At Home in the Universe

Who am I?
Stories I tell myself and others.

A “spiritual” autobiography -
remembering,
telling and writing
the self-narrative

of Urs Boeschenstein
At Home in the Universe

If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, Infinite.
For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern.

William Blake

My philosophy is to live in peace and harmony with myself, to live every day as it comes and to continue to be curious, to keep learning to think new ideas.

Jane Goodall

I don’t know whether the universe, with its countless galaxies, stars and planets, has a deeper meaning or not, but at the very least, it is clear that we humans who live on this earth face the task of making a happy life for ourselves.

Dalai Lama

For the first fifty years of my life, I rarely felt at home – not in the universe, not on the planet earth, not with many other humans, not within myself. Most of the time I was an exile, an “outsider” - nowhere at home. Now, getting nearer to my eightieth year of life, I realize - with amazement - that I have become a happy old man, at home with myself, at home with other people, at home in the universe.

“Who am I?” - stories

The story of how I learnt to open “doors of perception”, to “live in peace with myself”, to “face the task of making a happy life”, to learn to be “at home in the universe” is a long story indeed, a long story of many stories that I tell myself - stories that looking back I needed to revise, to re-tell again and again in ever-changing forms.

All these stories answer one question: Who am I? When did I ask that question for the first time? Was it the little boy who listened to his father reading the Bible, was it the adolescent who had not yet found his form and did not know who he was, or was it the young adult who studied linguistics, the history of the stories that we humans tell ourselves:

We tell ourselves stories of origins and endings, of form and transformation, of gods, the word, and law. All people, at all times must have created myths and stories to sketch a picture of our place under the sun. Cro-Magnon man, whose paintings of animals seem to exhibit a respect and awe, let alone line and form, that equals or surpasses those of later millennia, must have spun answers to these questions:

Who are we? Where did we come from? Why are we here?

Did Neanderthal, Homo habilis, or Homo erectus ask? Around which fire in the past 3 million years of hominin evolution did these questions first arise?

We live in a world of stunning complexity. Molecules of all varieties join in a metabolic dance to make cells. Cells interact with cells to form organisms; organisms interact with organisms to form ecosystems, economies, societies. Where did this grand architecture come from?

As Darwin taught us, the order of the biological world evolves as natural selection shifts among random mutations for the rare, useful forms. In crafting the living world, selection has always acted on systems that exhibit spontaneous order. If I am right, this underlying order, further honed by selection, augurs a new place for us—expected, rather than vastly improbable, at home in the universe in a newly understood way.

Stuart Kauffman

Stories we tell ourselves! I believe that I achieved my little bit of “happiness” by hard mental work, revising the stories that I tell myself, attempting to reflect on my fundamental assumptions and presuppositions concerning our human “reality”.

1 Stuart Kauffman At Home in the Universe, Penguin Books, 1995
Trying to understand my weltbild changes, I studied hundreds of books on what other humans thought and I reflected on their epistemology – their knowledge of knowledge. In the last three years I attempted to order what I had learnt in an essay “Wordview-Revisions”

- changes in my belief system, a sort of “intellectual” autobiography - weltbild changes from earth to water, to air, and to fire.

My “weltbild”-house had been very real for fifty years. I never doubted that my worldview had a secure “real” ground. What I doubted were “beliefs”, beliefs in a spiritual realm, beliefs in mythological stories of how our world came to be. I was an militant atheist, militant in the very unpleasant conviction that it was my duty to fight believers.

In the past thirty years my worldview started to shift, I lost my secure ontological ground. In my worldview-revision text I describe these shifts: from a worldview float, a perspective which allowed me to integrate oppositions; to a worldview airship, a perspective that gained me a wider horizon; and in the past few years – slowly becoming a wise old man - a creative worldview in the abstract space of theory, synthesizing a multiverse of perspectives:

This space of theory – the world of meaning – is a world of many viewpoints and many questions that are difficult to ask and difficult to answer: What is meaning? What is communication? To reflect on such questions we need to overcome the limitations of our language, we need to develop radically new concepts.

