and it can be very productive. Trust me. Call me.

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Cutting Loose



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As Gautama pointed out 2500 years ago, entanglements are everywhere in life. A bunch of them come with you out of the womb and as you go along you get entangled with ever more complex relationships, identities, groups, organizations, cultures, activities, habits and ideas. Some of these entanglements are necessary and some are not. Some of them are healthy and some are problematic. Sometimes they just fall away, sometimes they are torn away and sometimes it is necessary to cut yourself loose.

Like a boat that has become entangled, with ropes, to a pirate ship or a dock in rough weather, you have to cut that whole package loose and move to a better location. Maybe you need to leave that job or relationship. Maybe you need to move away from this place and change everything. Maybe you need to sail away to parts unknown for a fresh start. Or maybe you just need a new perspective on your circumstances without changing anything. Maybe you need to cut loose from your attachments rather than from the objects of those attachments. Maybe you need to change your perspective or your attitude. Maybe you just need to relax and stop struggling. There are certain types of knots, known to seamen and wise men, that do not yield to force, but which release spontaneously when relaxed.

Then there is always the question of your destination once you have cut loose. There are always new entanglements waiting to become entangled with the ones you carry with you. I think enlightenment is cutting loose from attachments that entangle you, so that you can choose attachments that nurture you. Detachment provides the freedom to refine your perception, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness and concentration. Gautama was wise. Trust me. Call me.

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Epigenetic Transmission



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People often think they have inherited their anxiety or depression from their parents because everybody in the family seems to have had it for generations. While there are some rare genetic conditions that cause or promote anxiety or depression at the physiological level, most of the time the older generations have actually *trained* their descendants to be anxious or depressed. The generational transmission of most psychological conditions may go along with the genome, but is not actually in it. This is called epigenetic transmission.

Human babies are born with only about a quarter of their adult brain and their intellectual capacity is limited to basic survival functions. They come equipped with a full range of emotional responses but they have no means of determining which emotions they should feel at any particular moment, unless they are hungry or uncomfortable. Newborns can, however, make eye contact with their caregivers, read the expressions on their faces, and mirror those emotions themselves. To a large extent babies feel what their parents feel. This is why postpartum depression and anxiety are so problematic. An anxious or depressed parent is training their child to be anxious or depressed. The range of situations children can feel some way about expands as they get older. Parents with generalized anxiety or chronic depression are constantly training their children to perceive the world as a dangerous or hopeless place. This is usually obvious when a client tells me their life story.

The good news is that epigenetic transmission of anxiety or depression is just behavioral conditioning and is therefore reversible by means of generalized counter-conditioning and psychotherapy, once it is properly understood. It is not necessary or helpful to work through every single trigger or issue that seems to be the problem. Trust me. Call me.

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Forever In Your Life



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Suppose that when you die you are neither obliterated nor transported to an afterlife, but rather are informed that you will continue your experience eternally within the confines of the life that you have just finished living. Like a ping-pong ball that is trapped between two opposing paddles or the proverbial drunk who is trapped between two trees, you will live out eternity in the moments of your life exactly as those moments existed the first time around. You will be able to travel at will between your birth and your death as though this territory was your own temporal real estate, and

you can spend as much time as you choose anywhere within it. Like I said though, this is forever so get used to it.

You are informed that this eternal fate will be made bearable or blissful by your ability to reinterpret any of your moments an unlimited number of times as you pass repeatedly through them; and also by your ability to forget whatever you choose. In the long run, your first kiss may be eminently forgettable and your prison might turn out to be your ashram. Whatever you choose, except that you have to work with each moment as it actually occurred.

This may or may not be what is actually going on here, but it is productive to suppose so because it recognizes the extraordinary value of each future moment that your life has remaining to run. You do not need a diagnosis or even a complaint to justify calling me about upgrading your remaining temporal real estate, or in order to improve it in any number of independent ways. If you knew that you were in your life forever you might take better care of it! Trust me. Call me.

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You Are Here



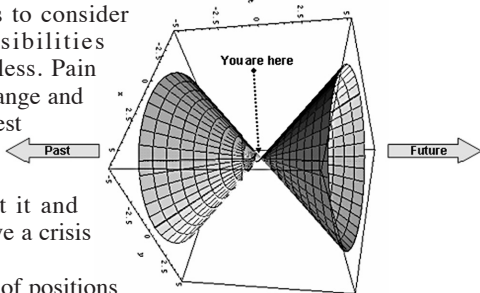
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You could drop everything right now and go to Brazil to make your living in the fish markets of Rio and learn to play the bongo drums. You wouldn't have to tell anyone you were leaving or have anything to do with your current life ever again. You can just begin to imagine the range of experiences that you might have over the rest of your life if you did such a thing. It is not likely that you will choose to do this, but you could. I sometimes encourage my clients to consider such possibilities

when they are depressed and hopeless. Pain and distress can be productive of change and it is a good idea to examine the broadest possible range of alternatives before committing to a new path. Crisis is opportunity, but be smart about it and remember that you don't have to have a crisis in order to seize the day.

A light cone represents the range of positions in space that a photon can reach in a given time, starting from an arbitrary origin. Physicists call this a world line, and your life is like that. It sometimes feels like you have no options, but you always do. You *could* drop everything right now to earn your living in the fish markets of Rio and learn to play the bongo drums. If you are stuck, that is a choice you are making and you can choose otherwise. If you are in distress, then this realization should make you feel better immediately. Trust me. Call me.



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Retirement



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For my present purpose retirement begins at the point where, without further earned income, your best projection of your net worth at the time of your death is zero. Beyond this point you should regard everything you do as voluntary, whether you continue working in the same profession or not. The world is vast and wide and there is no possibility of scratching the surface of its opportunity in a lifetime, yet many people fail to take advantage of their freedom when they can. Sometimes this is due to insecurity, pointless greed or lack of imagination,

but the most common obstacle to retirement and its proper exploitation is *productivity anxiety*. Productive societies like ours succeed by conditioning their citizens to work hard and to feel lazy and worthless if they do not. The adaptive value of productivity anxiety is clear. Mother Nature likes to keep us on our toes and she is prepared to motivate us with the stick.

Many people are haunted by the suspicion they may not be sufficiently productive or engaged, especially when they are contemplating or embarking on retirement. Previously, they could defend their productivity and engagement simply by stating their profession or course of study. Some people feel the need for an equivalent justification of their time in retirement, when you should not have to justify yourself. If you sit in the lotus posture for seven years of silence and then achieve enlightenment, have you been idle most of that time? If you engage in interesting capers of no particular significance for the rest of your life you should not feel guilty about that. What are you doing with your time and what are you going to do with it in the future? Trust me. Call me.

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Herding Cats



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Imagine your brain as a vast range of convoluted cortical hills stretching into the distance before you, upon which a multitude of intelligent cats wander aimlessly, thinking their individual feline thoughts, each seeking some higher purpose. Note the random patterns in which the cats freely roam. The hills represent your ideas, your desires and your intentions. The activity of the cats on each of these hills is your brain, thinking about those things.

As you survey your cognitive kingdom from the high vantage point of your prefrontal cortex, you cast the bright spotlight of your attention on one thematic hill after another, according to your evolving interest and intention. The cats are attracted to the spotlight and their aimless wanderings are drawn into patterns that are increasingly focused on the objects of your attention. They continue to think about those things on your behalf, for a while, even after you have turned your attention elsewhere, drifted into a daydream, turned on the television or fallen asleep.

