Coda

WHAT SHALL I DO WITH MY NEWFOUND PEN OF LIGHT?

In late 2016 I travelled to northern California to meet a friend and business associate. We spent an evening together thinking and talking. At one point he took a pen from his jacket and took a few notes. It was LED-equipped and beamed light out its tip, so that writing in the dark was made easier. “Just another gadget,” I thought. Later, however, in a more metaphorical frame of mind, I was struck quite deeply by the idea of a pen of light. There was something symbolic about it, something metaphysical. We’re all in the dark, after all, much of the time. We could all use something written with light to guide us along our way. I told him I wanted to do some writing, while we sat and conversed, and I asked him if he would give me the pen, as a gift. When he handed it over, I found myself inordinately pleased. Now I could write illuminated words in the darkness! Obviously, it was important to do such a thing properly. So I said to myself, in all seriousness, “What shall I do with my newfound pen of light?” There are two verses in the New Testament that pertain to such things. I’ve thought about them a lot:

Ask, and it shall be given to you; Seek, and ye shall find; Knock, and it shall be open unto you: For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened (Matthew 7:7-7:8)

At first glance, this seems like nothing but a testament to the magic of prayer, in the sense of entreating God to grant favours. But God, whatever or whoever He may be, is no simple granter of wishes. When tempted by the Devil himself, in the desert—as we saw in Rule 7 (Pursue what is meaningful [not what is expedient])—even Christ Himself was not willing to call upon his Father for a favour; furthermore, every day, the prayers of desperate people go unanswered. But maybe this is because the questions they contain are not phrased in the proper manner. Perhaps it’s not reasonable to ask God to break the rules of physics every time we fall by the wayside or make a serious error. Perhaps, in such times, you can’t put the cart before the horse and simply wish for your problem to be solved in some magical manner. Perhaps you could ask, instead, what you might have to do right now to increase your resolve, buttress your character, and find the strength to go on. Perhaps you could instead ask to see the truth.

On many occasions in our nearly thirty years of marriage my wife and I have had a disagreement—sometimes a deep disagreement. Our unity appeared to be broken, at some unknowably profound level, and we were not able to easily resolve the rupture by talking. We became trapped, instead, in emotional, angry and anxious argument. We agreed that when such circumstances arose we would separate, briefly: she to one room, me to another. This was often quite difficult, because it is hard to disengage in the heat of an argument, when anger generates the desire to defeat and win. But it seemed better than risking the consequences of a dispute that threatened to spiral out of control.

Alone, trying to calm down, we would each ask ourselves the same single question: What had we each done to contribute to the situation we were arguing about? However small, however
distant … we had each made some error. Then we would reunite, and share the results of our questioning: Here’s how I was wrong ….

The problem with asking yourself such a question is that you must truly want the answer. And the problem with doing that is that you won’t like the answer. When you are arguing with someone, you want to be right, and you want the other person to be wrong. Then it’s them that has to sacrifice something and change, not you, and that’s much preferable. If it’s you that’s wrong and you that must change, then you have to reconsider yourself—your memories of the past, your manner of being in the present, and your plans for the future. Then you must resolve to improve and figure out how to do that. Then you actually have to do it. That’s exhausting. It takes repeated practice, to instantiate the new perceptions and make the new actions habitual. It’s much easier just not to realize, admit and engage. It’s much easier to turn your attention away from the truth and remain wilfully blind.

But it’s at such a point that you must decide whether you want to be right or you want to have peace. You must decide whether to insist upon the absolute correctness of your view, or to listen and negotiate. You don’t get peace by being right. You just get to be right, while your partner gets to be wrong—defeated and wrong. Do that ten thousand times and your marriage will be over (or you will wish it was). To choose the alternative—to seek peace—you have to decide that you want the answer, more than you want to be right. That’s the way out of the prison of your stubborn preconceptions. That’s the prerequisite for negotiation. That’s to truly abide by principle of Rule 2 (Treat yourself like someone you are responsible for helping).

My wife and I learned that if you ask yourself such a question, and you genuinely desire the answer (no matter how disgraceful and terrible and shameful), then a memory of something you did that was stupid and wrong at some point in the generally not-distant-enough past will arise from the depths of your mind. Then you can go back to your partner and reveal why you’re an idiot, and apologize (sincerely) and that person can do the same for you, and then apologize (sincerely), and then you two idiots will be able to talk again. Perhaps that is true prayer: the question, “What have I done wrong, and what can I do now to set things at least a little bit more right?” But your heart must be open to the terrible truth. You must be receptive to that which you do not want to hear. When you decide to learn about your faults, so that they can be rectified, you open a line of communication with the source of all revelatory thought. Maybe that’s the same thing as consulting your conscience. Maybe that’s the same thing, in some manner, as a discussion with God.