L’heure est venue pour nous demander ce que c’est la philosophie: La philosophie est l’art de former, d’inventer, de fabriquer des concepts. Mais il ne fallait pas seulement que la réponse recueille la question, Il fallait pouvoir la poser “entre amis”, comme une confiance ou une confiance. Gilles Deleuze

We need friends to interact, to communicate, we need friends we can trust, we need friends to invent new concepts that help us to find out who we are. We need friends to become aware of an infinite world of meaning, to be able to be at home in a universe that we to construct ourselves. The world of meaning is not given out there, we make it and we need friends to build it together.

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2 Urs Boeschenstein Worldview-Revisions 2013
3 Gilles Deleuze Félix Guattari Qu’est-ce que la philosophie Les éditions de minuit 1991, pg.7
To stop the world

We need friends to “stop the world”. To “stop the world” had become a catchphrase among readers of Carlos Castaneda many years ago, in the seventies. I had never been a believer in the lore of Don Juan, but I had been fascinated by the phrase “stop the world”, wondering what it could mean. How does one stop the world? A useful interpretation I found many years later, reading Gilles Deleuze⁴:

“Trouve toi-même tes lieux, ton régime, tes lignes de fuite! Sémiotise toi-même, au lieu de chercher dans ton enfance toute faite et ta sémiologie d’Occidental. Stopper le monde exprime parfaitement certains états de conscience au cours desquelles la réalité de la vie quotidienne est modifié, ceci parceque le flot des interprétations, d’ordinaire continu, est interrompu par un ensemble de circonstances étrangères à ce flot” (Castaneda).

Bref, une véritable transformation sémiotique fait appel à toutes sortes de variables, non seulement extérieures, mais implicites dans la langue, intérieure aux énoncés.

Gilles Deleuze

We need friends to stop our tendency to believe that the world we construct with the words of our language is the world. The world does not exist outside, it is inside, inside our brains and inside the stories we tell, inside our language. With a little help of our friends, we may learn to stop the world⁵, to transform our perspectives, to review our worldview.

On my time travel from learning to speak before the Second World War to the revision of my language, my fabrication of new concepts, in the beginning of the third millennium I transformed myself from a naive realist - who being stuck in his ontology needed to ground his knowing in perception - into an “inforg”, an information processing story teller.

“We are informational organisms (inforgs), mutually connected and embedded in an informational environment (the infosphere), which we share with other informational agents, both natural and artificial, that also process information logically and autonomously. Questions about our personal identities, self conceptions, and social selves are as old as the philosophical question “who am I?”.

Of the many approaches that seek to characterise the nature of the self, two stand out as popular and promising for the task ahead. One is usually dated back to the great empiricist philosopher John Locke (1632 to 1704). Your identity is grounded in the unity of your consciousness and the continuity of your memories.

Then there is a second approach, more recent, known as the Narrative theory of the self. According to it, your identity is a “story”, understood as a socio- and/or auto-biographical artefact. We identify (provide identities to) each other. Today, we increasingly acknowledge the importance of a common yet unprecedented phenomenon, which may be described as the online construction of personal identities.

Who we are, who do we become, and who could we be, once we increasingly spend our time in the infosphere? The self is seen as a complex informational system, made of consciousness activities, memories, or narratives. From such a perspective, you are your own information.

Luciano Floridi⁶

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⁴ Gilles Deleuze / Félix Guattari Mille Plateaux Editions de minuit 1980, 172.
⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari A Thousand Plateaus, transl. Brian Massumi, Continuum 1987: “Stopping the world” is indeed an appropriate rendition of certain states of awareness in which the reality of everyday life is altered because the flow of interpretation, which ordinarily runs uninterruptedly, has been stopped by a set of circumstances alien to the flow. In short, a true semiotic transformation appeals to all kinds of variables, not only external ones, but also variables implicit to language, internal to statements.
⁶ Luciano Floridi The 4th Revolution, How the Infosphere is Reshaping Human Reality Oxford University Press 2014
The storytelling Me - à la recherché du temps perdu

Writing my intellectual autobiography had been hard work. When I finally allowed myself to accept what I had written, I published a “final” draft on my homepage, convinced it was an adequate description of the transformations of my worldview structures through the years of my life.