If you are thinking systematically, and if you reanimate each thematic cat hill periodically with provocative new thoughts and your attention, I think you can maintain about 5 parallel thought processes around the clock without particular stress or strain. Few people habitually think this way, although I recommend it for you in your particular situation. This description is not entirely fanciful. Neurons fire in groups and that is how you think. Trust me. Call me.

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Ketamine

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Psychotherapy usually boils down to questions of identity and attachment. Who we think we are and how we want the world to be seem like absolute necessities, no matter how sophisticated our philosophy or psychological insight. When they are out of alignment we often become anxious, depressed or otherwise unhappy. A few hours of structured conversation and analysis are usually sufficient to identify the problematic ideas and the perspectives that make them problematic. That's the easy part. Changing perspectives and attachments that

present to us as intuition can be difficult and time consuming. The usual methods of psychotherapy amount to a gradual reconditioning of problematic thoughts and perspectives by means of prolonged examination from many angles. This work can be painstaking and lengthy because we are swimming upstream *against* our intuition.

Suddenly, a treatment modality that has been loitering on the fringes of psychotherapy for decades has burst into the mainstream in the form of ketamine therapy. Ketamine has been widely used as an anesthetic for over 50 years and is recognized as safe and effective in a wide range of medical applications. In much lower doses, ketamine has psychedelic properties that induce a state of mental dissociation in which your sense of identity is detached from the intuitive thoughts and perspectives that normally seem so much a part of you. In this state it is often possible to directly “see” these thoughts and perspectives as distinct from your self, and to move away from them intentionally. Ketamine offers great potential for rapid psychotherapy in many cases and I am collaborating with the medical professionals who are now offering ketamine treatment in Santa Fe. Trust me. Call me.

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Nagging

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Once a suggestion has been made and understood three times, repeating it further can be properly regarded as nagging. If it really *is* just a suggestion, this is the time to respectfully drop it. If it is actually a request or an instruction, this is the time to clarify that and then renegotiate or try to enforce it. A popular but unfortunate alternative is to increase the frequency of the same ineffective suggestion until the victim explodes or goes underground. What is intended as friendly interest or

guidance is frequently experienced as nagging. Regardless of the objective realities, the perception of nagging evokes defenses that inhibit effective communication across the board, or much worse.

Resolution does not necessarily mean dropping it. Friends, colleagues, couples, parents and children legitimately guide, counsel and train one another all the time, usually by mutual consent, and repetition is often essential to these consensual goals. The trusting license to engage one another in this persistent and challenging way can be an important element in healthy personal relationships, so long as it is welcome or at least within the scope of age-appropriate parental responsibility. It is sometimes appropriate to be insistent about sufficiently important issues, and sometimes it is just intrusive or overbearing. It is important for both of you to be clear about what the suggestion really is, why it looks like nagging to one of you, and what you both should do about it. Nagging is pointless and toxic. Trust me. Call me.

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Lie Detectors



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Lie detectors are unreliable but incredibly persistent. I am talking about human lie detectors, although the machines are unreliable too. If your partner is worried about whether you are faithful, drink directly from the milk carton, still love them or think they are fat, then they will be looking for evidence to confirm their suspicion. If you were guilty they would not expect to find much evidence because they credit you with superhuman powers of deception. Under these circumstances it doesn't

take much to find you *guilty enough*, which may trigger fresh investigations in completely different areas. Their investigations might encourage you to investigate back. It's a slippery slope and there are things that you have been cagey or downright secretive about. Of course there are. This does not necessarily mean there is a problem. Privacy is important.

Human lie detectors often mistakenly believe that they are investigating a simple truth, which is rarely the case. When the target of investigation is infidelity or the milk carton thing, there is an important sense in which it is either true or false. But when the question is about a subjective experience like love or the perception of fatness, then the truth is likely to vary over time and circumstance. It is easy to read too much into the discoveries that are made in such fuzzy territory. You have probably each investigated the other in this way to some extent. It is a good idea to examine your file of open cases from time to time, and to consider whether some of them can be safely closed. Trust me. Call me.

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Watts of Thoughts: $E=mc^2$



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Energy cannot be created or destroyed, but only transformed. Since Einstein, matter *is* energy and so is every other thing in this universe; including your car, your computer, and your thoughts. Thoughts are not yet understood well enough to derive their energy content, but they are certainly implemented in neural chemistry that is very well understood, and that can be described completely as an electrical process powered by granola, Red Bull, salt, water, and oxygen. Although we cannot yet calculate it, every thought has a specific wattage. When some Nobel laureate finally discovers the meaning of the word *gist* we

will be closer to the formula for that calculation.

For the moment we can rely upon our universal agreement that there are a limited number of thoughts that can be thunk in a given period of time. That is why you need more time to think about this, and why your children need more time to study. I have read the opinion that people think about 30,000 thoughts a day, which is ridiculous but probably about right, and that 20,000 of them are repeats. Now *that* is a really interesting thought whether it is literally true or not! The technical term for this phenomenon is *perseveration*, and it constitutes a great waste of intellectual energy that could be applied far more fruitfully. You know what I am talking about. Yes, *you*.

The good news is that obsession and other pointless repetitive thinking is voluntary, at least to a certain extent. To the extent that it really is involuntary it can be reconditioned. What could you accomplish if you spent more of your time thinking systematically and effectively about your projects and the ongoing development of your life? Would you be more comfortable? Would you be more powerful? Would you be more admirable? Would your life be better? Yes, of course. Trust me. Call me.

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Anxiety and Stress



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Stress is the biological manifestation of anxiety, which is the feeling of impending catastrophe. The stress response prepares you to deal with whatever threat you perceive by fighting or fleeing from it. Stress is healthy for about 15 minutes, which is how long it took our distant ancestors to resolve their typical impending catastrophe, one way or the other, before returning to the serenity of grazing, sleeping and digestion. If the stress response is prolonged it becomes a medical and psychiatric problem. Since civilization has made actual danger so rare in our daily lives, modern

anxiety and stress are now commonly associated with questions of social standing and financial security, which do not fall within the 15 minute resolution window that is optimal for health and happiness.

Most people speak as though they believe stress is something external that oppresses them rather than something they do in response to certain situations. This perspective is partially correct, but it limits the range of potential solutions to those that actually eliminate or change the stressful circumstances themselves. If the circumstance in question is something like gravity, your family or the inevitability of death, then the solution will have to entail some shift in perspective rather than any alteration of physics or the human condition. Unlike the world itself, there is no limit to the malleability of perspective. Perhaps this insight is what some people call enlightenment.

Fortunately, each link in the chain leading from anxiety to stress can be broken. When stressful circumstances are immutable and your perspective is inflexible, it is still possible to neutralize the stress response by means of skills like bravery and poise. Even when these fail you can learn to relax in the same reflexive way that you raise your arm or wiggle your ears. This may sound like a trick but it isn't. Trust me. Call me.

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Enlightened Narcissism



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In our society, narcissism is an insult and humility is vastly over-reported. The most ambitious politicians and celebrities routinely proclaim their humility on national television, while narcissism is the title of a personality disorder. We are encouraged to disguise our natural narcissism and to pretend humility, which can render us inauthentic, guilty, and depressed.

The hallmarks of Narcissistic Personality Disorder are a grandiose sense of self-importance and a powerful need for admiration. These are also hallmarks of the most admirable and accomplished individuals in our society. The difference between saints and jerks lies primarily in their level of social sophistication. Jerks apparently do not realize that they actually need to be admirable in order to be admired. Saints recognize this and often sacrifice their physical, financial, and emotional well-being in order to do extremely admirable things. Enlightened narcissists in other fields prefer to be slightly less admirable without deprivation, as I do. The official psychiatric diagnosis of Narcissistic Personality Disorder is reserved for jerks and it is a diagnosis that I don't use.

