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The Truth Exercise: Living Life at a Target Intensity

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Abstract

A truth is a way of living: a rule that a person truly believes and uses to govern his or her life. Therefore, it is important that a person develops new truths to advance in life, especially in difficult times. However, while human nature directs worry-free people to be more open-minded to other peoples' opinions and people afflicted with a crisis to shrink into a reclusive state, this is actually the opposite of how a person should act. It's important that people should strive to develop their own opinions independently of others as often as possible, when they are not under adverse emotional, physical, or intellectual stress that would affect the process of developing truths. During a difficult time, it is important to reach out to close people and have them instill truths unto the person in need. The latter case is not as productive as the first in terms of creating original understandings of the world, but it is necessary to avoid overwhelming the brain. It then follows that the best time to discover new understandings for oneself are in times of "trained crisis," when the person has built up the mental forbearance to cope with a repeated, stressful environment.

This paper aims to develop a mindful, optimal way of living, in which a person makes the most of their mental capacity by consciously weighing the words of themselves against those of the people around them.

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The Truth Exercise: Living Life at a Target Intensity

A discussion of truth.

In the modern world, truth is not so important. Everyday courtesy ("How was your day?" or "I like your shirt!") are often mere words with little intent behind them, and white lies run abundant to save the trouble of long explanations. When something is said to be "true," it often means that it has a basis in indisputable STEM theories or in historical events.

But in the broader sense, truth is something that a person believes or knows most strongly about a topic. It may not be the absolute, correct truth (i.e., a scientific or "happening" truth), but it is a definite opinion. While there certainly exists the correspondence and pragmatic theories of truth that form a large part of many people's systems of beliefs (that is, knowledge about the physical world), many truths exist on the spiritual and emotional levels. Finding one's own truths (i.e., developing opinions) is a fundamental goal because it allows a person to make personalized, thoughtful choices that cater to the most important aspects of life, whether that means writing, socializing with friends, becoming the President, or even something as whimsical as learning to Rubik's cube blindfolded.

In other words, finding truths is the process of internalizing, of learning and choosing to believe that new knowledge. It involves both the intake of information, and the acceptance of the knowledge as undeniably correct. Stereotypical truths include physical observations of the world, which would seem indisputable. But to some, religion and cultural values may seem almost as sturdy, and every person most certainly has personal values that they hold to be unchanging and real. A person's truth can be that diamond is very hard, that God is real, that their livelihood is upheld by their sole parent. Or it could be that Big Brother is always watching through one-way mirrors and surveillance cameras, and that he or she would grow up to be an intelligence agent working against the government. Whatever a person is absolutely convinced about, whether it be by a scientific basis, a cultural folklore, or pure instinct.

As a result of this broadness, truths don't have to be *real*, in the tangible sense, but it should almost feel so to the person who holds that truth. In his novel, *The Things They Carried,* Tim O'Brien stresses that in *true* war stories (a type of *true* life stories) "you lose your sense of

the definite, hence your sense of truth itself, and therefore it's safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true" (O'Brien 78). His situation pertains to the Vietnam War, but the wars of fighting depression and other mental illnesses, struggling to keep financial stability, and moving past a family death can be just as real as combat, and this definition of truth still applies.

And of course, no two people hold the same truths. Discovering truths (i.e., learning and understanding it for oneself) is a truly personal experience. It might seem that teaching, or any form of indoctrination, would instill the same exact knowledge on all the pupils, but the different details that every student emphasizes in their mind and their personalities change the way they understand it, and whether or not they perceive the learning as truth.

In the spirit of this personal-ness, no specific truths will be discussed henceforth, but rather the moments of discovery that are most prone to truth generation.

It's important to remember that there is a clear purpose of having truths. A person without any truths will perform mechanically, without any conviction or moral judgement to guide their work. Truth can be used directly to affect judgement on everyday decision-making, to define a person's life, and is especially important to find a meaningful solution to difficult times. For example, recovering from a past malefaction and jailtime requires a strong sense of remorse. The convict has to make that remorse their truth, their reality, something to keep in mind in every waking moment of every day. No amount of scientific knowledge or statistics will get a person past a difficult point in their life if a person is not convinced to accept it: improvements can only happen on a person's own power.