It was in that spirit, with some paper in front of me, that I asked my question: What shall I do with my newfound pen of light? I asked, as if I truly wanted the answer. I waited for a reply. I was holding a conversation between two different elements of myself. I was genuinely thinking—or listening, in the sense described in Rule 9 (Assume that the person you are listening to might know something you don’t). That rule can apply as much to yourself as to others. It was me, of course, who asked the question—and it was me, of course, who replied. But those two me’s were not the same. I did not know what the answer would be. I was waiting for it to appear in the theatre of my imagination. I was waiting for the words to spring out of the void. How can a person think up something that surprises him? How can he already not know what he thinks? Where do new thoughts come from? Who or what thinks them?
Since I had just been given, of all things, a Pen of Light, which could write Illuminated Words in the darkness, I wanted to do the best thing I could with it. So, I asked the appropriate question—and, almost immediately, an answer revealed itself: *Write down the words you want inscribed on your soul.* I wrote that down. That seemed pretty good—a little on the romantic side, granted—but that was in keeping with the game. Then I upped the ante. I decided to ask myself the hardest questions I could think up, and await their answers. If you have a Pen of Light, after all, you should use it to answer Difficult Questions. Here was the first: *What shall I do tomorrow?* The answer came: *The most good possible in the shortest period of time.* That was satisfying, as well—conjoining an ambitious aim with the demands of maximal efficiency.

A worthy challenge. The second question was in the same vein: *What shall I do next year? Try to ensure that the good I do then will be exceeded only by the good I do the year after that.* That seemed solid, too—a nice extension of the ambitions detailed in the previous answer. I told my friend that I was trying a serious experiment in writing with the pen he had given to me. I asked if I could read aloud what I had composed so far. The questions—and the answers—struck a chord with him, too. That was good. That was impetus to continue.

The next question ended the first set: *What shall I do with my life? Aim for Paradise, and concentrate on today.* Hah! I knew what that meant. It’s what Geppetto does in the Disney movie *Pinocchio,* when he wishes upon a star. The grandfatherly woodcarver lifts up his eyes to the twinkling diamond set high above the mundane world of day-to-day human concerns and articulates his deepest desire: that the marionette he created lose the strings by which he is manipulated by others and transform himself into a real boy. It’s also the central message of the Sermon on the Mount, as we saw in Rule 4 (Compare yourself to who you were yesterday …), but which deserve repeating here:

> And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day is, and to morrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith? Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? For your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you (Matthew 6:28-6:33).

What does all that mean? Orient yourself properly. Then—and only then—concentrate on the day. Set your sights at the Good, the Beautiful, and the True, and then focus pointedly and carefully on the concerns of each moment. Aim continually at Heaven while you work diligently on Earth. Attend fully to the future, in that manner, while attending fully to the present. Then you have the best chance of perfecting both.

I turned, then, from the use of time to my relationships with people, and wrote down and then read these questions and answers to my friend: *What shall I do with my wife? Treat her as if she is the Holy Mother of God, so that she may give birth to the world-redeeming hero. What shall I do with my daughter? Stand behind her, listen to her, guard her, train her mind, and let her know it’s OK if she wants to be a mother. What shall I do with my parents? Act such that your actions justify the suffering they endured. What shall I do with my son? Encourage him to be a true Son of God.*
To honour your wife as a Mother of God is to notice and support the sacred element of her role as mother (not just of your children, but as such). A society that forgets this cannot survive. Hitler’s mother gave birth to Hitler, and Stalin’s mother to Stalin. Was something amiss in their crucial relationships? It seems likely, given the importance of the maternal role in establishing trust—to take a single vital example. Perhaps the importance of their motherly duties, and of their relationship with their children, was not properly stressed; perhaps what the women were doing in their maternal guise was not properly regarded by husband, father and society alike. Who instead might a woman produce if she was treated properly, honourably and carefully? After all, the fate of the world rests on each new infant—tiny, fragile and threatened but, in time, capable of uttering the words and doing the deeds that maintain the eternal, delicate balance between chaos and order.

