**Life: Lived Daily**

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**CONTENTS OF THIS BOOK**

Three short stories from my life – one about adversity, one about challenge, and one about realization – intertwined with three tools I developed to help me live life daily.

**PROLOGUE**

I was a happy person. I am also now a happy person. However, there was a broad period between those two points in which I was not a happy person. It was a period of life in which the tides of sadness seemed to always be approaching. There were points in which my whole body was engulfed, and I survived by breathing through a straw poking out over the water level. There were also points where I successfully treaded water and though exhausted was able to keep my head above the water. And then there was a point in which I was able to ride aboard a proverbial surfboard and carve through the waves of sadness. This process of collapse and renewal, destruction and reconstruction, death and rebirth, is one of the most natural and “real” experiences in life. This book seeks to capture this process along with describing the tools which levered me out.

There are many paths out of suffering. One need only browse a library for a plethora of stories about how different people(s) overcame their challenges and found renewal. At their worst, these stories are doctrines that individuals are told to follow blindly. At best, these stories are suggestion manuals, built on one’s personal experience, for others to “come and see”. This book intends to be the latter.

The suggestions in this manual are thus aimed at helping the reader live their life “day by day”. The book does not aim to convince the reader of the *value* of living day by day; for such descriptions one is best directed to the wonderings of Siddhartha Gautama, Plato, or Hafeez. Instead, the book aims to provide three practical tools for achieving a life lived daily. This is interwoven with the personal experience that inspired the construction of these tools, in order to demonstrate the inherent subjectivity of these recommendations. With this the reader is able to draw on their own powers of discernment to determine the use of these tools in their own life. That said, to my most disgruntled reader, I ask you not to judge the book based on your thoughts about its ideas but on your experiences engaging in these practices. As the old saying goes, “practice makes perfect”, and as a new one goes, “pontifications create complications”.

With the above explained, we are now prepared to dive into the book.

**CHAPTER ONE**

It must have been only 30 degrees Celsius outside. So, this could not explain the intense discomfort as I lay on plastic sheets in my room. Maybe it was that although the bed was so uncomfortable, what awaited me outside was even more so. You see, outside was the agonizingly slow realization of where I was in the world and in my ‘new’ life, that was eking out every last drop of my enthusiasm. My enthusiasm which my Year 5 teacher had described as “unrelenting”, was seemingly becoming relented.

The force driving this slow deterioration was my arrival in Singapore, a small city state sitting on the end of the Malaysian peninsula. A city famed for its economic stability and domineering government. A city that William Gibson called “Disneyland with the Death Penalty”.

Now it is important to note that not everyone dislikes Disneyland, for some the sensations of comfort and security override the subtle dis-ease of the fakeness. However, for the version of me lying in the bed, the latter was too hard to see past. More to the point, even if I was able to embrace the façade and convince myself that “Mickey Mouse is a six-foot man in a mouse suit”, I wouldn’t want to. For better or for worse I was not willing to embrace my environment. That is okay, many wise people have told me that I don’t have to love my environment to be happy. So, I guess my challenge wasn’t that I wasn’t embracing, but that I wasn’t *accepting*, a much harder challenge.

I turned to my left side, seeking to shield myself from thoughts coming from the right. The speed with which thoughts came to me was concerning. Instead of coming and going in waves, it felt like sadness just came flooding in. Unsurprisingly, this flood would lead to an overflow. It was likely that I would cry at least once a day during this period. I would cry on the subway, I would cry on the bus, and most of all I would cry in my room.

I would also cry in front of people. Sometimes it was because I couldn’t help but cry, and sometimes I would just let myself fall into the tears. I would try to allow the tears to be an honest signal of how I was feeling, look at myself in the mirror and see an authentically sad person looking back and me. Speak to my family and have them see an authentically sad version of Theo. They hadn’t had the chance to see me cry much before, I probably cried more in the space of one week than I did in my entire life up until that point. As the months went on, I then far surpassed that.

But, piercing through all the tears was a small feeling. No larger than a walnut but right in the centre of my chest, there was a feeling of pride. I was proud that I was able to express all this feeling. To show all that *feeling*, to the people around me and allow myself to be vulnerable and to see how people I love responded to

my authentic crying self. To let my sister and my mother sing me to sleep over the phone as I lay on these plastic sheets, in a room that was only big enough to fit me lying down in one orientation, with a white ceiling light that could sterilize a soul.

My brotherhood has all too often forgotten the skill of crying. In my time before Singapore, I had always believed I had the capacity to cry and that if I ever needed to be I could be truly vulnerable and open myself to every last ounce of sadness. My suspicion was now being confirmed. I was a crying, bubbling mess. I couldn’t have been prouder.

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I was proud of my tears, but crying isn’t all there is to sadness. Even when the tears subsided there was a deeper manifestation of my sadness. I felt a painful constriction around my throat. It felt like a snake had woven its way around my oesophagus. The snake would then hold on tight and pulsate with constrictions every once and a while. Once I was crying during a trip back to England and it was so intense that I really couldn’t stop myself. People would walk by, people who you might not want to cry in front of (like your brother’s girlfriend or your sister’s housemate) and I couldn’t do anything but cry. Others would ask me how it felt, and I would describe the snake, how it was grabbing my throat, how I couldn’t breathe. I didn’t feel like the snake wanted to harm me. In fact, I think in its own way the snake was trying to help me by binding me to this moment – so that I couldn’t look away – so that I could see what this moment was trying to teach me.

I have spoken to many people about the sadness I felt as I lay in that bed and the surrounding moments. Many people resonate with the crying and discomfort. However, instead of a snake around the neck, others describe other manifestations of the sadness. For some it may be a dagger through the heart, some a stone in the bellying dragging them down, some a crown of prickly thorns digging into their skull. I remain open to chakra or physiological explanations of this variation. Nevertheless, the uniqueness of my experience also endeared me towards my snake. This snake still visits me to this day and when it constricts, it reminds me that sadness has arrived, heightening me to these moments. Once I have been reminded, I can recall the fact that I have not yet accepted my circumstance, that I, like the snake, am still clingingly onto something. If I could identify what it was I was clinging to, I would be able to begin the process of releasing it and in turn the snake releasing me.

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Sadness visits often, however, when it does so it rarely makes its presence immediately known. I have many words for the negative emotions that I can feel; anxiety, fear, torment, anger, disgust. People and scholars have long debated the nature of these emotions and whether they are in fact distinct or different versions of the same thing. Here is an opinion I offer that isn’t necessarily rich in scientific logic, but it is based on my own experiential understanding of the present moment: *sadness is the common denominator of all negative emotions*. Thus, nearly all my emotions can be expressed in terms of sadness, if I am willing to dig deep enough into them.

Take the following examples from my experience in Singapore:

***Anger Statement:***

I am *angry* at myself for making the

decision to move my life here

***Converted into sadness statement:***

I am *sad* that I am no longer

in the place I used to be

***Anxiety statement:***

I am *anxious* about my future.

***Converted into sadness statement:***

I am *sad* that life has not turned

out how I expected it to.

To put it in another way, everything can be expressed in terms of loss. The reason I have found this so powerful is that once something is lost it cannot come back, at least not in that present moment. Therefore, the best course of action when one has lost something is to mourn appropriately and allow the feelings to naturally pass.

Another related feature that makes the feeling of sadness so profound is that the target of the emotion is by definition “gone”. When I feel sad, the sadness is directed at the person, place, thing, idea, or action, I have lost. As such, the emotion is between myself and the lost object. This doesn’t make the feeling any less intense, but it does avoid the chance that I drag another into my emotional episode. For example, there is the tendency to be *angry* at things I have lost BUT how can I be angry at something that is not there? I cannot. So instead, the anger must be redirected at others because *anger* requires a tangible target. Who will that target be? Probably someone close to me, someone who might have even come to help or means well for me. In this way anger can really become an exercise with fire.