The problem then lies in *how* a person should generate the most meaningful truths. If a person chooses only to rely on their friends-- a convenient source of easy, positive encouragement-- then their advice may be based too much on other people's opinions. At worst, as seen in stereotypical movie renditions of high school cliques, brainwashing of a herd mentality completely overrules the individual. But if a person decides entirely to rely on themselves to discover truths, then it may be entirely too much mental pressure, especially during times of mourning or extreme mental stress, causing breaks in confidence or health. This leads to a general rule of thumb: it is often better to avoid relying on the advice of others and focus on finding one's own path to truth; however, if there is some crisis-- a heavily emotional,

intellectual, or physical strain— people should seek the truth of others more than they do their own. Given that a person's life is generally some combination of weighty and unimportant matters, this rule should provide a balanced, meaningful way to discover truth.

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Case 1: people not in crisis should put some effort into contemplating their actions to find the most meaningful, not the most simple, option.

From a rural and unexciting background, Madame Emma Bovary from Woody Allen's "The Kugelmass Episode" always wished for glamorous, exquisite adventures. Similarly, Sidney Kugelmass felt that his busy, metropolitan life was too much of a bore, and wanted an unsophisticated escape and a passionate romance. It would seem a lucky coincidence and a perfect fit that the two are united.

But problems quickly arise; first a few, then many all at once. Kugelmass sees "ruin and alimony; jail" (Allen 4), problems that never came up in his apparently dull life. He has to put up with "sneaking around town ... not to mention a hotel tab that reads like the defense budget" (4), which is problematic enough that he has to consider starting his life over under a new identity. And the problem is reciprocated for Madame Bovary, who becomes both angry at Kugelmass and worried that her husband will be concerned about her.

And while it would seem reasonable to assume that Madame Bovary and Kugelmass would learn from such a dear mistake, Madame Bovary is known to have multiple extramarital affairs, and Kugelmass asks Persky for another fairytale favor after his affair. Both are driven to their demises by further risky affairs.

The reason for this is simple. In "The Wayfarer" by Stephen Crane, the path to truth— in Madame Bovary's and Kugelmass's case, the satisfaction they wish for— is depicted as a path smothered with weeds, or even knives. "Doubtless there are other roads" (Crane 11) thinks the narrator, but the inverse doesn't even cross his mind: doubtless there are other means to cross this path. Doubtless that a person can snip the weeds or roll a carpet over the knives or simply wear steel-toed boots and a heavy jacket. But that would require too much preparation, too much

extra thinking. In the busy life of the 21st century adult, there never seems to be adequate time set aside for planning time after work, school, social gatherings, and family are scheduled.

But this effort is always a better deal than having to fix cheap, lazy mistakes. Consider an analogy: perhaps the Wayfarer is lost in a heavy jungle, and needs to find a source of drinking water. He knows there is an ancient, pristine oasis a little below the surface in a heavily-wooded and rooted area, but he thinks that he will find help before he needs a steady source of water. So instead he drinks from puddles on the surface. After exhausting the puddles, he becomes desperate and begins to dig a hole to make a well, but just after he reaches it, he dies from the infections caused by his consumption of contaminated water.

If truth is the well or the thorny path, then its greatest demerit (which is also its merit) is that its its troubles are superficial, whether it be thorns or dirt. The problem with alternative paths is that they appear less malicious, but they can be full of traps. It's always the same: a person can buy cheap third-party software to do an expensive task, only to realize a randomware virus was concealed within it, or a person could skip all of their math homework for time's sake, and then pay dearly when he realizes that he has to pass the class to graduate. Taking the easy way out, as Kugelmass and Emma Bovary do, always has its sneaky consequences.

An alternative for Kugelmass would be to talk through his problems with the psychologist or his wife. Fix his marriage. But while his psychologist gives sensible advice, his conclusion is that "[he's] an analyst, not a magician" (Allen 2), after which Kugelmass hopes for a magician. Ironically, the magician Persky later complains to Kugelmass, "I'm a magician, not an analyst" (5). Kugelmass heedlessly seeks a quick solution from others, not committing his relationships because loyalty is not his truth. The statements by his analyst and Persky indicate that nobody can help Kugelmass but himself, but he never tries. But the setting of Kugelmass in the heart of the Big Apple creates a mood of the constant activity: he feels that something should *happen*, and is overly action-oriented without a corresponding anchor in thought.

Emma is not blameless either. Her husband, known to be simple, honest, and loyal, doesn't deserve her infidelity. Either she should work out a divorce for her high-profile dates or attempt to make her own relationship work. Given her abundance of time, she has no excuse to not work on solving her own relationship problems.