Grandiose plans are prerequisite to major accomplishments. Admirable personal ethics are prerequisite to admiration. Enlightened narcissists understand that ethical pretensions are easily detected and they are therefore genuine, consistent, and reliable. Enlightened narcissism is the foundation of ethical behavior, despite nearly universal claims to the contrary. Embrace and harness your natural narcissism! Trust me. Call me.

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The Thrill of Incompetence and the Agony of Success



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Success is often mistaken for a condition that can be sustained indefinitely. But success is an event rather than a condition, more like a good party than a good marriage. The thrill of accomplishment is always transitory. New interests, aspirations, and projects must constantly replace those that have been fulfilled or else a nonspecific despair can develop. Ironically, this is most likely at the peak of a successful career, where the growth curve starts to level off.

This is half the despair that underlies the standard midlife crisis. The other half is a sudden awareness of the ticking clock. Now you have terror and despair at the height of adult achievement, neither of which has any apparent external cause. The roots of the midlife crisis are therefore invisible and your public often cannot empathize with you because nothing appears to have changed. Even *you* may have a hard time accounting for the crisis and everyone is therefore likely to come up with their own explanation for what your problem *really* is. Such explanations are often inadequate or mistaken.

Long after its shelf life has expired, success often continues to provide material and other rewards that make it difficult to try anything else. In order to get the thrill back it is necessary to try something new, something really substantial and something at which you must probably start off relatively incompetent. Otherwise you are likely to find yourself with an expensive sports car and a sweet young thing, still in despair. This will not do. Your situation is unique, but not *that* unique. Trust me. Call me.

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Social Distance and Masking



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It is a simple fact that you are alone inside your head from the moment you are born until the day you die. Your whole life unfolds within the two pints of neurons that constitute your brain, except that they are constantly exchanging signals with the outside world. Early on, these signals convince you that there are others like you out there, whose opinion matters and on whom your survival depends. In order to interact with them, you invent an identity that you wear like a mask, without knowing it's a mask or that you have invented it. Everyone has their

own mask and, when we face each other, we determine what to think and how to feel together. This is what it means to be a social being.

Until very recently, all social interaction was up close and personal. Our family, our tribe and the occasional stranger were the only others we encountered. We were literally in each other's face; where body language, prosody and context matter more than words. In the Middle Ages, books and newspapers began to stand in for personal communication. In the 60s, Walter Cronkite became our uncle, who spoke to us every day. Just yesterday, text messaging, cable news and Twitter became our constant companions. Then came COVID, social distance and literal masking. Each step along this path stripped away more of the social nuance and context we have evolved to rely on. Our identity is increasingly defined by this new network of signals that are not human. Many people I know, clients I see, and societies I observe are fragmenting and suffering in this alien environment. Adjustments will be required inside our heads, where we will always live alone, and in our human relationships, which determine what we think and how we feel. Trust me. Call me.

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Embrace Your Inner Rat



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It is important to recognize and embrace your inner laboratory animal so that you can better influence your own behavior once you decide what you want to do. Rats are particularly good for conditioning experiments because they exhibit complex innate behavior and they are uncontaminated by culture or by thinking. These rat features allowed psychologists to determine the mathematical rules of positive and negative reinforcement half a century before the neural mechanism of conditioning was properly understood. You establish a reinforcement schedule for yourself when you learn to play golf or quit smoking, master a new subject, recover from an addiction or overcome a fear. You are reconditioning yourself intentionally all the time; or trying to

without exactly knowing the rules. You are trying to embrace your inner rat.

Targets for behavior modification are not so clear when we are talking about intimate relationships, personal aspirations, kids, parents, sexuality, love, money, retirement, security, attachment or existential angst. Contrary to the strict behaviorists, humans have extremely complex language and symbolic instincts that are genetically coded and literally embodied in the wetware of our brains and vocal cords. Speech is one product of this system and thinking is another. Everything we think, say and do is conditioned on this foundation by our culture, language and situation. This is the essential postmodern insight and it is also the key to counseling and psychotherapy. From a sufficient distance many of our strongest beliefs turn out to be quite arbitrary, especially the dysfunctional ones that are causing you grief. Culture and language define who we think we are and what we think is going on, including the problems we think we have and their solutions. This is why certain kinds of thinking and talking can be especially helpful.

Depression and anxiety reflect your belief that your situation is dangerous and hopeless, that everything is a big deal, and that this is never going to change. None of these things is actually as true as it seems when you are depressed or anxious, and this insight itself provides immediate relief from depression and anxiety. This insight needs to be reinforced. Trust me. Call me.

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Launch Operations



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The rocket does not care much about the gantry or what stands behind it. It is poised to explode into space on the back of its powerful thrusters with transition to warp speed shortly thereafter, no doubt. The universe waits to be discovered and an appreciation for the history and support structure that makes the launch possible will have to wait a while. For the avoidance of doubt, you are the gantry and your son or daughter is the rocket. Let's assume you are not trying to live vicariously through your offspring and you are not trying to mould him or her to the pre-conceived

image you certainly have in mind, but rather that your pure and steadfast goal is to facilitate the success of their own personal mission in life; whatever that might turn out to be. If you are in this for the credit you might want to come up with a backup plan.

As the gantry falls away, which is where you are now, Mission Control is suddenly reduced to radio communication. Until that moment the launch sequence could be interrupted at any time while all manner of equipment and personnel could be applied directly to the rocket. That luxury has expired. If there is a problem now, the best you can do is to provide radio advice on how to jury-rig an air purification system from spare parts for the zero-gravity toilet. The isolated crew are going to have to do it themselves. They still need Houston to calculate a re-entry that doesn't involve incineration, but they may not realize this until they have been in orbit for a while. Be patient and wait for the 911 call. I realize this is difficult.

Planning, training and ground operations are all vital to the success of the mission, but after launch you can't use your own tools anymore. You should start shifting to radio support as soon as possible. Trust me. Call me.

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Attachment



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As Gautama Buddha famously observed, attachment is the root of all suffering. This is true, but attachment is also the root of love and passion. Attachment is fundamental to the the human condition but it is also, to some extent, voluntary. Detachment can be cultivated by various means, and it is an objective of many schools and practices; including science and enlightenment. Detachment is often an important goal of psychotherapy. Dissociation is a state of detachment from personal identify itself, to which we can resort under

circumstances of extreme trauma. Pain is unavoidable but suffering is relieved by detachment, according to the metaphorical formula:

Suffering = Pain x Resistance

Attachment can also be cultivated by various means, and it too is an objective of many schools and practices; including education and marketing. Attachment is often an important goal of psychotherapy. Attachment styles define which people are compatible and how they determine whether or not they are being loved. Relationship counseling is often a matter of translation from one love language into another. Codependence is an attachment to shared identity at the expense of personal identity and interest, demanding constant reinforcement at any price. Insecure attachment often resorts to a defensive form of protective detachment, or the pretense of detachment. Secure attachment can be mistaken for detachment because it requires no signs or active confirmation. Secure attachment can afford to be relaxed and undemanding. The avoidance of suffering need not entail the renunciation of attachment, passion or joy. Trust me. Call me.