In contrast there is a true beauty of sadness. When I am sad, those around me have a natural tendency to soothe and comfort. It is hard wired in our sociality as human beings. Sadness invites compassion from others and in time compassion to myself. Therefore, once my feelings are expressed in terms of sadness, I invite others in and begin the wonderfully natural and real process of mourning, soothing, and accepting.

This is why I don’t fully agree with Bobby McFerrin’s theory that we should all “not worry and be happy”. Instead, I think we should strive to “not worry and be sad”. Be sad in its purest form without seeing the feeling as “unacceptable” and allowing it to stir anger, resentment, anxiety, or worse. Just let the sadness wallow, my own sadness and the sadness of those I meet. Afterall, a world ravished by sadness is a world ravished by compassion.

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None of this appreciation of sadness makes it any easier to experience though, in fact it makes it even harder. As I lay in the bed feeling sad, and respecting this emotion with all my heart, I also felt I did not want to distract myself from this feeling. Of course, there are things I could use as tools of distraction, whether these be chemical substances or social substances, that would take my mind elsewhere. But I didn’t want these. I remember one particularly profound day in which someone told me I could try using pain killers to numb the emotional pain. I was averse to this idea. Not because I doubted the science, or that I had anything against the idea of using pain killers. Instead, I was averse because I didn’t want anything to numb me from the intense experience I was having. I wanted to look straight into the darkness so that I could see the wisdom it was teaching me.

You see on that bed I realized that sadness (or suffering) is really my greatest teacher. It is like a bright beacon saying “Theo, there is something to learn here”. The only problem is that evolution might have made the beacon a bit too bright, so much so that I find it uncomfortable to even look into it. But if I feel strong enough to manage this discomfort (and it is okay if I am not sometimes, but if I am), then I can stare right into the sadness and see what it is trying to teach me.

When I do this, I often find it is a similar lesson to what I have learnt before, or I read in a book, or a loved one had told me, or maybe I even gave this advice to a friend who was sad once. That is okay, the solutions to life aren’t meant to be too hard so it is fine when they repeat themselves sometimes. What is important is that we accept this lesson.

My sadness taught me many things. Sadness showed me that most of my suffering arouse from my expectations about the future or my longings for the past. I used to have a grandiose view of my life, in which each day was merely a cog in a much bigger system. Every day was one step away from the past and one step towards the big future. But I was completely wrong. There was no future I was moving towards, there was no past I was leaving, all there ever will be and has been, is the present. That means, “each day” wasn’t part of a bigger system, it was the whole system. Instead of looking for bigger meaning in my life, my sadness told me to look for smaller meaning in my life; smaller, smaller, smaller.

**TOOL ONE**

What is the “smallest” and “realest” way of measuring life’s passing? We have many different instruments to do this, we have decades, years, hours, minutes, nanoseconds, etc. Each of these are reliable and accurate instruments in that they are consistent and give an exact estimate of how much life has passed for each person, but they are not so interpretable. Fundamentally, two issues arise with “measuring life”.

The first issue is that measures of life can be too big. For example, what is a decade, what is a year? These things do have some scientific basis but if I asked you what it “feels like” to have a year past, what could you say? You may talk of seasons. But then I would ask, where do you live? If I move you to the equator where there were no seasons, would you say there was no year? Next, you might say, a year is how long it takes the earth to go round the sun, but, then I would ask, how does it feel to go round the sun? Where are we now around the sun? Where is the beginning and the end of our orbit? It is hard and practically impossible to answer these questions. So why measure our life in something that is so big we can’t feel it? Surely that is a recipe for confusion and statements like, “really?! It is already Christmas again” or “Wow, this year has gone so fast, I don’t know where all the time went...” So, we find that whilst these larger measures of our life make sense, they don’t really serve us well as a measuring stick for life.

The second issue is that measures of life can be too abstract. I just said, a year was too long, so maybe we show go very small and precise, maybe we should measure life in seconds. How does that sound? Well, I would ask your-self what is a second? You may come up with a very clever answer appreciating the physical laws and how we abstracted these to provide the value of a second. You might be right, but I would ask you what these physical laws feel like? And the reality is there is no feeling as we cannot perceive the world on this micro level. This is because a second has no evolutionary value, neither does a minute, neither does an hour. We made these things up much later in humanity, and whilst they are incredibly helpful for calculation there are not experiential measures.

The first tool resolves this issue by providing a small and real barometer of life’s movement: A Day. What is a day? Well (externally) a day is signified by one lighter period and one darker period. But also, (internally) a day is signified by our circadian rhythm, an internal body clock that matches wakefulness and restfulness to the rhythmic cycle of the day, it is the only “clock” in the body and shows deep down we “feel” a day as the passing of our life.

So, if a day is the “realest” barometer of our life we should measure it this way. How do you do this? Well, you ask yourself (or google), how many days old am I? Then you either try to remember it or you write it down, or you make a calendar of it. Personally, I write the number of days I am alive (today being 9869) on my wrist each day but friends of mine have it as their computer home page or marked in their calendars. So that is the first tool:

**“Know how many days old you are and use that to measure how much life you have lived.”**

Why might you do this? Well, I have noticed some wonderfully fortuitous benefits about using a “day scale” to measure my life, I will mention some below:

**1. Each day is *just* one day**

When I look to my wrist now I see “9869” and I think, wow, I have had a lot of days! Because I have had so many I am relaxed to the fact that even though I slept in this morning and was a little unproductive, that is just one morning of one day, of which I have had 9869 of, so lighten up, it is *just* one day. Or if I was sitting on my bed and crying on day 9795, I would think wow this was a sad day, but it was *just* one sad day. Even if I cry the whole day for 18 hours and never feel happy once (which would really be a worst case scenario) that would really be okay within the context of my life, because it is *just* one day. I will have happy ones.

**2. Each day is a *whole* day**

When I look to my wrist now I see “9869” I also think wow I have a *whole* day today. Tomorrow, it will become 9870, and that will be a new *whole* day, then I will have 9871 and have another *whole* day. Each one being a rich “real” experience of life. Some animals, like the mayfly, can pack a whole lifetime into a single day and I am sure that day for them, the day they take flight, is full with a richness we can aspire too. The mayfly’s life shows us how rich we all are. In all likelihood I have many thousands of *whole* days to come. It makes me feel incredibly wealthy. So much so that if someone told me now I was only going to have 3000 more days I would think, wow, 3000, that is a lot and I think I would be pretty excited with the 3000 different things I could do in each of those *whole* days. Now, if someone said that to mean in years, that would mean I had about 8 years left; terrifying! Only 8 summers, only 8 Christmases. So that is why we shouldn’t think in years, they don’t really help us understand how our lives pass.

**3.** **Days are more comparable**

When we think about each day we have (whether it is *just* one day,or we see it as a *whole* day) it becomes wonderfully easy to compare the extent of our lives with others. First, when we consider how rich a day is, we see how rich an old person’s life must be. My grandma has lived 33,007 days, a truly phenomenal amount of days. So, when I am having a bad time and I speak to her, I am in the presence of someone who has experienced more bad days than I can imagine just through sheer wealth of experience, so let’s listen to these older people! (If I said she was 90 years old, we can also see how we might treat her differently.) By the same token, we can teach our juniors, just like my niece who has lived 3,656 days, much about life *but* also it is likely she has at least a token of wisdom from all those days worth listening to. Even if we don’t think about other humans, nearly all animals in this world live through the vehicle of one day. Some have different patterns of wakefulness and restfulness but they all have circadian rhythms. This is because the circadian rhythm is one of the oldest parts of the animal brain that we all share with our common ancestor millions of years ago. So, by using a day-scale, we can also helpfully see that life is in fact: all interconnected.