To stand behind my daughter? That’s to encourage her, in everything she wants courageously to do, but to include in that genuine appreciation for the fact of her femininity: to recognize the importance of having a family and children and to forego the temptation to denigrate or devalue that in comparison to accomplishment of personal ambition or career. It’s not for nothing that the Holy Mother and Infant is a divine image—as we just discussed. Societies that cease to honour that image—that cease to see that relationship as of transcendent and fundamental importance—also cease to be.

To act to justify the suffering of your parents is to remember all the sacrifices that all the others who lived before you (not least your parents) have made for you in all the course of the terrible past, to be grateful for all the progress that has been thereby made, and then to act in accordance with that remembrance and gratitude. People sacrificed immensely to bring about what we have now. In many cases, they literally died for it—and we should act with some respect for that fact.

To encourage my son to be a true Son of God? That is to want him above all to do what is right, and to strive to have his back while he is doing so. That is, I think, part of the sacrificial message: to value and support your son’s commitment to transcendent good above all things (including his worldly progress, so to speak, and his safety—and, perhaps, even his life).

I continued asking questions. The answers came within seconds. What shall I do with the stranger? Invite him into my house, and treat him like a brother, so that he may become one. That’s to extend the hand of trust to someone so that his or her best part can step forward and reciprocate. That’s to manifest the sacred hospitality that makes life between those who do not yet know each other possible. What shall I do with a fallen soul? Offer a genuine and cautious hand, but do not join it in the mire. That’s a good summary of what we covered in Rule 3 (Make friends with people who want the best for you). That’s an injunction to refrain both from casting pearls before swine, and from camouflaging your vice with virtue. What shall I do with the world? Conduct myself as if Being is more valuable than Non-Being. Act so that you are not made bitter and corrupt by the tragedy of existence. That’s the essence of Rule 1 (Stand up straight with your shoulders back): confront the uncertainty of the world voluntarily, and with faith and courage.

How shall I educate my people? Share with them those things I regard as truly important. That’s Rule 8 (Tell the truth—or, at least, don’t lie). That is to aim for wisdom, to distill that
wisdom into words, and to speak forth those words as if they matter, with true concern and care. That’s all relevant, as well, to the next question (and answer): **What shall I do with a torn nation? Stitch it back together with careful words of truth.** The importance of this injunction has, if anything, become clearer over the past few years: we are dividing, and polarizing, and drifting toward chaos. It is necessary, under such conditions, if we are to avoid catastrophe, for each of us to bring forward the truth, as we see it: not the arguments that justify our ideologies, not the machinations that further our ambitions, but the stark pure facts of our existence, revealed for others to see and contemplate, so that we can find common ground and proceed together.

**What shall I do for God my Father? Sacrifice everything I hold dear to yet greater perfection.** Let the deadwood burn off, so that new growth can prevail. That’s the terrible lesson of Cain and Abel, detailed in the discussion of meaning surrounding Rule 7. **What shall I do with a lying man? Let him speak so that he may reveal himself.** Rule 9 (Listen …) is once again relevant here, as is another section of the New Testament:

Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them (Matthew 7:16-7:20).

The rot must be revealed before something sound can be put in its place, as was also indicated in Rule 7’s elaboration—and all of this is pertinent to understanding the following question and answer: **How shall I deal with the enlightened one? Replace him with the true seeker of enlightenment.** There is no enlightened one. There is only the one who is seeking further enlightenment. Proper Being is process, not a state; a journey, not a destination. It’s the continual transformation of what you know, through encounter with what you don’t know, rather than the desperate clinging to the certainty that is eternally insufficient in any case. That accounts for the importance of Rule 4 (Compare yourself …). Always place your becoming above your current being. That means it is necessary to recognize and accept your insufficiency, so that it can be continually rectified. That’s painful, certainly—but it’s a good deal.

The next few Q & A’s made another coherent group, focused this time on ingratitude: **What shall I do when I despise what I have? Remember those who have nothing and strive to be grateful.** Take stock of what is right in front of you. Consider Rule 12—somewhat tongue-in-cheek—(Pet a cat when you encounter one on the street). Consider, as well, that you may be blocked in your progress not because you lack opportunity, but because you have been too arrogant to make full use of what already lies in front of you. That’s Rule 6 (Set your house in perfect order before you criticize the world).