I proudly gave a copy of my paper to my good friend Clements, when we “winter birds” met again in the warm “cold season” in Thailand’s pleasant Isaan province. He did not like my paper: “Your text is difficult to read”, he said, “it is not a story – it is just a collection of quotes”. His remarks shattered my pride, a few years ago such remarks would have made me angry. I would have reacted to unwarranted criticism with: No, no, no! You don’t understand! But this time I surprised myself, I heard myself say:

Clements, you are right! My worldview-revision story is indeed not my story. It is the story of what other people think about fundamental changes in human worldviews. But reflecting on changes in world views is the motive that keeps me alive.

I want to find out how I can use the results of human reflection, the results of philosophical and scientific investigation to make better decisions every day; I am trying to learn to keep walking on the sunny side of the street every moment of my life.

Clements nodded agreement but added: To convince me, you have to tell me your story of this lifelong learning process, the story who you are!

Who am I? - I (the 79 years old “me”) smiled - I am the stories that I tell myself; and there are many voices in “me” that are telling many different stories.

I have long ago buried the illusion of an ego, I have thrown my captain’s cap away and learnt to listen to the many voices that form the parliament of my memories.

I have even learnt to trust memory voices that cannot talk. I call them my guardian angels, or when I’m in a scientific mood my “intuition” and I listen carefully when such a pre-conscious voice warns me to rethink my decisions, my wants and my wishes.

Some of my “voices” tell stories of what happened to me (to us) many years ago.

But who is “me”? Who are you? Who are we? Are we our memories of episodes or are we memories of feelings that we cannot “know”, because we cannot speak about what we do not consciously know?

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7 [http://www.uboeschenstein.ch/](http://www.uboeschenstein.ch/)
I’m sorry, Clements, I cannot truly tell you who I am. I don’t know where to begin. Shall I start with the little unhappy boy I was seventy years ago or with the happy “me” I am now? Just tell me the story of how you became who you became! That story is actually very simple, I said, it is about learning to be “at home in the world”, “me” being happy in my world.

“At home in the universe”, that might be the title for a different worldview revision text, I thought later that evening, sitting on the balcony of my hotel room watching the sunset. Maybe I should write my “spiritual” auto-biography, graphing my auto-biography, my self-narrative⁸, telling my little stories.

I’ll do it my way.

I started collecting ideas for many stories together with Clements. We spent many pleasant afternoons telling stories about how we got to be who we had been, who we are and who we still hope to become, how two old men had learnt to be at home in the universe. Clements told me about his guitar playing in a rock band back in the sixties. I followed, at the next storytelling afternoon, with my story of “me” - the performer that I had been long ago, remembering: stories about the “good old times”, stories about successfully dealing with living one’s life.

**My self-narrative - “me” - the performer**

The folksinger “me” – that’s a long story, forty years of my life. Tell me, he said. So - Clements being a Scotsman - I thought I might sing him a Scottish song, Roby Burn’s “For the sake o’somebody⁹ and failed miserably. I had not sung the song for more than thirty years and could no longer remember the lyrics. But Clements did not mind: You have an amazing voice, he said. Yes, I know I had, I always loved singing, the singing lessons were the happiest moments of my school years. I could sing better than any of the other children in my class and I enjoyed that. Now I only use my voice for speaking, for telling stories. Why, he asked. At the age of sixty, I lost my hearing and had to give up my career as a performer. I had a difficult time at sixty, the first signs of approaching old age, the end of “me” the performer.