**4. More milestone celebrations**

If we live by each day, then each 50th day is a call for cake and ice cream, each 100th day is a pretty big milestone, each 500th day is a massive event, and each 1000th day is a moment for powerfully deep introspection. As you can surmise, living by each day means lots of cake and ice cream!

**CHAPTER TWO**

The sadness of my life during my time in Singapore was like a towering storm. Waves 50ft high would come crashing down all the time. Storms suck, but at the same time, many of our favorite stories revolve around storms. That is because storms can also make for an adventure. Or even more significantly; storms can create a hero!

So how could I become the hero of my storm? I would need to make the storm into an adventure. So instead of just sitting in the hull stopping water coming in, I would rise up above deck, climb into the crow’s nest and start commanding orders: “Steer left”, “Bring in the starboard side”, and “Man overboard”. Every time a new huge wave came, that wouldn’t be the world defeating me, it would be my Everest to climb and conquer in search of quieter seas. This is how my time in Singapore became my Odyssey.

My Odyssey drew a lot from the Odyssey of Odysseus. Odysseus was a god like character who set off on a journey to return home after the battle of Troy. However, he was unable to return home to his loved ones due to a variety of different occurrences; cyclopses, Poseidon’s wrath, and so on. Although I am not god-like, and I am not Greek, I still felt a lot of connection with Odysseus. Besides the fact that we both had an Odyssey, I also resonated with his approach to his odyssey. Odysseus is often seen as the idol of manlihood, revered by others as “great, wise, Odysseus”. However, maybe in modern terms he wasn’t our typical hero. I say this because throughout his odyssey, Odysseus did something few men openly do. He did it on the beach, on his boat, with kings and admirers, and I am sure he did it in his bedroom. You see Odysseus cried. Odysseus was a crying, bubbling, mess, and just like myself on my odyssey, I believe he was proud of himself for that.

I also picked up some vital information from Odysseus on how to construct an odyssey. An odyssey is a particular form of story. I have been a character in a variety of different stories in my life – stories of love, stories of learning, stories of community – each with their own ingredients – lovers, teachers, nature – and whilst I don’t control what happens in my life, I can shape the narrative of the story. For example, if I fail a test at school I could make a few different stories, a story of shame (story 1) or a story of compassion (story 2):

***Story 1:***

I am a stupid person who was defeated by a test.

***Story 2:***

I came up against a formidable test that shone a light on my weakness and

let me learn from it.

Stories can be made from even smaller things. For example, when I walk home from work or school, I can tell myself:

***Story 1****:*

I am walking home on the road

***Story 2****:*

I am walking home on a beautifully smooth and

level path laid down through the hard work of my ancestors to help me get home with

ease and comfort.

These stories don’t change the objective facts, the only difference between these stories is on what element of the moment I am focusing my attention. Every event I experience is the rich unfolding of the entire universe since the big bang up until that present moment, so that means there is a deep wealth in each of these moments. Whilst shifting my attention doesn’t change the reality, it does change the subjective experience of my reality, and thusly my subjective experience of myself. Baring this in mind, for me to carve out an odyssey from my experience in Singapore I needed certain vital ingredients.

I needed a vehicle. Most the great journeys people go on they have some sort of vehicle. The coolest people have some mythological being like a winged-horse or a dragon. Some more realistic people have boats or motorhomes. I felt it was important that my vehicle felt unique and allowed me to navigate the strange world of concrete and high buildings I was in. The obvious vehicle would be a bike, but too obvious. So instead, I took something from my past, from a time when I did feel comfortable and graceful, and brought it to Singapore. I bought myself a skateboard.

Skateboards are not so common in Singapore’s well-regulated pavements, so it was ideal. I am not that good at skateboarding so I would fall off a lot, so it was ideal. Whilst it was illegal to skate in most parts of Singapore the authorities were so perplexed when they saw me crossing a major road on my skateboard, they didn’t know how to punish me, so it was ideal.

Another vital ingredient for an odyssey is being in a strange land. Odysseus was in many strange places with strange inhabitants. But an interesting feature of his odyssey is that the inhabitants weren’t necessarily bad, they just had different goals. The cyclops was hungry and hurt, the demons where just doing their job, and Calypso just wanted someone to keep her company. I found a nice parallel here with my time with Singaporeans. To overly generalize, Singaporeans are very kind and they have wholesome goals to achieve wealth and security in their life. They love food and are generally conservative in their approach to life prioritizing hard work over creativity. All worthy ideals. The only issue is that, I have no goals to achieve wealth and security, I am disturbingly unconservative, and I value creativity above all else. This contrast between me and Singapore is apparent in the way I speak, the way I interact, and the way I move towards goals in my life. I was told I might be the only hippy in Singapore. With my long hair, skateboard, and bare feet, this is a theory I haven’t yet falsified and am not sure I will.

So Singaporean culture is wonderful but seemingly juxtaposed to mine in all the value-based ways, making it the ideal environment for *my* odyssey. Singapore is a concrete jungle with very little “wild” nature, making it the ideal environment for *my* odyssey. Singapore, had a million rules and regulations to curb my approach to life, making it the ideal environment for *my* odyssey.

The final thing, and arguably most essential ingredient to any odyssey, is the challenges. This is what really gives the story its sense of adventure, and its re-readability. The story of Odysseus battling the cyclops, giant storms, and intruders in his house is engrossing. So, to have a real odyssey you need trials to overcome.

Singapore is not a very trialling place. The cushy subway takes you to the heat regulated food centers and back to the air-conditioned workplace. So, if I was going to have real trials, I would need to make them myself. In other words, if I was going to make the sadness and challenges I felt in Singapore conquerable, I would need to first make them tangible. I wanted to look the beast straight in the eye.

The thing about the perfect trial is that it also needs the possibility of failure, that is why it is called “try”al. Planning takes the risk out of the adventure and without the risk I don’t need to show courage and if I don’t need to show courage I can’t be the hero of my story. So, I focused on trials which I could (very) likely fail. That was not an easy task. Many trials I took on involved non-descript goals. For example, I recorded an album of music, but this isn’t something I could fail at. I tried to start a small business but there was no real risk in that. I went on epic train journeys, but I was at least 98% sure I would get to my final location. A real trial needs the risk of failure to be seemingly insurmountable.

One day I was describing my odyssey to a friend and they told me the age-old wisdom that “life is a marathon not a sprint”. At first, I nodded in agreeance, as you would when anyone says a hackneyed phrase like that. But later, on the way back home the phrase caught my attention again: did the person who originally said that quote, run a marathon and think that is just like life is? Maybe. But I had been thinking a lot about life recently and the phrase just didn’t seem like it was akin to life. What felt off about the phrase is that life isn’t like a marathon because people often train and practice running a lot before a marathon to the point where they know they will complete it. But Odysseus wasn’t able to practice for his odyssey, he was just thrust upon it. So, to me, it felt like life is a marathon where you don’t get to practice, where you don’t know what challenges, you will face and how hard it will be. Now that seemed a lot like life, and that also seemed a lot like a trial with a very prominent risk of failure. So, I thought to myself, “I can do that, I can *try* to run a marathon without training and maybe in the meantime it will teach me something about life”. So, my odyssey trial was decided:

*I would run a marathon without training.*

I planned my marathon with a friend in Singapore, I went alone, and I only told a few people I knew in Singapore. It was important to me to only tell a few people because I didn’t want other people to know about the marathon. I wasn’t doing the marathon for anybody else but myself and I thought that if I told people they might say “don’t do it” or even worse they might presumptuously congratulate me on taking on this challenge. The big problem with the latter is that then you receive praise for something you haven’t actually done, someone is praising your future self, which isn’t actually you yet. If this is all about the “present me” then I would prefer that only those who had to know about it did. So, I found the next feasible marathon I could do and I signed up.