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Intuition, Creativity and Aesthetics



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Intuition is one part of yourself making suggestions to another part, generally without explanation. What you are aware of as your conscious self is really just a tiny subset of what goes on inside your head. Consider what suggestion a cat's whiskers might give to their cat about whether to proceed into that narrow space. The kitty doesn't need to know trigonometry, the width of its hips or the consequences of getting stuck in a pipe to benefit from the intuition that arises from the simultaneous stimulation of whiskers on both sides of its face. This intuition means

"Don't crawl into that pipe, Kitty!" Most of the cats that ignored this intuition in the past are dead. This simple reflex suggests how intuition works at higher levels.

Once you have invested the necessary hours to master any discipline, regardless of its scope or scale, you can expect to have intuitions that reflect what you have learned in that domain thereafter. Note that intuition encodes everything you learn regardless of whether it is right or not, so intuition also institutionalizes errors, mistakes and delusions along with wisdom. Intuition is effortless and it frees you from having to reconstruct everything from first principles repeatedly; so you can build on what you have learned. Creativity is intuitive, almost by definition. You can invite your intuition to generate surprising new alternatives from among which you can select those that are interesting but not too crazy. Intuition is only a good thing as long as your critical reasoning and judgment are intact and activated. Intuitive judgments about the quality of your own intuition are *aesthetics*, which inform you about what you think is good and right without your having to know why you think that. Intuition is a sharp sword with two edges. Pay attention to how you wield it. Trust me. Call me.

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Like Binocular Rivalry



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This too shall pass. If you are pessimistic and depressed, you will get over it. If you are optimistic and joyful, you will get over that too. If you are deciding whether to marry or divorce, retire or find a new line of work, go to Brazil to become a bongo drum player or endure what you have come to regard as a pointless existence; you will probably flip back and forth repeatedly before making a decision. You may even flip back and forth indefinitely without ever making a decision. The facts in the world that we are considering are generally not flipping back and forth like this, so it must be something

about us and the way we think.

Flip-flopping is built deeply into the structure of our brains, as illustrated by the phenomenon of binocular rivalry. Normally the images presented to each of our eyes are almost identical and our brain integrates them to give us a single image with depth. However, if you are fitted with goggles that present entirely different images to each eye, say a house on the left and a face on the right, then you don't see a face superimposed on a house as you might expect, but rather you see first one image and then the other; alternating back and forth every few seconds. This involuntary alternation is nature's way of making sure we consider various interpretations of our situation. If humans didn't do this our ancestors would have been eaten and some other species would be living in Santa Fe.

Difficult personal decisions often entail this sort of involuntary flip-flopping, which can be experienced as either confusion or illuminating deliberation. Flip-flopping can be productive for a while. This insight is instructive for the resolution of dilemmas, the reduction of anxiety and depression, and the enhancement of serenity. Trust me. Call me.

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Walkabout



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The walkabout I recommend entails a sustained and solitary launching into a comfortable but unfamiliar environment that is interesting but not dangerous. Twice for me, this has been India with good hotels. My object is to suspend the routines and regularities of life as much as possible in order to invite new thoughts and experience into that space. A walkabout must be undertaken alone because personal relationships channel so much of our capacity into established patterns. Pattern maintenance

is arguably the *purpose* of human relationships and it is generally a good thing, but not on a walkabout. A walkabout should be longer than a month.

A walkabout is not a vacation but a pursuit, the object of which can be framed as broadly or as narrowly as you please. Your intention invites your unfettered mind to fill the empty spaces within your frame, as you invite it to fill your screen with words and thoughts when you write. This creative filling is effortless, although some people feel compelled to strain while it is happening, out of a mistaken sense of executive agency. The daily walkabout cycle is a setup for this process. The unfamiliar environment into which you launch each morning arrests your attention for a while and clears away the ordinary mental debris. Whatever befalls you in your launching might enhance your framework in some way or it might not. In the absence of routine to fill your day after the action, absentminded rumination is your creative engine. Only periodically do you reflect upon what has filled the spaces and cull it down to something you can use. There, at the end, is your executive agency. There is your walkabout harvest. Trust me. Call me.

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Guilt



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Guilt is anxiety about being cut out of the herd to die alone in the wilderness. Humans are intensely social creatures who define ourselves almost entirely by our membership in groups, and by our roles within them. Family is the most fundamental group from which it is possible to be expelled; although nations, clans, companies, clubs, cliques and cabals can all serve as surrogates. We feel that if we were expelled we would be utterly alone, and guilt is therefore a close cousin

to loneliness. Since guilt is the fear of exposure and expulsion, the loneliness it engenders can be sustained in the very midst of the group itself, which is confusing for everyone.

Guilt demonstrates that you have accepted the code of some group as valid and applicable to you, whether you agree with the code or not and even whether you have the vaguest idea what you have agreed to. You have accepted someone's version of what is appropriate and you expect to be held accountable to that standard. Does the word *inappropriate* irritate you? Do you feel that words like this are deployed to manipulate you? Guilt demonstrates loyalty and it is often extracted from its victims for that reason alone. Perhaps you have had parents, lovers or employers like this. If they can induce you to feel guilty they believe they will own you, especially if you don't know exactly what it is you feel guilty about. They are right. Guilt is an oppressive emotion and it is unnecessary in the presence of integrity. You don't need guilt. Trust me. Call me.

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Burn Your Bucket List



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Ever since Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman made that movie a few years ago, everybody is making lists of things they want to do before they die. Sometimes these lists are long and extravagant. The creation of a bucket list can be a constructive gesture of freedom and self determination when you are feeling stifled and unfulfilled, and it may even result in the accomplishment of one or two of its entries. But my clients routinely demonstrate that bucket lists have a

way of morphing into to-do lists over time, at which point they are likely to generate anxiety and frustration rather than exhilaration and fulfillment. In these cases the question becomes “*How can I ever hope (or afford) to accomplish all the things I have defined as essential to my fulfillment?*”

It is time to scrap the bucket list in favor of a more subtle metaphor, one that celebrates the inexhaustible range of possibilities in the world as well as the fluid nature of our own preferences and taste. I propose *The Funnel of Life*, for which you should imagine the sort of contraption that dispenses food pellets to your hamster when he chooses to dine. Harry the Hamster assumes there is an inexhaustible food supply and he takes it for granted that the next pellet out of the chute will be just as tasty as those still buried in the hopper above. He does not ask for any particular pellet and he does not worry about getting through them all; he simply asks “*What next?*” Harry is serene and happy. Be like Harry. Trust me. Call me.

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Capers



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Capers are essential to the well-being of human males at every stage of their development. At 8 months, a satisfactory caper can consist of crawling out of bounds or landing on the most satisfying notes of the electronic musical pad beneath our Johnny-Jump-Up. Over the course of the male lifecycle our capers may evolve to encompass skateboarding, paintball, football, girls, cars driven with reckless abandon, forbidden women, forbidden men, business and power pursued with reckless

abandon, money pursued with reckless abandon, espionage, war, philosophy or technology pursued with reckless abandon, fishing, golf and unconventional essays. The need for capers can be satisfied within the law and within the commitments of any reasonable relationship if it is recognized for what it is and addressed in a healthy and straightforward manner, although it need not stay within these bounds. Sneaking out to a movie in the afternoon, going to a film festival alone for a couple of days, or disappearing into the desert for an esoteric academic conference are like crawling out of bounds for me now. In caper deprivation a dreadful malaise may set in, especially at middle age, and this can be difficult to diagnose and to cure. Midlife malaise can result in unexplained weight loss, sudden motorcycles, and the appearance of sweet young things where there should be none. Capers are essential to the well-being of human males at every stage of development. They should be cultivated and nurtured carefully rather than allowed to grow wild. Trust me. Call me or have him call me.