And Kugelmass's and Madame Bovary's troubles seem very trivial in comparison to those of John Gardener's monster Grendel, from the novel of the same name. Grendel is an interesting character in that his truth differs greatly from the philosophies of the people in Hrothgar's kingdom. Because no one wants to trust Grendel or accept him in any way, he has no choice other than to create his own principles. The problem is that the philosophies that Grendel subscribes to are those that surface naturally: he does not put any effort into synthesizing them. It is his natural urge to clean up the humans' wasteful mess after war and to terrorize them every now and then. After his encounter with the dragon, one piece of the dragon's advice is to continue terrorizing the humans as he had been doing, but this is terribly convenient to Grendel because it involves no change in his lifestyle. Furthermore, the pessimistic nihilistic view imparted by the dragon is already very similar to that of Grendel's. The reason that Grendel is defeated by the humans is that every time a new truth— a different, human perspective— is offered to him, he cowers away, unable to accept or understand it. Once is when Wealtheow demonstrates beauty to Grendel, and another is when Beowulf expresses an optimistic nihilistic view. Grendel is unable to accommodate these these philosophies, and is destroyed not only physically, but also (perhaps more permanently) ideologically.

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Case 2: people in crisis need to find alternative truths, either in a friend or in literature.

Sometimes a person needs to make up their own truth to survive a crisis situation, so long as the person does not reject other philosophies as Grendel does. This is often the case in war, when a person must distance themselves from the violence, the cruelty, the sheer disgust of the fighting. In *The Things They Carried*, Tim O'Brien writes that he tells war stories that are not "happening truth," but rather a "story truth" that feels more genuine. In other words, often the depiction of a single, real event cannot convey everything that a person feels. According to O'Brien, a story can reveal much more by emphasizing or recreating everything that conveys the *essence* of the truth into a single instance or story. . He writes about people with such precision that they cannot be fictionalized, yet they are: at least, the people are. The things they carry are not. It's similar to Emily Dickinson's poem, "Tell all the truth but tell it slant —", which states that "the Truth must dazzle gradually / or every man be blind" (Dickinson 7-8). In many ways

too much of a truth can be disillusioning. Suppose O'Brien writes instead about the dozens of dead men he sees, including the few that he saw himself kill; death becomes familiar and the war is not what it means to a person at the front.

To survive the war, O'Brien shares an intimate relationship with the other men in his platoon. They share their truths and he his. Usually, this comes in the form of stories. His life is accepted by the others, and he accepts theirs, even stories "that swirl back and forth across the border between trivia and bedlum" (O'Brien 85) about girlfriends gone wild in Vietnam and sanity-depriving jungle music. There is no other choice in the war— communication is a natural form of coping. This is true of other situations of prolonged hardship— for example, the extended hostage situation in Ann Patchett's *Bel Canto* caused the unlikely friendship between the hostages and terrorists that even caused love affairs between the two parties. Months of intimacy cause a friendship past tolerance, past intimacy: something more along the lines of clear, pure understanding. While the hostages and the terrorists have completely different roles, they become a homogenous group to survive. The terrorists and the hostages, like the soldiers, are saved by their ability to understand that everyone else shares their pain. It's a different kind of group mentality than that of cliques, one that is forced and more intimate.

This is the opposite reaction to and outcome of the midlife crisis. According to Christopher Nelson, people who become complacent with themselves and simple decisions, without an effort to reach out to new liberal ideas or new people, are often those who go into the midlife crisis. They lack inspiration or understanding and become human barnacles. While finding a barnacle-like life may appear to solve many simple, tangible problems (after all, living stuck to a rock barnacle-style with a family means "no runaway children, no injudicious bungee-jumping, no family members getting lost while conducting dangerous expeditions into unknown regions" (Nelson 1)), it only does so much before it begins to wear on a person's mental well-being after the "barnacle cements its own prison" (Nelson 1). Grendel, for example, is perhaps experiencing a midlife crisis, fiddling with tedium and a lack of understanding with others. Out of their frustration with communication, characters like Grendel often end up becoming even more reclusive, relying further on themselves to try to find truth, but crisis causes

a mental desperation and lack of creativity. Knowing the hardships of others is the best inspiration in dull times. Trying to find truth by oneself drives the mind crazy.

It's the battle between secrets and time.

When does a person learn to share all of their secrets?

Eveline, from James Joyce's collection of short stories, *Dubliners*, decides to keep quiet her entire conflict between staying home to familial responsibilities or escaping with her fiancé. Rather than trying to talk with her friends and family (at least her brothers, if she has fallen out of terms with her father), any of whom would have some outside insight that would aid her choice. But she debates the choice between family duties and the respect for her own love life ceaselessly until her inaction makes the choice for her. Time runs out, and her secrets win.