I found myself at the starting line of the Halong Bay Marathon: that is in Vietnam. I stood at the line and told myself, you are ready, you have been preparing for this, you have been training for this, you can do this. In other words, I lied to myself. I wasn’t ready, I had done no preparation, I had done no training, and the only people I had told about the marathon assured me I wouldn’t be able to do it. But I imagined that when Odysseus battled the Cyclopes, something no man had ever done before, he also believed he was ready and prepared.

In truth I still felt alone in life. I was still at almost the lowest point I had ever been, but this was my moment to stare in the eyes of the beast and rise up to meet it. So, I channeled my inner Odysseus, and started to run.

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Did I finish the marathon, or did I fail? That is the question everyone has asked me since, after they told me how dangerous it is to run a marathon without training. It would have been nice to never tell anyone what happened and just have it be my story. However, I understand that all humans love to hear about stories, whether those are stories in music, film, business, the news, or anything else. During my time in Singapore, I actually stopped listening to stories from others for a long period of time, because the story of my own life was too important to ignore. I find that stories can be distractions that we get lost in.

Now, getting lost can be some of the most beautiful experiences of our lives. Similarly, I think movies, music, sports, and theatre, are all great sources of enjoyment in our lives. But, as with all things, there is a time and a place. Singapore was a place where I needed to give my full attention to my own story, and I had the time to give it.

However, given you picked up this book to read, I am assuming that this is the time and a place for you to get lost in my story. And maybe, it will turn out that getting lost in my story will help you find your own story. Selfishly, the most wonderful outcome from this book would be that you put it down and have the veracity, curiosity, and any other “ity”, to focus your full attention on your own story. Even if it is just for a day, I personally found diving into my own story to be a deep breath of fresh air.

That my wish for you once this book is finished, but for now, let’s get into the story of my marathon.

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I began running in the darkness in the early morning. I placed myself in the middle of the pack. My gazelle like legs that are long and dainty give me an unfair running advantage, with each stride I did twice what the Vietnamese person next to me was accomplishing but I knew pace was not the game here.

I tried to find a rhythm and to do so I listened to an audio book about the power of the human mind. I thought that listening to an inspirational book would inspire me even more. I went on for a while like this, doing pretty well but then I realized I started to feel mentally drained and this feeling was seeping into my body. I realized that the thoughts of the book were weighing heavy on my mind and making it harder to run. I remembered that the word “inspire” comes from the same Latin root as “respire” and basically means to breath in the wisdom of others. Whilst these breaths of inspirations might be nice on a lazy Sunday afternoon, during a marathon it meant that my brain was panting just as much as I was, so I apologized to the writer of my book and for the rest of the marathon put them away.

Sometime later I reached a long (long) road I knew I had to run the length of. I was feeling very tired and I wasn’t halfway yet, not even that close. My legs felt weak, and I couldn’t imagine how I could get to the halfway point let alone get back to the start. I thought to myself maybe I should make it to halfway and that would be enough, that would be a pretty hard challenge to run a half marathon without training at all. I accepted that I would inevitably fail the challenge and I was pleased about that. I realized that maybe what I would learn from my marathon is that when you face challenges you need to be compassionate to yourself and let yourself fail every once and a while, the self-care would be my lesson from failure.

As I pondered my failure a group of runners overtook me who were all running together in this wonderful orderly line. They were like one machine that was propelled by their collective spirit to: go on. Given that I had already failed I thought it might be nice to latch on to this group. I was the last chain in a line of 6, it was a funny looking chain as I was about 1 ½ feet taller than the people in the chain in front of me but in a wonderfully unspoken gesture they let me be part of their team and add my spirit to their collective. We ran together, slowing down, speeding up, and everything in between until we made it to halfway. To the amazement of the past self, I have made it! And then, I carried on…

I carried on back down the long road, it was painful to know how long the road was and feel so powerless to that. The sun had also woken up with a fiery disposition and was beating down on us. Very soon I found myself running all alone. I was pushing out every last bit of energy I had. I also took moments to walk and recuperate. As I ran I was becoming increasingly thirsty for water, I had taken some energy bar things that another runner told me I should take but nothing to quench my thirst. Unfortunately, the Halong Bay Marathon isn’t the best serviced marathon and checkpoint after checkpoint had run out of water by the time I got there. I was running on empty. One saving grace was that there was another person running just by me who was also running on empty but he didn’t stop, so I didn’t stop, so he didn’t stop, so I didn’t stop, so we just kept going. In a wonderfully unspoken contract I would pass him in a burst of energy and then have to slow down, then he would pass me, then slow down. We were like two people with an elastic band between us flinging ourselves forward. This perpetual movement got me to the end of the long road and to a bridge.

I stared up at the bridge that was about very, very high and realized I would need to climb my way up to that bridge, I then remembered that the bridge had a very low railing, I then remembered that my legs felt like they were held together by jello, I then looked at my clock and there was 45 minutes to go. I had made it far but the time limit for completing the marathon was 6 hours and 30 minutes, there was still around 10 km left, I knew I wouldn’t be able to do it. I stopped on the climb to the bridge and breathed in my failure. It was a sweet breath, one of true compassion to myself. It felt dangerous to cross that bridge with such a low railing when I was feeling very unstable, if I fell to the side there was nothing but death awaiting me. I was proud of what I did so I signalled for a taxi to stop, and took another sweet breath of failure.

I signalled for a taxi. I signalled again. I thought to myself, oh wait I have no money to get back, I am in Vietnam with no way of explaining my situation, so I am stuck. I realized I just had to get to the next checkpoint, so I carried on. I got there and to my gleeful surprise they had hydration. I sat and drank isotonic fluid and ate a banana, heard once that elite athletes eat bananas and so I thought, it my moment of failure I could at least embody their essence. I then asked someone to help me find a cab and explained my situation and that I only had around 45 minutes left and needed to go back. They said if I take a taxi then I will automatically be disqualified from the marathon and I said that I understood that, they then also surprised me… They told me I in fact had 1 hour and 45 minutes left… I had miss judged the time… the marathon was back on!

Refueled I continued my ascent to the bridge, walking with purpose. I met a kind looking man who was also walking. I made a spoken bond with him. I told him I was scared to cross the bridge and I would be grateful if he could walk over it between me and the low railings to make sure I wouldn’t fall off the side and die. He honored our spoken bond and we walked over holding hands, not physically, spiritually (we walked over physically, the holding hands was spiritual). We made it to the other side of the bridge, and I was on the home straight. I said I would start running again and he said he was going to continue walking. I said thank you to him, he said thank you to me for the company. I asked him where he was from, and would you believe it, he said he was from Singapore.

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I finished the marathon. How long did it take? Well, that is wholeheartedly irrelevant. I realized before doing the marathon that the longer a marathon takes the more impressive a feat it becomes. Someone running slowly for 10 hours to finish something is in many ways more impressive than someone running fast for 3 hours. But, more importantly, for me, the trial was not about time it was about the journey. The trial gave me all that I desired. It let me stare right into failure and rise up against it and it showed me its wisdom so clearly. The marathon taught me that:

*No hero succeeds on their odyssey without the help of those around them.*

From the unspoken bond with the chain of runners, to the unspoken bond with the mutually drained competitor, to the spoken bond with the man from Singapore, I would have failed without each and every one of them.

On finishing I felt a kinship with Pheidippides, the Greek solider who initially ran the 26 miles from the city of Marathon to Athens. When he finished, he arrived with a message which read “Joy we win”, and he then died. I didn’t die. But just like Pheidippides I did feel like saying “Joy we win” as I crossed the line.