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Depression



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Clients are rarely depressed when they leave my office. This is not because I am a brilliant psychotherapist but simply because we have just had a lively 70-minute conversation. You were depressed on arrival and it took 45 minutes to describe your situation, how you feel, and what you think about it all. At this point I ask if you are still depressed, right at that moment sitting there on my couch and talking to me so energetically. You are a bit surprised to find that you are actually not depressed at that moment, but you assure me that the feeling will return shortly. I grant that it probably will,

but not while you are in my office. I assure you that your temporary remission is normal and I point out that during the course of our conversation there has been no change in the depressing situation you have just described. Yet you are not depressed at this moment, so it must be that the relationship between your situation and your depression is not as direct as you have presumed.

Before you leave my office we leap on the opportunity that your temporary relief affords to make some small but constructive decision regarding your situation. This token cements your engagement with the resolution of your dilemma, which leads to the actual change and permanent relief you seek. It is usually not difficult to identify the knots of circumstance and perspective that are vexing you. The Cognitive Triad of Depression is the combination of an unacceptable situation, a sense of powerlessness to change it, and the fear that it may go on forever. Removing any of these elements relieves depression. It is not rocket science and it works. Once the paralyzing haze of depression has lifted you can turn your attention to understanding and managing the composition, direction and quality of your life. Trust me. Call me.

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Disavow Your Thoughts & Feelings



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Every kind of thought is in your head. The vast majority of these are unconscious and most would be incomprehensible if you could somehow experience them. What might be the thoughts of your digestive tract, for example, which has 5 times as many active neurons as your spinal cord? Your thoughts and feelings are almost entirely dedicated to regulating your metabolism or seeking food, money, friends and sex in a complex dynamic environment. You will note that, without

effort or awareness, you never put the fork in your eye instead of your mouth, exit through the window rather than the door, or mistake your spouse for a hat. Your unconscious thoughts get along just fine without your attention, which would only confuse you both.

You view the life you think you lead from within a tiny bubble of conscious experience, balanced high on the pointy tip of your metaphorical brain. From within that bubble you vaguely sense the unconscious mass of primitive impulses and feelings from which your thoughts, behavior and personality emerge. Sometimes you hear them in the form of obsessive thoughts or emotions you would rather not experience. Every kind of thought is in your head and you are capable of any emotion, attitude or act; but you are more than that. You use language and you reason about your circumstances. You decide which thoughts and feelings to endorse and which to disavow. You decide how you roll, and you even have some influence on what you think and feel. Trust me. Call me.

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Don't Believe Everything You Think

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The thoughts that pass through your head at any particular moment reflect the explicit and implicit beliefs you have come to embrace over the course of your life, reinterpreted in light of your current physical and emotional state, under whatever your current circumstances happen to be. Note that many of your beliefs and important aspects of your personality were present at birth, and many others were impressed upon you immediately thereafter by whatever family, culture or cult you happen to have been born randomly into. The earliest beliefs you arrived at on

your own were childish and often mistaken, as were your feelings about those beliefs. You were then drawn, more or less by chance, to communities of people and ideas that influenced the further evolution of your thinking and belief according to their own biases. This house of cards is the source of the ideas that come spontaneously to your mind these days, many of which are mistaken or beside the point. You are thinking this way most of the time, and so is whoever you are having trouble with. You should be skeptical about both of you and about what you think of each other.

The good news and the bad news is that words actually spoken, as opposed to thoughts merely think, can have an outsize effect on the thinking and speaking that follow. The bad news follows when the words are treated as statements of fact or arguments to be defended. The good news follows when they are taken as intuitive hypotheses to be critically examined, tested and evaluated. This is the method of critical reasoning, of science, and of my approach to psychotherapy and personal counseling. It works best when you aren't committed to believing everything you think. Trust me. Call me.

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Understanding Words



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After the fact, people often want to defend themselves on the basis of the words they literally used rather than what they clearly meant. While backpedaling, for example, you might try to reverse yourself by making a claim like “...but I said you were right” when what you actually said was “...yeah, right” in that sarcastic tone that slips out despite your best effort to act like an adult. The meaning of words cannot be properly understood without also hearing their prosody, which is the rhythm, emphasis and tone that tells us what a speaker really means and whether he is lying. The absence of prosody is what makes Stephen Hawking’s

robotic voice so strange. The absence of prosody is also what makes email and text messages so easy to misinterpret. With a phone call you get the voice and prosody back, with Skype you get facial expressions and eye movement, and when you are face to face with a person you also get their body language, odor, and a whole range of interpersonal signals you are not even aware of.

Beyond the transcript and the prosody, there is the larger context that determines what is *really* going on in an exchange between two or more particular people. An otherwise cutting insult delivered by one good friend to another may be properly understood as an expression of intimacy. *See what we can safely say to one another?* We are that close! Or a truly cutting insult can be delivered to an intimate partner in a way that no third party could recognize for what it is, which is assault with a concealed linguistic weapon. You know what I mean.

So there are at least three distinct levels on which the words that are directed at you can be interpreted, or misinterpreted: the transcript, the prosody and the context. Failing to recognize this accounts for about half of all human communication problems. This is one of those things everyone knows that should have a major impact on their lives, but often doesn’t. Trust me. Call me.

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Flânerie



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A *flâneur* is one who saunters among the streets, mixing with the crowd but not participating, shopping with no intention to buy; an anonymous observer within the fray. A *flâneur* occupies no fixed position, either geographically or intellectually, and feels no compulsion to form any opinions. *Flânerie* is like a sabbatical or a reflective pause during which the *flâneur* is fully open to new impressions, some of which may take root and flourish later on.

As you read this I will be immersed in the Sundance Film Festival, during the course of which I will see 30 films or more. Each will be the crafted reflection of some director's perspective on some aspect of the world. I will see these films in the company of a few friends and 40,000 strangers and I will pay 5 times what it would cost to see the same films at the Violet Crown or the Jean Cocteau. The teeming masses and the festival atmosphere will magnify and color the cognitive density of 30 unpredictable films in so short a time. I cannot understand the effects all of this will have on my future intuition, but the experience *will* change and expand me somehow.

Periods of sensory and intellectual *flânerie*, interspersed with periods of consolidation and integration, are at the heart of both scientific and artistic enterprises. They are also at the heart of personal development. Without *flânerie* there would be no creative leaps and we would be condemned to circular lives within the bounds of what we already know. Proper *flânerie* is indistinguishable from laziness or nihilism, and is therefore suspect. Some people never let go long enough to absorb anything new. You should attend conferences outside of your field. Trust me. Call me.

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Guys, Interrupted



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When I am having a certain type of animated conversation I like to be interrupted, as do most of my buddies. When we are on a roll, an interruption indicates that my interlocutor has grasped whatever point I was making and is ready to a) acknowledge it and move on to something else, b) acknowledge it and put some spin on it, or c) dispute it and suggest that I am an idiot for thinking that (in a good way). The way we see it, waiting for one another to finish every sentence, paragraph or monologue would be grossly inefficient and painfully boring; so we don't do it out

of mutual respect. My brothers and I would sometimes prefer to leapfrog one another's half-baked ideas into outer space and worry about re-entry later. We can engage in this sort of conversational irreverence because we know we are safe with each other no matter what we say, like teenage boys wrestling.