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⁸ Luciano Floridi The 4th Revolution, How the Infosphere is Reshaping Human Reality Oxford University Press 2014: **self narratives**: the construction of our social self (who people think you are) feeds back into the development of your self-conception (who you think you are), which then feeds back into the moulding of your personal identity (who you are).

⁹ Roby Burns For the sake o’somebody: My heart is sair
You know, when my voice broke and changed into a powerful baritone voice I started to have a lot of success as a folksinger. I learned to play the guitar to accompany myself, very badly, I never became a good guitar player, but my singing was really good, I developed my own style of singing ballads and over the years developed a repertoire of many hundreds of songs.

In the sixties I started to write my own songs, singing my protest songs at large gatherings of the antinuclear power movement. Some of my songs became quite popular, in the course of the years I produced more than twenty LPs, collections of Swiss folksongs, English and French songs, my own compositions.

But then, nearing forty, I became uneasy with my success, I felt I needed a change and started learning to sing mediaeval songs, collecting a repertoire of “Minnelieder”, troubadour and trouvère songs. This kind of music I could no longer accompany on my guitar, so I started to learn to play thirteenth century minstrels instruments, the hurdy-gurdy, the cittern, the rebec, and many kinds of flutes. Practising my new instruments, eight to ten hours a day, was really enjoyable, working hard on my music changed the singer into a musician. I started to study music theory, the structure of monophonic music and for many years gave concert-lectures all over Europe and even in the United States. Twenty years ago, when my failing hearing stopped me appearing on stage, “me”, the musician, had a hard time to adapt. To avoid falling into depressions, I learned to compose “fractal music” on the computer and I started collecting everything that had ever been recorded during my long performer career, memorabilia, my music archive.

I also had other memorabilia – photos of my car collection – that I still carry with me, and sometimes indulge in memories, dreaming of former pleasures. Next time the two retired musicians met, I showed my friend my treasures.

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10 Urs Boeschenstein *Muure-Blues*  
11 Urs Boeschenstein *Wolfram Suite*  
12 Urs Boeschenstein *Music Archive*
This is the folksinger with his 1930 Austin 7 - I told Clements, showing him this picture. I used to be crazy about old cars. I used to be car crazy too, he admitted, we all were back then. Yes, I know, but with me it was a mental illness that accompanied me for many years.

Where did you find that beauty, he wanted to know and set me off to one of my favorite stories:

I found it sitting in a scrap yard at Aberdeen, the lady is Scottish. I studied at King’s College in the winter 1965 and felt miserable both for the abominable Scottish winter weather and the abominable teaching at the college. So the student went for long walks on the heath behind the house where we stayed and one day I espied the beauty, bought it for 200£, had it delivered to the garage next to our rented house and started restoring her, it took me six months. The first time I took my family for a ride in it, my six-year-old son did not like it, for him it was much too slow (back in Switzerland we went for rides in a Mini Cooper, which had been sold to pay for our stay in Scotland).

That I sold the Cooper S because I needed the money is only half the truth. Here comes the second half:

When the good news arrived that I had won a scholarship to study at Aberdeen for a full year, my wife and I decided that the whole family would move to Aberdeen. To find a place where to stay I drove my Cooper from Zürich to Aberdeen during the summer holidays. I did it in record time: twenty-two hours driving. Taking off from Zürich at 9 PM, I arrived at the ferry at Callais at 6 PM. From Dover through England to the Scottish border and on to Edinburgh and Aberdeen took me twelve hours.

I very much liked Aberdeen, it was a beautiful city, the granite city of the North, I liked the people, I liked the weather and I was able to find a convenient flat for the family: Hilton Street 70, Aberdeen.

And then I drove back, very fast, I had promised myself I would break my own record, but I didn’t. Everything went well through England. I arrived in France at eleven in the evening. The first few hundred kilometers, driving through a dark night - fast but carefully, I managed an average of about 80km/h, too slow to beat my record. Then, shortly after Reims, a very fast Citroen overtook me, I trailed him – keeping a safety distance of 150 yards, watching his taillights. He was driving really fast, over a 140, but I kept behind, enjoying the ride (and the sound of a Beatles record). The road, straight on for kilometers, straight on but up and down. In those days there were only very few motorways in France; it was still the old “routes nationales” that had been built in the 18th-century.