I say “joy” because I notice that as I overcome my challenges I feel joy. When I am able to manage my suffering, it actually becomes positive. By this logic, when suffering begins it is also an indicator that joy is coming, if I am able to manage with the suffering I have. So, every wave of my odyssey it just that, it is a wave that will come and go, that is impermanent, and that will inevitably lead to periods of joy.

I say “we” because I notice that it is a bit errorsome to say “I” completed the marathon. And it is not just that “I” have people to thank but it is truly that my capacity to complete the marathon was tantamount to the support of the people I met along the way. Not just the people, but the beautiful nature I saw that brought my mind away from the pain in my legs, the pavement that the workers had built to make the ground smooth so I could just put one foot in front of the other, even the bridge builder who let me see failure close-up and gave me the chance to conquer it. The list could go on, and there is a perspective in which nothing I or anyone accomplishes by themselves. It is just one perspective, but it is an interconnected perspective and as I crossed the line I decided to adopt this view.

I say “win” because then I can let it go. Competition can get a bad rap in modern society. It can be seen as aggressive and unfair. But, there is a beautiful side of competition. When a competition is over, there is a winner, and then we all can move on. Humans aren’t always great at doing this because a loss can linger in the mind for a long time, but that is why it is good to play games and sports, so each of us can practice the art of competing, losing (or winning), and moving on. I think after the marathon I was ready to move on. It served its purpose and I heard its teaching. I can see how trials and challenges can become somewhat addictive to some but that is not the purpose of an odyssey. If I can’t move on from a trial then it shows I am not really learning from my challenges but learning how to make challenges. This sadly might have been where Odysseus failed. Once he returned from his odyssey, once he had found his loved ones and returned home, it wasn’t long before he left again… off on another “adventure”. But I don’t think life is about seeking out adventurous challenges so that you can feel heroic. I think life sometimes throws hard challenges at you and then you need to learn how to overcome them, but you also need to stay vigilant as to when the challenge is over and when the joy returns. So, once the marathon was done I said, “Joy we win!” and I moved on.

**TOOL TWO**

Each day is short and sweet yet everything we experience in our lives occurs in these short little packets. The ups, the downs, and the in-betweens. In fact, it is likely the case that in each day we experience one up, one down and one in-between.

One of the greatest challenges is to maintain gratitude. Despite living in arguably the most bountiful time in our existence we find it hard to appreciate fully the abundance that surrounds us. This is the simple process of habituation, as we become used to the extraordinary, such as items from foreign lands (Greek Yoghurt; Chinese Pottery) or miracles of science and technology (telephones; climate-controlled houses). It is peculiar to note that these luxuries were only experienced by the highest echelons of society for thousands of years.

The challenge of being grateful for the modern-day luxuries is partly because our abundance is so overwhelming. To really enjoy things, there needs to be that eager expectance stage before they come. The feeling experience when you have travelled 30 minutes for your favourite ice cream and then the most wonderful flavour explodes in your mouth. To appreciate the joys of each day more, there needs to be the knowledge they are coming, plan for them, and rejoice in them.

This expectancy is true for good things and it is also true for challenging moments in our life. It is the expectation that challenge is coming that makes it so difficult. That said, life is actually as a whole only challenging for short periods of the day. These moments might stick out, or their impacts might linger, but humans are the most well adapted creature on this planet - by a humungous distance - and as a result we are pretty capable of mastering any environment. Therefore, managing “challenge” in life, can be more about managing the feeling of being challenged - the frustration, the helplessness, and of course the sadness – than it is about managing the actual outcomes of that challenge.

As a wonderful reality, it is found that by taking challenges head-on then they become less frustrating. In other words, if challenges are not t viewed as a roadblock but a hurdle that can be jumped over, then they can be approached with a problem-solving mindset. In doing so, a challenge can be both accepted and relished.

There are joys, there are challenges, but that is not to say it is known what will happen in each day and much of what does occur is unexpected. The word unexpected can be negative for some, or positive for others, either way it is this unexpected nature that makes life so rich. Whilst humans have an innate drive to reduce the uncertainty in life. Taking a step back, it becomes obvious that uncertainty is actually the essence of life. Looking deep enough, it becomes clear to see that uncertainty is all around us. If we look even deeper, it becomes marvellous to ee that the unexpected is in fact wonder-full. Afterall, it is when life is surprising that we are filled with the most wonder.

Joys, challenges, and surprises are three of the key ingredients of each day. So, I found that if I could relish each of these experiences then I could relish each day. This is the second tool I developed:

**“At the beginning of each day write down one Joy, and one Challenge for that day, then at the end of the day reflect on one or more surprises from your day.”**

The tool is simple but needs some explaining.

First of all, the joy is something that you are making sure is going to bring you joy that day. This joy is decided at the beginning of the day. It might be something you planned on an earlier day (e.g., a walk in the park) OR if you don’t have anything joyful planned for that day you create something (e.g., sitting and drinking some tea with a biscuit). The joy can be anything but it is something that your past/present self is planning for your future self. The idea it to just be kind to your future self and give them at least one (as guaranteed as possible) joy for each day.

The challenge, like the joy, is something that is known at the beginning of the day. This can be any task you have to complete or event you have to bear. You can focus on the major challenge of the day and when it comes you can get yourself ready and bring your “A” game to that challenge. Also, when you have thoughts about it throughout your day you can say to yourself, “it is okay to worry about X, because X is my challenge for the day, it is meant to be a little bit intimidating and scary”. By doing this, it allows ourselves to lean into the challenges of life, bracing for the impact. At the same time, by giving a name and a face to the challenge by acknowledging them, you are respecting it and taking life one challenge at a time.

The surprise is unlike the joy and challenge as at the beginning of the day you do not know what the surprise will be. Instead, this is a reflection of the present self to notice what the past-self went through. The surprise doesn’t have to be good, it can be a neutral, or even a bad surprise. But if you can, notice the good surprises, to be kind to your present self. You might not realize already how many wonderful surprises occur in our day; a dish that is more delicious than we thought, an interaction with a friend that was unexpectedly nice, or a slice of nature that warmed our heart. I personally have been blown away by how many good things happen in my day that I had not expected would occur. Of course, if there was a bad surprise then you can also remember (using the first tool) that this is just one day, one of many, one of thousands, and so it is okay to just be sad for one day (and even okay if it continues tomorrow for that is also just one day).

This tool is about drawing the beauty out of each day on this earth, whether that beauty is the result of overcoming challenge, experiencing joy, or just being surprised by daily life. I use this tool for myself, but I also use it with others. If a loved-one (i.e., anyone) is feeling their day is a bit intimidating when it starts or if they feel that on reflection it wasn’t that great, I try to just use these three simple things to anchor them. Bring their attention to the beauty of their day (joy), be frank about the difficulty (challenge), and just remind them of what they might have missed (surprise). When I do this with others it is just the same as when I do it for myself, it is simply a compassionate act. Whether that is compassion for other or self-compassion doesn’t really matter for ultimately, they are one and the same thing.

**CHAPTER THREE**

An odyssey is defined as “a long wandering or voyage usually marked by many changes of fortune”. I think this definition is the result of most odysseys we see coming from story books. The thing about a story is that they need to end. Life didn’t go on for Peter Pan; there was no “after” in the ending of “happily ever *after*”. This is just a quirk of how we read stories, we want things to be interesting for every page and once the ultimate realization of the book has *become*, the book itself has *become* boring.

However, this view is diametrically opposed to a real-life odyssey. In real life, the “realization” or the “self-actualization” is the whole purpose of the journey. When Cinderella was finally able to live “happily ever after”, then her life could begin, she could leave the wicked stepmother and start being happy! So, although it doesn’t make for great reading, the hero on their odyssey needs their realization.