I spoke recently with a young man about such things. He had barely ever left his family and never his home state—but he journeyed to Toronto to attend one of my lectures and to meet with me at my home. He had isolated himself far too severely in the short course of his life to date and was badly plagued by anxiety. When we first met, he could hardly speak. He had nonetheless determined in the last year to do something about all of that. He started by taking on the lowly job of dishwasher. He decided to do it well, when he could have treated it contemptuously. Intelligent enough to be embittered by a world that did not recognize his gifts,
he decided instead to accept with the genuine humility that is the true precursor to wisdom whatever opportunity he could find. Now he lives on his own. That’s better than living at home. Now he has some money. Not much. But more than none. And he earned it. Now he is confronting the social world, and benefitting from the ensuing conflict:

Knowledge frequently results from knowing others, but the man who is awakened, has seen the uncarved block. Others might be mastered by force, but to master one’s self requires the Tao. He who has many material things, may be described as rich, but he who knows he has enough, and is at one with the Tao, might have enough of material things and have self-being as well.²¹⁸

As long as my still-anxious but self-transforming and determined visitor continues down his current path, he will become far more competent and accomplished, and it won’t take long. But this will only be because he accepted his lowly state and was sufficiently grateful to take the first equally lowly step away from it. That’s far preferable to waiting, endlessly, for the magical arrival of Godot. That’s far preferable to arrogant, static, unchanging existence, while the demons of rage, resentment and un-lived life gather around.

What shall I do when greed consumes me? Remember that it is truly better to give than to receive. The world is a forum of sharing and trading (that’s Rule 7, again), not a treasure-house for the plundering. To give is to do what you can to make things better. The good in people will respond to that, and support it, and imitate it, and multiply it, and return it, and foster it, so that everything improves and moves forward.

What shall I do when I ruin my rivers? Seek for the living water and let it cleanse the Earth. I found this question, as well as its answer, particularly unexpected. It seems most associated with Rule 6 (Set your house . . .). Perhaps our environmental problems are not best construed technically. Maybe they’re best considered psychologically. The more people sort themselves out, the more responsibility they will take for the world around them and the more problems they will solve.²¹⁹ It is better, proverbially, to rule your own spirit than to rule a city. It’s easier to subdue an enemy without than one within. Maybe the environmental problem is ultimately spiritual. If we put ourselves in order, perhaps we will do the same for the world. Of course, what else would a psychologist think?

The next set were associated with proper response to crisis and exhaustion:

What shall I do when my enemy succeeds? Aim a little higher and be grateful for the lesson. Back to Matthew: “Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven” (5:43-5:45). What does this mean? Learn, from the success of your enemies; listen (Rule 9) to their critique, so that you can glean from their
opposition whatever fragments of wisdom you might incorporate, to your betterment; adopt as your ambition the creation of a world in which those who work against you see the light and wake up and succeed, so that the better at which you are aiming can encompass them, too.

What shall I do when I’m tired and impatient? Gratefully accept an outstretched helping hand. This is something with a twofold meaning. It’s an injunction, first, to note the reality of the limitations of individual being and, second, to accept and be thankful for the support of others—family, friends, acquaintances and strangers alike. Exhaustion and impatience are inevitable. There is too much to be done and too little time in which to do it. But we don’t have to strive alone, and there is nothing but good in distributing the responsibilities, cooperating in the efforts, and sharing credit for the productive and meaningful work thereby undertaken.

What shall I do with the fact of aging? Replace the potential of my youth with the accomplishments of my maturity. This hearkens back to the discussion of friendship surrounding Rule 3, and the story of Socrates’ trial and death—which might be summarized, as follows: A life lived thoroughly justifies its own limitations. The young man with nothing has his possibilities to set against the accomplishments of his elders. It’s not clear that it’s necessarily a bad deal, for either. “An aged man is but a paltry thing,” wrote William Butler Yeats, “A tattered coat upon a stick, unless/Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing/For every tatter in its mortal dress ….”

What shall I do with my infant’s death? Hold my other loved ones and heal their pain. It is necessary to be strong in the face of death, because death is intrinsic to life. It is for this reason that I tell my students: aim to be the person at your father’s funeral that everyone, in their grief and misery, can rely on. There’s a worthy and noble ambition: strength in the face of adversity. That is very different from the wish for a life free of trouble.

What shall I do in the next dire moment? Focus my attention on the next right move. The flood is coming. The flood is always coming. The apocalypse is always upon us. That’s why the story of Noah is archetypal. Things fall apart—we stressed that in the discussion surrounding Rule 10 (Be precise in your speech)—and the centre cannot hold. When everything has become chaotic and uncertain, all that remains to guide you might be the character you constructed, previously, by aiming up and concentrating on the moment at hand. If you have failed in that, you will fail in the moment of crisis, and then God help you.