The Citroen’s taillights would disappear behind a hilltop, I would temporarily lose my guide, but then catch up with him again. This happened many times until coming up a dark hill again the night sky suddenly became bright, as if there had been an explosion. I hit the brakes and managed to stop a hundred meters from a horrible sight, two cars had crashed - burning. I ran over to the site of the accident, there was nothing I could do. Only a few minutes later I heard the sound of a police car coming from the other side and ran through the field to where they were trying to stop the fire, I watched from a safe distance. When the fire was extinguished I walked back to the road. One of the policeman told me that they had received a phone call, alerting them to a car that was driving zig-zag through the town 10 km away, without lights, a the driver obviously very drunk. They had been five minutes late!

“Have you seen the crash”, another policeman asked, I said no. I didn’t tell them the story of my trailing the Citroen. We walked over to where I had parked the Cooper, the policeman guided me on a country lane back to the “nationale”. I drove on - very, very slowly.
Back in Zürich I unloaded my bags at home, drove the Cooper to the garage where I had bought it and told the mechanic: Please, sell it! I promised myself I would never drive a fast car again.

And with that promise - I would never drive a fast car again! – I return to the full truth of my “car illness”:

The day after our first outing in my self-built beauty, I brought my little boy to school in the Austin 7. He still did not like it, but when he came back for lunch, he told me that all his friends at school had very much liked the old Austin 7, and so from then on we often drove to school in the “Goat” - as he called my beauty - and happily showed our treasure to all his buddies. At the end of my scholarship year at King’s College I drove the old lady back home to Switzerland. My wife and kids had left Aberdeen before me by train, I was solo, just me and my restored Austin. We travelled on small B roads, and wherever I passed an old garage I would stop and enquire for spares, back in 1966 spares were still available. Somewhere in Yorkshire the garage owner told me: No, spares there aren’t, but down there in that shed, I think there is an old Austin. I went to look and found a very rare specimen, a 1929 Austin Swallow. Half an hour later I continued my journey being the proud owner of two Austin Sevens.

I travelled back to Yorkshire the following year and brought my second vintage car to Switzerland. My wife and kids complained because the next three years I spent all my spare time in my workshop restoring the Swallow. In the following years the collection grew further. I bought a 1924 Austin Chummy, from a friend at the Pre-War Austin club, and a 1935 Austin Nippy. Car crazy “me” could not stop. For ten years I enjoyed driving my Austins daily. And then in 1976 my wife’s divorce lawyer asked for her share, making me so bloody angry that I secretly sold the whole lot. My green conscience helped only little to overcome the loss, but it helped to live without car for almost ten years. I must admit that in those ten years I rode heavy British motorbikes, BSAs, Triumphs and Nortons; overcoming my infatuation with cars was not easy, in spite of my sore green conscience my addiction to motoring was stronger. In 1985 I was tempted to buy an Austin Mini Moke. In 1992 I was asked to transfer a 1921 Silver Ghost Rolls Royce from London to Slovenia and almost fell into the trap of buying it, when the owner offered it to me when I delivered the car, a near miss. And then, when I was sixty, I bought a Marlin, the beautiful blue kit car below.
I had dreamed about a two seater sports car when I was forty years younger. As a student I could not afford to buy one, now at sixty, I drove my dream car with ever so much enjoyment over ten and more Alpine passes in one go, the Simplon, the Furka, the St. Gotthard, the San Bernardiino, the Splugen, the Maloya, the Bernina, and some Italian passes in addition. But after four years regularly paying too much money for expensive tires and servicing the highly tuned engine, I finally gave up dreaming – the Marlin was sold. I was finally healed from my infatuation with speed. I still love driving, but these days it is a small two seater city car, a Smart. I am not yet cured from my love motoring mobility, that “mental illness” will probably stay with me for the rest of my life.