During my time in Singapore the world was hit by a pandemic. The plague of our time, something that almost all generations experience once, a truly unique time for introspection and resetting. I was fortunate that this occurred on my odyssey.

The pandemic gave me time to cherish each day of mine and face my ultimate challenges head on. I was able to sharpen the tools that I have described above and be even more adept at using them in everyday life. I was starting to feel content with my ability to navigate the odyssey and the sparks of joy had begun to catch flame with the kindling of self-compassion. It wasn’t a roaring fire, but it kept me warm.

So, what now, when I have become comfortable on an odyssey, what do I do? I had created my trials to overcome and doing more of that felt like just distraction from the primary goal, which was realization. So, I needed something that wasn’t a trial but instead an introspection. I needed to sit with my odyssey and just listen to what it wanted to teach me.

Listening is one of the most powerful skills we have. It is not a “doing” state but is a “receiving” state. If I listen hard enough who knows what I could hear. But what did I need to listen to in Singapore? I can hear the cacophony of cars and industrial works surrounding me that make me feel chained. But listening to them felt too easy, I wanted to listen to something even quieter, something that could be unnoticed but was in truth very wise.

I had heard of a way of listening. It is a technique practiced historically in the Americas though I am sure it is also common to almost all ancient cultures around the world. It is a skill of listening to the overwhelming wisdom of the nature around us, that is constantly surviving through adversity, growing and blossoming each year. The one problem is, “there is no nature in Singapore”.

Singapore is one huge city, so how could I connect to nature here. Trees here feel more like ornaments, arranged to mimic nature. So, it is hard to find a secluded spot to just listen. In Singapore you can’t really escape the city, and given it was the plague times, I couldn’t really escape Singapore. So, the nature was hard to access, it was probably surrounded by the city, and it wasn’t pleasant. So that makes it sound like listening to nature would be really hard and challenging in Singapore; Perfect!

*Hard*, *challenging*, *Singapore*, those are the words that sum up my odyssey! So, I decided I needed to find a way to sit and listen to Singapore’s strange form of nature. You see, even in this confused natural environment you can’t stop a tree being just a tree. Given that nature is a wise teacher, I then felt I should show it more respect and get to know it better. So, I decided what I needed to do was a “City Vision Quest”.

What is a Vision Quest? The primary cultural background which the vision quest idea originates from is communities living on the North American continent. From my research and what has been relayed to Michael (a friend in California who has done many quests with the Chumash) by his teachers (then passed on to me), is that the vision quest is usually a rite of passage and part of a “coming of age” ceremony. As such, there is no set description of a vision quest and so it is more of an umbrella term for such cultural traditions, the one I engaged in is thus not holding any of the specific cultural traditions of any one community but instead adopting the essence of the intention behind the quest, to seek wisdom from nature. The quest is also very personal so there is no description of what must happen for it to be a “vision quest”. Michael resonated with my desire not to disrespectfully assume this tradition from another’s culture and from his conversations with members of the Chumash tribe in California, the broad idea of a vision quest is something that can be shared. Personally, I feel very grateful for the creation of these quests and the culture they come from and I do think I (and maybe others in my community) could benefit from embracing this tradition.

So, for my quest I am really following what Michael told me, which is that the quest is about seeking guidance in your life from a natural being, by honoring that being and listening to its teaching. Practically, it involves fasting (no food/water; no sleep; no talking) and sitting and just listening in a natural place for 24 hours. Note, that is technically a “mini-quest”, full quests are a few days typically. This “mini” nature of the quest suited me perfectly as this stage of my odyssey wasn’t meant to be another challenging “trial” but focused on introspection.

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What do you need to do a quest? Well, it is a bit like packing a lunch box with spiritual ideas and concepts. The first thing you need is a *natural being*, this will be your guide on the vision quest and a gift for that being. The second thing you need is a question, this helps narrow the mind. And finally, you need a lesson in how to *listen*.

So first I set out to find a natural being. I spent around two days walking around the city waiting for something to call to me. I already had one tree I was friendly with so I first went to there, the tree is big and bountiful with a lizard and family of ants who live there, I meditate with the tree a lot so I thought it was a natural choice. The tree is also part “technology” as it works as a signal tower; in fact, the tree has already taught me how to live with technology with such grace and harmony. However, when I went to the tree I felt like it said to me, “go find another being, I’ll always be here when you get back”. So, I walked on and I met this other super spooky tree that really called to me (but it basically terrified me), I kind of felt like maybe this was where I was meant to do it but I also thought to myself; “geez, Singapore is always making things tough”. So, I kept that tree in mind and then walked on again.

It started raining really heavily so I took shelter under a gazebo. Then on the wall by the gazebo I saw a mark on the wall (I think it was where a vine has been removed) but it looked like a dog, and it looked like a dog pointing its nose in a direction, so although it was raining I thought; “I better go that way” (the way the dog was pointing).

I then arrived in a park and heard a very familiar sound. It was a “moooo” sound, the park I was in was right by where I used to live. In fact, I could see the room where I started this book lying in the 30-degree heat, smothered in sadness. When I was in that room I used to here this “moooo” sound and I hated that “mooooo” sound. I was convinced it was an electronic cow sound, or some sort of illegal cow farm. It used to make me feel so far from nature. Whenever I heard it, the sound reminded me of how unhappy I was and how challenging it was to live in this place. In some ways it was this “mooooo” sound that pushed me onto this whole odyssey and led me here, and here it was, ruining my final search for realization.

But then I remember what I had learnt, about how I should walk towards suffering with an open hand and an open heart. So, I walked towards the sound, in the rain. I followed the sound into a clearing, and the sound got louder and I realized this sound was coming from a dried up river bed, I was confused… I looked under a little stone bridge and it hit me! (figuratively) It was a Toad! It wasn’t a weird bionic Cow! The whole time it was this toad calling me, it was nature calling me! I will be honest, that was my happiest moment yet in Singapore and I literally ran all the way home singing a song that went “The Cow says Moo, The Cow says Moo, but not only the Cow says moo, The Toad says moo too!” It was amazing, and I knew without a shadow of a doubt this was my natural being for the quest. My natural being was:

*The Toad Under the Bridge*

For my being, the toad under the bridge, I needed to make an offering. This is a sign of respect. I searched for something that this toad might value. I know that traditionally offerings have included tobacco but that is because the natural being people find is typically a tree, for my toad it felt like something else would be appropriate. I also wanted to stay true to the cultural heritage I was in. Singapore has a large Chinese influence, so I thought the toad under the bridge might appreciate something in line with Chinese folklore/tradition. I searched for a mythical toad and found Jin Chan.

Jin Chan is a legendary toad you have likely seen a statue of holding money in its mouth. The story behind the legend is that Jin Chan turns up on the full moon in front of the homes of those who will receive good news. Typically, the good news is prosperity and wealth, which is why the toad is depicted holding money in its mouth. So, I thought it was respectful of me to give some of my wealth to the toad under the bridge, reversing the story of the legend and being a symbol of humans giving back to nature what they have always given us. So, out of respect to my teacher/natural being I decided to offer the toad a shiny dollar coin.

The next thing to do was find a question. I had to find a question and carry it with me for a couple weeks. It actually came to me very fast and just captured a key part of my Odyssey. Something that will decide when my Odyssey ends and where I choose next. The question was as follows:

*“How do I know when to leave – and – How do I know when to stay?”*

It is in one sense true that I have no control over my lives. Based on my *belief* in science it is also my *belief* that on some level everything is pre-determined. However, in one sense it is also true that I have complete control over my lives. I right now can decide fully if I take a sip of water, or a sip of my over-priced coffee, or not even take a sip, or not even take a sip and take off all my clothes and get put in Singapore prison. Based on my *belief* in my present experience, it is also my *belief* that I have complete control over my life. So, these are two true things that can’t be reconciled. And guess what, that is absolutely fine. Neither *has* to be true and practically speaking I can just go on as the conversation between these two truths; that is what a wise monk told me once in California and I have held it with me ever since.