When we commune with our sweethearts, however, we try to strike an entirely different conversational tone; because we are deeply interested not only in what you have to say, but also the lyrical way in which you choose to say it! We realize that this other type of conversation is as much about connection as it is about communication, as much about *listening and being heard* and as it is about the subject at hand. We realize that sometimes we are exploring new territory together rather than going anywhere or concluding anything in particular. We get that. We also realize that we will be sleeping outside in the dog house if we don't get this right. Only please don't ask us to give a chronological account of our day, because we can't do that. We just don't organize information that way. Your situation is unique and so is his. Trust me. Call me.

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Integrity



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Most people would agree that integrity includes doing what you say you are going to do, although it is not always clear when you have said you are going to do something. Nobody wants or expects to be held accountable for everything they say in ordinary conversation, which is more like brainstorming than decision making. Statements made under the influence of alcohol are conditionally exempt, as are declarations made in anger, hysteria, delirium or confusion. The interpretation of when someone has said they are going

to do something also has a great deal to do with the interests of the interpreter, who may be your partner, child, colleague or customer.

I have a large cardboard sign with the title *Integrity* in my office and in couples counseling I use it to signify unambiguously when someone is making a serious commitment that they expect to be held accountable for. For the duration of the exercise, no statement or declaration can be regarded as binding unless the speaker is literally holding my cardboard sign, and I don't hand it over lightly. I begin the exercise by asking each partner to excuse the other from every commitment or obligation they think they have ever made to one another. Going forward from that clean slate, I recommend that they hold the sign immediately in order to promise that they will not sleep with any third party without prior notification. Commitments beyond that should be very few, and only regarding issues of genuinely vital interest to one or both partners. Commitments can be oppressive where freely given gifts, love and service are not. Trust me. Call me.

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Iron Chef



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The Iron Chef is handed a bag of ingredients and challenged to create a culinary masterpiece. You are handed a bag of faculties and circumstances and challenged to create an autobiography. Prizes are awarded on the basis of the creation rather than the materials. This concept is particularly important during adolescence, midlife transition and old age; which sometimes overlap.

During development, a personal and professional identity is forged from stereotypes that are floating around in the family and the society, combined with the actual resources that each child happens to have received in his bag. Hopefully she is

not pressed to follow a recipe for which she does not have the ingredients, but is allowed to utilize what she does have in something like her own way.

Around midlife the contents of the bag start to change, but the established recipe often does not. Short term memory degradation and back pain are among the most notorious midlife losses but, for men, fluid depletion and the loss of immortality are actually more troublesome. On the other hand, experience and the possibility of wisdom have been added to the mix and these can be potent resources that enable new autobiographical possibilities. Hopefully the midlife transition goes well and there is no red sports car or 26-year-old hottie.

Eventually we should expect to lose everything and die. It may sound strange to say that this does not have to be regarded as a loss. It depends upon who you think you are and what you think you are doing. If you have prepared yourself with an appropriate philosophy, then you may regard these changes as new ingredients for your evolving creation. You may be the sort of person who can do this naturally or you may have to work on it, which is not so difficult once you start. Trust me. Call me.

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Lost Boys



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At 15, plus or minus 3 years, many adolescent males make a convincing case that they are incapable of any responsible judgment and unable to grasp the concept of a future. They continue to reinforce this impression through creative demonstrations of astounding recklessness and poor judgment until they are 24, plus or minus 8 years. This is when the world switches from predicting how they are going to turn out to judging how they actually turned out, which is critical because that judgment tends to fulfill itself.

This indisputable reality is sometimes called the self-fulfilling prophecy or, more technically, the Pygmalion or Rosenthal effect. Rosenthal famously demonstrated that when teachers are led to expect enhanced performance from their randomly assigned students they get it, and when they are led to expect poor performance they get that. The same goes for psychologists and probably for physicians as well. Predicting an outcome is very different than creating one, which is what is going on here. Parental judgments and expectations exert a far more profound Pygmalion effect on their kids than those of teachers or psychologists.

The fact of the matter is that we have no idea what our kids are going to make of themselves, or when. Since they often don't even wake up until they are 24, plus or minus 8 years, that is a more reasonable time to start predicting how they are going to turn out than to start judging how they actually did. Many of them are just starting their adult launch sequence. This is also the point at which you can actually be helpful to them if you have not previously alienated them by trying to be too helpful, too forcefully, too soon. If you aren't careful you can wind up treating your son as though he were defective, which is neither helpful or true. Trust me. Call me or have your son call me.

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Manipulation



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I am an accomplished manipulator of people and I have a professional obligation to be transparent about that. Psychologists mostly just talk, and practically none of the things we actually say requires a license. But I do need a license to call myself a psychologist and I am committed to a code of ethics that includes informed consent. Personal counseling and psychotherapy are intermittently manipulative in the sense that some insights must be gained in stages that counselors and therapists already understand as we lead you through them, which we do at your invitation. Good parenting, friendship, mentoring and teaching of all kinds are

also intermittently manipulative, and properly so as long as you are serving the genuine interests and have the reasonably informed consent of whoever you are counseling, treating, mentoring, parenting, partnering or otherwise helping out.

This sort of informed benevolent manipulation is clearly a good thing, and I only use the term in this context to highlight its evil twin; covert self-interested manipulation. This other species of manipulation is universally resented whenever it is suspected, and it routinely masquerades as its admirable sibling when challenged. The two species of manipulation have in common the fact they both involve intervals during which someone is intentionally leading someone else in some direction by influencing them in ways that may be invisible or unclear. The difference between benevolent manipulation and its evil twin boils down to the question of motive, which can never be established objectively. Covert self-interested manipulation engages our trust and then violates it. Its hallmark is that it continues to conceal itself even after its objectives have been achieved. Even the ongoing suspicion of covert self-interested manipulation will poison human relationships. The only effective antidote to this type of suspicion is systematic remedial transparency, if you or they are up to that. Trust me. Call me.

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Metacognition



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Metacognition is knowing you know something, without necessarily having that thing in mind. When a name or a word is on the tip of your tongue, that's metacognition. When you know you can figure out a particular type of problem, that's metacognition. When you get the gist of a thing without having all the details, that's metacognition. A gist is really quite a slippery thing when you look at it closely, pointing as it presumably does to a complete and detailed

rendition of the thing about which the gist is supposed to be. The substance behind the gist is presumably encoded somewhere in memory. But being human, we sometimes have gists that turn out to have nothing behind them at all. We thought we knew something but we didn't.

Metacognition is one aspect of intuition, which informs us generally and tells us what to think and do. Stereotypes, insights and knowledge are all metacognitive objects, providing the gists we live and reason by; whether they are true or not. We think about our friends and family in terms of stereotypes we develop just for them, and we behave accordingly. What is the gist of your lover, partner, friend or colleague? Forcing that question produces a recitation of facts, feelings, relationships, expectations and characteristics. This is your stereotype for that person. This detached perspective allows you to be analytic for a moment, which could change the way you see things. Trust me. Call me.

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Mind Wandering



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Mind wandering is a state in which we allow our minds to roam freely in their own mental space for a while, which is to say that we apply a minimum of effortful discipline to our thinking while we are doing it. Since mind wandering and daydreaming are indistinguishable from laziness they sometimes fall under suspicion, which is unfortunate because they are essential to creativity. Cognitive scientists have begun referring to the distinctive pattern of interaction among brain regions, whenever we are *not* engaged in an effortful mental task, as

the *Default Mode Network* of the brain. Mind wandering is a fully conscious activity that consumes every bit as much metabolic energy as an effortful mental exercise like working through a difficult math problem. Meandering among the less attended pathways of your mind, you encounter latent images and ideas that you apprehend and incorporate into ever broader networks of association by means of your attention. This is how ideas are formulated and developed, without effort. This is half of what we call thinking.