That last set contained what I thought were the most difficult of all the questions I asked that night. The death of a child is, perhaps, the worst of catastrophes. Many relationships fail in the aftermath of such a tragedy. But dissolution in the face of such horror is not inevitable, although it is understandable. I have seen people immensely strengthen their remaining family bonds when someone close to them has died. I have seen them turn to those who remained and redouble their efforts to connect with them and support them. Because of that, all regained at least some of what had been so terribly torn away by death. We must therefore commiserate in our grief. We must come together in the face of the tragedy of existence. Our families can be the living room with the fireplace that is cozy and welcoming and warm while the storms of winter rage outside.

The heightened knowledge of fragility and mortality produced by death can terrify, embitter and separate. It can also awaken. It can remind those who grieve not to take the people who love
them for granted. Once I did some chilling calculations regarding my parents, who are in their eighties. It was an example of the hated arithmetic we encountered in the discussion of Rule 5 (Do not let your children do anything that makes you dislike them)—and I walked through the equations so that I would stay properly conscious. I see my Mom and Dad about twice a year. We generally spend several weeks together. We talk on the phone in the interim between visits. But the life expectancy of people in their eighties is under ten years. That means I am likely to see my parents, if I am fortunate, fewer than twenty more times. That’s a terrible thing to know. But knowing it puts a stop to my taking those opportunities for granted.

The next set of questions—and answers—had to do with the development of character. What shall I say to a faithless brother? The King of the Damned is a poor judge of Being. It is my firm belief that the best way to fix the world—a handyman’s dream, if ever there was one—is to fix yourself, as we discussed in Rule 6. Anything else is presumptuous. Anything else risks harm, stemming from your ignorance and lack of skill. But that’s OK. There’s plenty to do, right where you are. After all, your specific personal faults detrimentally affect the world. Your conscious, voluntary sins (because no other word really works) makes things worse than they have to be. Your inaction, inertia and cynicism removes from the world that part of you that could learn to quell suffering and make peace. That’s not good. There are endless reasons to despair of the world, and to become angry and resentful and to seek revenge.

Failure to make the proper sacrifices, failure to reveal yourself, failure to live and tell the truth—all that weakens you. In that weakened state, you will be unable to thrive in the world, and you will be of no benefit to yourself or to others. You will fail and suffer, stupidly. That will corrupt your soul. How could it be otherwise? Life is hard enough when it is going well. But when it’s going badly? And I have learned through painful experience that nothing is going so badly that it can’t be made worse. This is why Hell is a bottomless pit. This is why Hell is associated with that aforementioned sin. In the most awful of cases, the terrible suffering of unfortunate souls becomes attributable, by their own judgment, to mistakes they made knowingly in the past: acts of betrayal, deception, cruelty, carelessness, cowardice and, most commonly of all, willful blindness. To suffer terribly and to know yourself as the cause: that is Hell. And once in Hell it is very easy to curse Being itself. And no wonder. But it’s not justifiable. And that’s why the King of the Damned is a poor judge of Being.

How do you build yourself into someone on whom you can rely, in the best of times and the worst—in peace and in war? How do you build for yourself the kind of character that will not ally itself, in its suffering and misery, with all who dwell in Hell? The questions and answers continued, all pertinent, in one way or another, to the rules I have outlined in this book:

What shall I do to strengthen my spirit? Do not tell lies, or do what you despise.
What shall I do to ennoble my body? Use it only in the service of my soul.
What shall I do with the most difficult of questions? Consider them the gateway to the path of life.
What shall I do with the poor man’s plight? Strive through right example to lift his broken heart.
What shall I do when the great crowd beckons? Stand tall and utter my broken truths.
And that was that. I still have my Pen of Light. I haven’t written anything with it since. Maybe I will again when the mood strikes and something wells up from deep below. But, even if I don’t, it helped me find the words to properly close this book.

I hope that my writing has proved useful to you. I hope it revealed things you knew that you did not know you knew. I hope the ancient wisdom I discussed provides you with strength. I hope it brightened the spark within you. I hope you can straighten up, sort out your family, and bring peace and prosperity to your community. I hope, in accordance with Rule 11 (Do not bother children when they are skateboarding), that you strengthen and encourage those who are committed to your care instead of protecting them to the point of weakness.

I wish you all the best, and hope that you can wish the best for others.
What will you write with your pen of light?

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