This question speaks to the “truth that I am experiencing the world and have control”, and to me it just felt like the critical question of my time. It felt like the question that Odysseus may not have asked himself. He just kept voyaging searching for what he wanted, but, did he ever stop to think “how will I know when I have found what I wanted”. Or if he was engrossed in what he “didn’t want”. Ultimately, “leaving” and “staying” are the simplest and yet one of the most profound things I can do in my lives so I just wanted to gain wisdom on how to make these decisions.

The final thing I needed then was a lesson in how to listen. My advisor Michael helped me with this. He gave me a children’s book called “The Other Way to Listen”. I have always loved children’s books and felt that anything that isn’t easy enough to explain to a child probably isn’t worth knowing much about in life.

This book describes a way of deep listening that is distinct from the *normal* way of listening. Typically, I listen like I am tuning into a specific channel waiting to hear something, like I am listening out for something. This book describes listening in a way where I remove my filter and expectations of what I want to hear and just listen to what the world is trying to tell me. It is something that takes practice, effort, and trust. It is a kind of listening that is so patient I will likely get distracted before I hear anything, and when I do, I can just start listening again. It is hard to do, luckily I would have a whole day to do it.

So, now I was ready to go on my city vision quest and this book is now ready for another story, so if you have the time we can begin.

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I arrived at sunset (you arrive and leave at sunset, traditionally), I gave the offering to the toad and I just sat down and listened. I sat on a path in a very normal city park. I positioned myself behind a tree, but it was a particularly fascinating tree. I was sitting on a path between the dried-up river bank and a small bit of grass with a bench on it. The tree was growing on the grassy patch with the bench on it. However, the tree was growing horizontally across the path, completely blocking the path.

This is strange to see in Singapore which is famed for its easily navigable city landscape, but this tree had just decided to disobey the Singapore authority and (although I am sure they tried) the Singapore government hadn’t yet been able to fine the tree $3,000 for its transgression. The tree was living life exactly how it intended to, without being consumed by the societal pressures around it. However, that wasn’t even the most amazing thing about the tree. As the tree grew horizontally across the path the branches of the tree were growing vertically on either side of the tree.

Let me explain, where the tree started on the grassy patch with the bench, there were some branches growing at the base of the tree, all going straight up. Then as you followed the tree trunk across the path (to where the branches typically are) there was then another set of branches growing directly upwards. So, to an observer it looked a bit like two trees were growing straight up and then there was this weird trunk in between them. The final thing you need to complete the image of this tree is to know that there were no branches growing up from where the tree crossed the path. So, it looked a bit like an archway, with the trunk at the bottom and the tops of the tree (at either ends of the tree) meeting at the top. The tree was a bridge between the grassy part with a hill and the old dried up river bed, it allowed life to travel between these two points; ants down low, birds high above, and I am sure at least once it was the pathway for the toad under the bridge. In many ways, this tree was facilitating the conversation between these two worlds. It was a pretty amazing sight, and you can imagine that sitting with it for 24 hours only made me keep realizing how incredible it was and how if you just walked by you might not notice this feat of tree engineering.

The fact that it was disobeying Singapore so much was just an additional testament to its unique personality. I still visit this tree to this day and I would say it is probably one of my best friends here in Singapore. Michael said one of the best things about vision quests is making new friends and considering I don’t have many *people* I can really connect with in Singapore it was great to make my new tree friend.

As I sat by this tree. I then kept listening and watching some animals move around me and mosquitos have their dinner (which for tonight was me).

Then, just as the sun was about to set my guide came out to greet me! It literally jumped out in front of me. I was shocked just seeing the toad under the bridge right there, the being that had called me all the way here. Michael did not tell me what to do if this happened (partly because I think the being people usually choose is a tree with can’t (physically) go anywhere). As a result, in that moment, I had no idea what to do. So, I just bowed, and I kept bowing. And I thought to myself, “when should I stop bowing… is it possible to show too much respect…”, I decided it wasn’t and thought I would just wait for the toad under the bridge’s signal to rise. I kept bowing. I heard the toad under the bridge come right up next to me, It literally sent shivers down my spine. I was listening very hard trying to use the technique I had learnt for my vision quest, just listening, *listening,* listening. I think I heard it brush my arm hair. I kept bowing. Then I heard a light tapping sound and I arose; the toad under the bridge was gone and night had completely fallen.

My sense was that this was the toad under the bridge giving me his blessing and signaling to me the quest had begun. I didn’t see my guide again (although it did croak a few times to stop me falling asleep) but I am sure – that I believe – that the toad under the bridge orchestrated everything that occurred from that point on. The toad under the bridge was obviously a very important character in the dried-up river bed and so I think he instructed all the animals to show me their teachings. Many animals had different teachings.

*The* teaching isn’t the same as *my* learning. I can learn anything I want from any teaching, so the teaching is more the objective actions that the teacher is enacting. By the same logic, a wise person I met once said, that a teacher can’t “teach” a student anything because that implies that what the student is learning is controlled by the teacher, which it is not. The teacher instead just teaches to the space around them, it is then that space (if it is filled by a cognizant being) that does the learning. This also shows why the “question” of the vision “quest” is so critical. Because, all teachers are teaching all the time about everything, but the student can’t learn everything at once, so the student needs a “question” to help narrow the focus of their learning.

There were many teachings that appeared to me during the vision quest from all the animals that called this place home. When night had completely fallen and the mosquitos had finally finished dinner I felt a tiredness coming over me. It was eerie to be in this park with no one around, it was like being at school in the middle of the night. I was walking back and forth to keep myself awake and on one of my paces I saw this prehistoric like creature swoop in. It sat by the edge of the pond and just stared at the water. It then began to cipher through the different perching points available to it in search of food. Every once in a while, it would lunge for a fish, once it was successful. I went over to be with the night bird and every time it left for another perch I left for another perch, every time it stayed, I stayed. We just moved around searching, and when somewhere seemed promising we stayed. We didn’t care how long we stayed we just did so until we wanted to leave or if we didn’t see anything here that would serve us. We did this for an hour or two, then the night creature left.

I then kept sitting trying not to fall asleep until the sun breached the sky. After I have sat for 10 hours or so waiting for the sun its sight is the most beautiful thing in the world. It comes with such grace and illuminates all there is in the world. The world also responds to the sun with movement and song and most of all energy. The sun is the original source of energy in this world and when the day breaks you can see that with your own eyes.

The day brings out lots of animals, the swooping kingfisher, the butterflies, the parrots. The animals I spent the most time with were the fly and the lizard. These two animals are at opposite ends of the food chain but, interestingly, they leave and stay very similarly. They usually find a rock, stay there for ages, then leave in a scurry of energy. It is as if a spring is building up in tension and then just finally releases. There were lots of rocks in the dried-up river bed and I would hop between them with the lizards and the flies, at one point I waited about an hour to hop onto a rock because a fly had decided to stay there for a long time. While I waited, I just let my mind rest, I just stayed in the comfortable feeling of safety. Then when we left (the fly and I) we rushed to find a new place of safety, and then we stayed again in the comfort of safety. There isn’t much more in life we can rejoice in than the knowledge, as my mother says, that right now, right here, we are okay.

As the day passed, I could look up and trace the straight line of the sun across the sky. The sun moves at such a beautiful continuous pace just drifting through space. When it got near the horizon again and left my field of vision, I knew it was in fact just gracefully carrying on its path. The sun never leaves and never stays it is just continually moving through space.