But Eveline is still relatively lucky that she is forced to make a decision. But take it to the extreme and experience the tragedy of Hamlet. Hamlet has the conviction to kill the king throughout the entire play, but stalls. He tells himself that he wants to be reasonable, when in reality he wishes to find just the right moment to attack so that he doesn't injure the mental health of him or his friends. Unfortunately, no such situation arrives, and he doesn't receive any advice from his unknowing friends. He dies with his secrets, which are luckily survived by Horatio. Time wins again with Hamlet's indecision.

It follows that Hamlet should have confided in his friends, or his mother. Indeed, in Margaret Atwood's poem, "Gertrude Talks Back," Hamlet does hold a conversation with his mother. And if this conversation did take place in the novel, the tragedy would be prevented. In Gertrude's own words, "[she] could have put [Hamlet] straight in no time flat" (Atwood) with the knowledge. Sometimes it's as simple as asking, and the imaginary conversation quickly and effectively exposes grave truths simply by means of communicating.

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Case 3: people in times of trained crisis have an optimal compromise of independent thinking and environmental stimuli to generate truths.

Human acclimation to stressful situations is normal. At every stage in life, people become more hardy, from the time of their infancy to senescence. Teenagers have it especially rough,

learning to independently and responsibly conduct themselves in a quickly-advancing global workforce. Human perception is that no crisis lasts forever: eventually a person gets used to difficult situations, becomes well-trained to handle the hardship. And it turns out that this process of acclimation is especially useful for meditative, productive truth generation.

Even highly-stressful situations, if properly prepared for or thought out, can be suitable environments for finding truth alone. Sports are a common example, highly-performant and highly-stressful situations, but usually not associated with existential crisis or other distress. Another reason that O'Brien is able to stay mostly sane throughout *The Things They Carried* is because war is an act; it is predictable, the soldiers are trained, and there are clear, military objectives. This is especially true before he gets drafted into the military and is forced to face the decision on his own in the chapter, "On the Rainy River." The shock fades and O'Brien matures immensely as he gets used to the idea of participating in the war. He realizes that "Canada had become a pitiful fantasy" (O'Brien 55) – his sense of bravery and fear are totally redefined. This is illustrated too in "Constantly Risking Absurdity" by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, in which the poet (the "acrobat") performs a set of risky, well-practiced, and beautiful procedures in his art. Like a poet, who is trained and calm, a person who does not have to face a situation in crisis has much more mental freedom to perform well and think freely. And the poet slowly approaches "that still higher perch \ where Beauty stands and waits" (Ferlinghetti 24-25).

Here, the risk is no longer crisis, and can be treated as though it were everyday living (i.e., case 1).

The benefit of treating trained-crisis situations as non-crisis situations is that a person has much more mental freedom, while also overcoming more hardships that are ripe for discovery. Albert Camus analyzes the role of personal enlightenment in the case of the Sisyphus, a person is "superior to his fate" at the "hour of consciousness" (Camus). This consciousness lies at the height of enlightenment (at the beginning of Sisyphus's descent) between the toil of overcoming the crisis (pushing the rock up the hill) and tedium (walking down the hill). Sisyphus is doomed to a life of hardship, but he also has an infinite number of these moments. It's the perfect middle ground between the doldrums of everyday living and the overwhelming sense of despair or pain in crisis.

The best part about this is its inevitability, much like the inevitability of the periods of crisis and tedium in life. It necessarily follows the toughest hardships. It can be Sisyphus as he realizes his accomplishment, or Hamlet as he discovers his honor and success and mortality and failures right before his death, or Grendel as he is struck by the painful wonder-disgust of Wealtheow and the Shaper. Interestingly, Camus realizes that “this myth is tragic ... because its hero is conscious” -- tragedy necessitates this moment at the top of the descent. But it creates beauty in non-tragic ways, too.

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It’s difficult to force a recluse into seeking help. Hamlet thought that he should keep his motive secret and his loved ones out of the entire ordeal. Unfortunately, his failure is great and afflicts everyone around him with sadness at his insanity. And Eveline thought it would be less hurtful for her family not to know she was thinking about leaving, but that only tore herself up.

By the same token, given the opportunity to socialize in worry-free free time is rather enjoyable, but a person should not get carried away in the practice. It doesn’t allow for new truths to form.

The amount a person can learn is directly proportional to the difficulties they face. Little to nothing in leisure time, a larger amount during a crisis (moderated so as to keep a healthy mind), and the most productive moments in times of trained crisis, or the initial part of the descent.

Truth is about learning, and the truth of truth itself can too be learned. Like an exercise, methodical and deliberate, people can elect not to be a Grendel, an Eveline, a Kugelmas, or a Hamlet, falling to their fiery and tragic ends; all it takes is a small conscious effort to decide what help is really needed. Vigilance is key here.

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