The other half is effortful and systematic. Systematic thinking utilizes whatever rules, logic and biases are available to arrive at decisions, take action and produce results. Systematic thinking strives to confine itself to what has already been learned. Systematic thinking is judgmental and restrictive in the service of competence and reliability. Systematic thinking is effortful. The common misbelief that only systematic thinking is productive leads to exhaustion, paralysis and distress. The fruits of thought are grown organically and harvested systematically. Systematic thinking and mind wandering should resonate and alternate in their own natural rhythm. Thinking doesn't need to be so hard. Trust me. Call me.

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Mindfulness



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When people refer to mindfulness as a mental discipline they generally mean sustained attention to the here-and-now, although the here-and-now turns out to be a slippery concept. Even the most abstract thought about the furthest future or the most distant past is thought in the here-and-now, of course, but that is not what mindfulness people usually mean. They mean attention to immediate sensations like your breath and the feel of your feet on the floor, or to the physical space you are in and the objects that are in it with you;

even though your immediate view might encompass many miles or the vastness of space. The point of mindfulness is that you are not *thinking* about whatever you are attending to, you are simply *experiencing* it.

Definitely excluded from this sort of mindfulness is any human narrative that is extended in time and space; like yearning, disappointment, expectation, frustration and anxiety. These things do not exist in the moment, even though they are suffered there. Therein lies the therapeutic value of mindfulness. Sources and objects of anxiety, depression, frustration and anger are the natural targets of deconstruction by mindfulness. Mindfulness relieves these unpleasant feelings while you are actually practicing it and, if you are paying attention, it also demonstrates that there is no necessary connection between the elaborate narratives we think of as our lives and the way we actually feel at any particular moment. Mindfulness relieves suffering. If it sinks in, this intellectual insight can have a profound impact on your philosophy and your perspective, which can have a profound impact on your life and the way you experience it. Trust me. Call me.

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Miswanting



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By the time you have overcome your physical addiction to cigarettes you are likely to believe that a smoke will relieve the unpleasant sensations of road rage, social anxiety, existential angst, financial insecurity and irritation with the difficult people who surround you. In fact, the only sensation a cigarette will actually relieve is the craving for nicotine itself. Your mistake stems from the fact that for years you were *always* craving nicotine because you were hopelessly addicted to

it, so you were always relieved when you lit up no matter what else happened to be irritating you at any particular moment. In this situation you are like a laboratory animal being trained to smoke a cigarette whenever you have a sensation you don't like. You therefore *miswant* cigarettes after you have quit, even though cigarettes don't actually make you feel better about anything but nicotine withdrawal. If you succumb to this mistake you will quickly reestablish your physical addiction and resume your ongoing misinterpretation of what a cigarette can do for you. Catch 22.

The term *miswanting* was coined by Daniel Kahneman, who won a Nobel Prize in Economics for his work on the psychology of judgment and decision-making. Most of his insights have since been applied to advertising strategies intended to train you to miswant all sorts of things. But miswanting is by no means limited to consumer products. You have also been conditioned to miswant things in your personal relationships, your career, and your life. Many of these unfortunate mistakes can be neutralized by identifying them and learning to want better. Trust me. Call me.

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Pandemic

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There is nothing like a close call to get your attention! Heart attacks and cancers that don't kill you, car wrecks you don't die in, gunfire that grazes you, addictions you overcome, predators you escape and pandemics you survive. These are moments when evolution invites you to look around afresh and make serious changes to ensure *that* never happens again! These are rare opportunities because we spend most of our time trying to make things routine so we don't have to pay any further attention to them. We have to because

our bandwidth is limited and we have much to do. And so we go along, absorbed in all our projects, tolerating much in the service of stability until the next close call startles us awake again.

Such moments of adrenalin clarity, while they last, are ripe with potential. Many of my clients come to me in such moments and it is important to identify their full range of opportunities quickly and clearly, before the moment passes. Then we slow down to reflect more carefully on what should be done and how to do it. Note that the special clarity we enjoy after close calls is not restricted to the particular crisis at hand, but can be extended to the rest of your life as well. We are in a collective situation like this right now with the COVID-19 pandemic, which has our full attention but which will ultimately fail to kill most of us. This might be a good moment to examine your life to see what adjustments are indicated. I have a spacious office in an isolated location where, when they let you out of your house, we can have a few intimate conversations at a safe social distance. Or we

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Parasympathy



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The sympathetic nervous system activates every aspect of the human mind and body for fight-or-flight when the brain detects a situation that could have catastrophic consequences; like being killed and eaten. The body is saturated with signals and hormones that focus the mind and senses on an obsessive, hyperactive search for threats. Blood is diverted to the muscles and limbs that will be expected to do the fleeing or fighting. Heart rate increases, pupils dilate, digestion stops and the whole organism is set on hair trigger. In the natural environment for which sympathetic activation was evolved, the situation is

resolved within seconds or minutes by means of escape, victory or death. If activation is extended beyond this timeframe it has the medical and psychological consequences we call stress and anxiety.

The *parasympathetic* nervous system deactivates the red alert conditions of fight-or-flight; returning all systems to modes more appropriate to digestion, reflection, sex and sleep. Despite the headlines, physical danger is extremely rare in our society, so we should spend most of our time in this state of serenity. Unfortunately, the mental systems responsible for perceiving threats often attach themselves to abstractions that pose no existential threat; such as the status of our relationships, financial statement or political perspective. The fight-or-flight response can be triggered by almost anything, and it is unclear when abstract situations like these have been resolved, if ever. The parasympathetic response may never be allowed to return us from fight-or-flight to feed-and-breed, so we suffer from anxiety and stress. Fortunately, it is possible to stimulate the parasympathetic response intentionally, which usually requires some training in breathing, meditation, hypnosis, biofeedback, courage and/or philosophy.

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Regret



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Don't believe everything you think. People are not rational, especially when they are making important decisions. Daniel Kahneman, a psychologist, won a Nobel Prize in Economics for identifying a truckload of systematic errors people make when they rely on their intuition. People are more likely to refuse a bet if they are told they have a 30% chance of losing than if they are told they have a 70% chance of winning the same bet, they are afraid of terrorists who pose no statistical threat but not of driving cars on the freeway, and statements that rhyme are

more likely to be believed. The list of cognitive biases goes on and on. Salesmen, connen, educators, artists, lovers and psychologists exploit them all the time.

People fear loss more than they value gain and they take extreme measures to avoid decisions they might regret, sacrificing opportunity in order not to be mistaken. Worse, we tend to evaluate loss relative to what we have at the moment and gain relative to what we hoped for when we started. This partly accounts for the difficulty many people have ending or fixing relationships, changing careers, adjusting portfolios, retiring or getting otherwise unstuck. The avoidance of suffering is more powerful than the pursuit of happiness, which is why my clients tend to show up when they are near rock bottom on some dimension of their lives. Their distress doesn't trouble me because I see it as a catalyst for change. Their presence in my office automatically shifts their focus from intuition to rational analysis, regardless of anything I might contribute. There is as much to be gained when you are happy as there is when you are miserable. Come see me now, whatever state you are in. Trust me. Call me.