When the sun finally kissed the horizon, I gathered myself, I kissed my tree goodbye, I bowed to the guide toad under the bridge, and I left.

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From all the teachings it became apparent to me that there were many ways and reasons to leave and to stay. Along with the big differences between animals there was also within-animal differences to be seen. I think this is what the toad under the bridge wanted to show me, that there are many forms of knowing when to stay and leave. I think my guide also respected me to learn my own way of doing so and to learn to be inconsistent; or “allow” myself to be inconsistent. Reflecting on this, I noticed that the beings I enjoyed watching the most where the ones who left and stayed with *patience*.

In a sense all the animals also showed patience as well, it is just that the cues they were waiting for varied in terms of their frequency. So, whilst I can be like all the animals, hover, perch, wait, and dive, no matter how I do so I can be patient.

I guess this realization is a response to my question. My question was so fundamental that there is likely not one simple “rule of thumb” that we can use to arrive at the same answer every time, but I can approach these processes in the right way, with patience. When I am sad I can still be patient, when I am in happy I can still be patient. When I am hungry I can be patient, when I am full I can be patient. Everything I do can be done with patience, after all that is what all the other animals in our kingdom do, so it should be good enough for me!

*Sometime after my quest…*

One evening I visited the botanical garden in Singapore. There is a lake called swan lake there where two swans live. Looking into this lake I saw a swan emerge from the darkness. It was graceful in its movements as it meandered in my direction and came by the bank I was standing at. It slowly began gathering some reeds by the bed, taking a few mouthfuls but not too much, leaving plenty behind for the next visitor to the bank.

Just as the swan became satiated it then grabbed one last mouthful and held it in its mouth, I wondered if it was going to bring it to the other swan in the lake as a token of kindness. The swan then turned from me and left. It gracefully meandered away, not seeking to travel in a straight line but just allowing the push and pull of the lakes water to move it left, and right, and right, and left, trusting that through the equal balance of its intention and the uncontrollable forces of the natural world that it would reach its desired destination.

From one flowing present moment to the next the swan moved into the distance, slowly engulfing itself in a blanket of darkness and feeling at home every step of the way. As I watched the swan, I said to myself; “I want to leave and stay just as this Swan does”.

**TOOL THREE**

When you live life daily you open yourself to the ebbs and flows of each day. On good days you want to go out and explore. On bad days you want to curl up at home.

Home is one of the most beautiful words. It is not an abstract word like love or peace, yet, it evokes a similar level of emotions. Although it is one of the most common words in our language it is also uniquely personal. The word home is like an unmolded ball of clay. When this ball of clay collides with human consciousness it creates a fanciful amount of images and feelings. When I think about “going home” I feel immersed in a feeling of warmth and security.

However, a peculiar thing happens when I think about home for too long, I ask myself well where is my home? I notice that a number of different places come to mind and that I feel like I need to choose one of these places as my “real” home. This then becomes a very challenging choice because I am weighing up a number of different factors such as how long I lived there, whether my family is there, how I felt when I was there, etcetera. This rabbit hole of thoughts then typically leads me far away from the happy feelings I felt when I first thought about home and into a sad feeling: I may have no home at all.

Even worse, the rabbit hole often leads me to the conclusion that “I am not home”, which quickly flows into “I am lost”.

One animal that has seemingly mastered the art of the home is the tortoise. Its hard shell that keeps its soft gooey interior safe from predators is a marvel of evolution. The shell also has a sense of emotional calm that I project upon it. A predictable warmth that even a 100-year-old Galapagos tortoise doesn’t get bored of. The shell is safe and predictable, but it is also easy to get out of, it isn’t suffocating. So, when the tortoise needs to go off and explore – feel away from home, live on the edge – then all it needs to do is poke its head out and get on its way. The shell is a portable home that the tortoise carries on its back and for an animal that lives as many days as a tortoise I am sure it is a life saver.

But humans don’t have shells, just skin. Also, even if we did, would the inside of a tortoise shell really match the rich vivid imagery of home that came up in your head when you heard “going home”; the grassy meadows, or the mountain ranges, or the beaches, or the city buildings? Probably not, the tortoise’s shell is just darkness, a pitch-black backdrop. So how can this darkness be home? The darkness is nothing, home is a rich vivid place. At home everything is familiar, and if we are fortunate enough there are people and things we like. In darkness we feel alone.

That is all true but when we live day by day and we find ourselves stranded on an island in the middle of nowhere all that we know intimately is darkness. When we close our eyes and enter the space created by the back of our eyelids we are in the place we inhabit the most in our entire lives.

We spend every night in this place, we go there every time we blink, and sometimes we just go there to get away from everything. And when we go there we aren’t alone, we hear the voice of ourselves talking to us, and we see the subtle changes of luminosity as if we were a child looking at the sun through the sheets of our make-shift den. This place behind our eyelids whether we like it or not is our little human tortoise shell. Sure, it doesn’t keep us safe from predators, but we have houses, and cars, and baseball bats, for all that stuff. Instead, it accomplishes the other thing that the tortoise shell does, it brings us solitude in a familiar and predictable place.

This brings me to the final tool:

**“Make the place behind your eyelids your home”**

This has been a strange tool to learn, at it is the one that requires the most effort to use. Like most homes, to feel safe there you need to like your roommate. And in this place behind your eyelids there is a roommate who can be a bit chatty, a bit rude, but ultimately has known you longer and cares more about you than anyone in this world. So, to feel at home when you close your eyes you need to make that person your friend. You need to be your own best friend. It is not an easy task but living with the same person your whole life never is (imagine if grandma lived inside you head, that would also probably suck).

This relationship like all relationships also takes maintenance. It maybe takes an odyssey or two to really get to know each other and it certainly takes lots of patience. For that reason, I suggest you sit in that place behind your eyelids every once in a while and just be there. Just see what it is like in there, listen to the voice in your head without getting caught up in it and when it is done or it takes a breath, just listen to the silence it leaves behind. There is a pause after everything, that’s when the healing begins.

You might have to sit in the place behind your eyelids for days, weeks, months, or years, before it feels like a cozy home. But, when it does feel like home, you will have your very own tortoise shell that you can crawl up into on the bad days and that you can poke you head out of and start exploring from on the good days.

This leads me to a final thought: My odyssey has been many things but most of all it is a journey back home, what I didn’t realize is that I was actually making this home all along. In other words, after the long voyage across oceans and to treacherous seas Odysseus realized that the ship that had carried him home, was in fact the home he had been creating for himself.

**EPILOGUE**

Since writing this bookI have re-read it over a dozen times. Sometimes it is with the intention of catching any spelling mistakes I made (hopefully I left some in for you to find) but no matter “why” I choose to read it, each time it fills me with joy, meaning, and a veracity to re-engage with my own story in life.

I hope that from reading this book you experience at least a minutia of that joy, meaning, and veracity. However, I know that reading this book for you is unlikely to have the same impact that it has for me. I knew that when I started writing this book, because first and foremost I wrote this book completely for myself. In some ways, writing this book was the “fourth tool”, in which I crystalized my experience in Singapore, making it into something beautiful.

I will continue to read this book for the rest of my life. I also plan to use it as a neat rebuttal to people I meet who say, “Theo, you seem like a happy person who has never been sad”, which I remember being said to me a lot during life before Singapore. Now, when people say that to me, I can say “Thank you, I work very hard on living a happy life, but I also get sad, once I got very sad for a long period of time, there is a book I wrote about if you want to read about that”.

That was my original wish, but after reading this book for the umpteenth time, I have a new wish. My wish is that after reading this book, you (the reader), are inspired to write your own book about your story, so that you can crystalize a period of your life into something beautiful. That is a book I would very much like you to read, and I probably would want to read as well!