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Strong and Strange Attractors



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In mathematics, an attractor is a sticky situation toward which a system tends to evolve once more transient factors have played themselves out. For example, a lot of things happen during a round of golf, but gravity guarantees that the ball will always wind up on the ground and stay there until some work is done to put it back in play. Gravity is a strong attractor. Social psychology is not as advanced as physics, so human relationships are not understood with the same mathematical precision as

golf, but a quick review of the frantic coupling and uncoupling you have witnessed throughout your life should convince you that intimate relationships are strong and sometimes strange attractors. This is written in the inscrutable genome and it plays out like clockwork whenever existing relationships are disrupted by a *force majeure* such as puberty, death or a mid-life crisis. Once they have been established, even the most painful relationships can be incredibly sticky, sometimes to the ongoing bewilderment of the principals themselves.

Careers, friends, artistic preferences, politics, cable drama, addiction, sports, news, gossip, hobbies, habits, obsessions, memes, ruts and routines are also strong attractors. Once you are stuck to them it requires an intentional effort to break free. In the worst cast you could remain stuck to whatever solution you first stumbled upon in each category and your life could be fully defined and unbearably dull. A pervasive sense of staleness will alert you to this danger. You should take strong but judicious action to liberate yourself from your most oppressive attractors. Trust me. Call me.

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The Button Factory



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Where do your personal buttons come from, the ones that can be so easily pushed? Over the holidays you may have returned to the bosom of your complicated family; to the psychosocial factory where your original buttons were manufactured and installed, and where they know how to press them! A personal button is just a trigger that initiates some conditioned psychosocial response, as the proverbial nuclear button initiates an elaborate process of global annihilation. The theoretical

foundation of personal button manufacturing is behaviorism and operant conditioning, which dominated academic psychology during the middle half of the last century, until the “cognitive revolution” rediscovered thinking as an important element of human behavior. Behaviorism and operant conditioning describe you, accurately, as a machine that is programmable by means of reward and punishment, which is how personal buttons are manufactured. But, ironically, your programming also includes the possibility of rational thinking and decision making, by means of which you can customize and transcend your factory settings. In addition to your various buttons, you have probably learned to think for yourself to some extent, and to take a certain class of decisions and actions on that basis. Even your original factory buttons can be disabled or modified without undue fuss *once you have chosen to do that radical thing*. There are button factories and service stations everywhere, not only in your family, and your personal buttons can be reconditioned and repurposed throughout your lifetime. It is better when your programming is voluntary and intentional. Trust me. Call me.

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The Governor's Card



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In the city of Kyoto, there lived a great Zen master called Keichu. Keichu held sway over his temple and was respected for his astute perceptiveness. When Kitagaki took over as Governor of the city, he heard much about Keichu's wisdom. Kitagaki called upon Keichu one evening at the temple to pay his respects. Kitagaki presented his calling card to the attendant and asked for an audience with the Master. The attendant asked Kitagaki to wait and went inside to give the card to Keichu. "Master,

there is someone here to see you," the attendant announced, and he gave Keichu the card which read: *Kitagaki, Governor of Kyoto*. "I have nothing to do with this fellow!" bellowed Keichu, throwing the card in disgust. "Tell him to leave right away!"

The attendant picked up the card and dashed to the hall where Kitagaki was waiting. "My apologies, dear Sir," he said, "The Master does not wish to see you," returning his card. Realizing his folly at once, the Governor took a pencil and scratched out something from the card. "That was my mistake," he told the attendant, giving him the card again. "Would you please be kind enough to ask your Master once again?" The attendant returned to Keichu's chamber and handed him the Governor's card again. The card now simply read: *Kitagaki*. The Governor had scratched out the words, *Governor of Kyoto*. Keichu read the card and his eyes lit up. "Oh, it is Kitagaki? Yes, I would like to see him now; please send him in!" And that is how the Governor of Kyoto got an audience with the Zen Master Keichu. Trust me. Call me.

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The Hedonic Treadmill



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T*he Hedonic Treadmill* theory claims that people each have a personal level of happiness to which they return after events render them briefly more or less happy; just as we return to our usual weight after a diet or a period of gluttony and dissipation. One famous study found that quadriplegic accident victims are only slightly less happy than major lottery winners one year after their accident or win. This is an important insight with practical implications for you. The acquisitions and

achievements on which we misplace our hopes of future happiness are ephemeral. In fact, most satisfaction comes in the form of anticipation before attainments are realized, and the rest comes during a short period of appreciation thereafter. Both of these satisfactions are often abbreviated further by the unfortunate perception that nonchalance is cool. *“Sure, I have all this fabulous stuff, but you can see from my expression that I am really quite bored with it all.”* Nonchalance can be overcome once it has been recognized as the anesthetic that it is.

The lesson of the hedonic treadmill is not that attainment is pointless, but rather that attainment must be continuous if it is to shift our set point of happiness. Our relentless mistake is to presume that the satisfaction of some particular attainment will be lasting. The solution is to systematically disrupt our own stability on an ongoing basis, so that our happiness can be spiked anew just as we are acclimating to our last caper. If you get the rhythm right, this is like skipping along the crest of the waves rather than bobbing up and down like a cork. Trust me. Call me.

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Death



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I became aware of my own mortality when I was 11 years old, as a result of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Like everyone else, I was convinced we were all about to be incinerated in a nuclear holocaust and I became depressed for the first time. When the crisis was resolved everyone else was relieved, but I realized I would eventually die anyway. I have been aware of that fact most days since October 16, 1962. That awareness has had an enormous influence on the course of my intellectual, emotional, social and professional

development. Our expectation for *when* we will die is central to responsible financial planning and to many important lifestyle decisions. It is also central to the development of our personal philosophy and quality of life, whether we are aware of this or not. The psychological impact of mortality can be moderated by faith, denial or certain types of reasoning; each of which has broad and complex consequences.

I have had the privilege of interacting closely with a number of friends, relatives and clients who knew they were going to die within a short time. Each of them reacted in their own way and each was surprised by that reaction. Despite the essentially traumatic nature of living through a terminal period, I would characterize about half the cases I have witnessed up close as positive in ways that these people articulated themselves. In almost every case there was a major reassessment and realignment of priorities. Nearly everyone would agree that the priorities of people who are aware of their imminent death are superior to those of people who are not. There is an opportunity here for those of us who have not yet received our diagnosis. Trust me. Call me.

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Harvesting Creativity



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It is impossible to tell whether another person is being creative or not. It is difficult enough to tell whether you are being creative yourself. This is because the essence of creativity is surprise and the invisibility of origins. What is taken for creativity can be merely the repetition of something that was creative in the past, or that was learned elsewhere. Think of the aging pop star singing his only hit from 40 years ago, for the zillionth time. Even the most original works can morph into platitudes. This is not to disparage creativity but rather to exalt it by setting it apart

from its relics and imposters. In addition to its many practical and aesthetic benefits, creativity is thrilling.

At the most basic level creativity is not a systematic process, although it can be systematically cultivated. Beneath the surface of consciousness lies an enormous bubbling stew of constant neural and glandular activity; a mob of impressions, thoughts and impulses, all high on various endocrinal drugs. Some of these subconscious sirens sing in distinctive voices. There are among them geniuses and idiots, devils and saints, muses and gorillas; all clamoring for our attention. To dwell there is insanity, but it is from this babbling chaos that creativity emerges. We can watch this cacophony from above and impose some unexpected order on it, as though our unconscious were a Rorschach inkblot that we can interpret and render according to our craft and disposition; which it is. If the result surprises and delights us, then we experience it as creative and we get the rush of exhilaration that we seek. Creativity can be intentionally cultivated and harvested. Trust me. Call me.

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