_Nobody is perfect!_ Clements said, and that was that.

Later that winter day in Korat Clements’ remark came back to my mind: _Nobody is perfect!_ Something bothered me, deep inside something made me feel uneasy. I did not like the word “perfect”. I asked myself: What does he “mean” using the word “perfect”? What does the word “perfect” denote? How can anything be “perfect”? How do we judge what is perfect?

*Nobody is perfect!* Reflections on the idea of perfection

What makes us think we must improve to become perfect? What tells us that we ought to become better? Why can’t we be content with what we are? These questions pushed me into an uneasy pensiveness, reflective thinking processes that are much more difficult to deal with than formulating stories out of memories that come up easily; memories that allow me to tell tales about my career as a singer and as a car collector, jokingly mentioning an incurable “mental illness”.

_We are all damaged in our own way._

*Nobody is perfect.*

_We are all damaged in our own way._ Johnny Depp

In what way are we all damaged in our own way? What is my hidden mental illness, the incurable problem deep inside? What was it that had damaged me? Is it a deep-seated problem with not being perfect, with not being good enough? What bothers me about the concept of “perfection”? My stream of thought ebbed out – no tangible answer came in sight, I gave up.

I got up and went back into the room to lie down, my ruminations had made me tired. I noticed a book standing on the shelf above my bed, a book I had taken along for re-reading but had not _seen_ for many weeks – Laurence Sterne: “The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman”. A little voice whispered: The last time you opened that book, you marked a passage on “friendship”, remember? I opened the book and read:
“I have undertaken, you see, to write not only my life, but my opinions also; hoping and expecting that your knowledge of my character, and of what kind of a mortal I am, by the one, would give you a better relish for the other. As you proceed further with me, the slight acquaintance which is now beginning betwixt us, will grow into familiarity; and that will terminate in friendship.”

Laurence Sterne

Storytelling, including facts of life and opinions, seems to be a deep urge for speaking humans, it serves to bind us together. Reading this made me smile. “As you proceed further with me, the slight acquaintance which is now beginning betwixt us, will grow into familiarity; and that will terminate in friendship”.

The two storytelling old men were slowly becoming “friends”. I smiled happily and thought that “the slight acquaintance” that we had achieved so far telling “success stories - the performer “me” story, the car collector “me” story - would have to be complemented by “failure stories” to allow us to become a little wiser. With Clements' remark “Nobody is perfect!” we had stumbled on a new level – the level of highly abstract concepts with hidden assumptions and presuppositions. Approaching the concept of perfection we were bound to develop “wisdom” a little further with lots of “deviating” stories, bound to recognize that all polar opposites are “identical”

When a man sits down to write a history he knows no more than his heels what lets and confounded hindrances he is to meet with in his way —or what a dance he may be led, by one excursion or another, before it is all over. For, if he is a man of the least spirit, he will have fifty deviations from a straight line.

Laurence Sterne

What confounded hindrances led me to the uncountable deviations from a straight line? And then I laughed out loud: Human life is not a journey to reach perfection. It is a life to be lived. You are good enough as you are!

Why can’t you believe that? I asked myself. That’s a question you should have asked before, the conscious, reflecting “me” shouted. Another quieter voice added: It is a question you could not possibly have thought before. To invent new ideas, to ask new questions, to “fabriquer des concepts”, you need the help of your friends, the help of all the billions of humans that form the global brain.

Next time we are going to meet we shall have a lot of concept fabrication to do. We shall have to talk about friends, about communication, dialogue, and about the troubling, empty idea of perfection and how we can learn to overcome our personal damage and develop new thoughts. A chance to do just that opened when we started to tell each other stories about our early adult life.

Clements told me about his years in Germany playing in American Army Rock Music Clubs and he promised me stories about Gisela, his very special girlfriend, he also told me his stories of spending some weeks in police custody for some grams of hashish. And I filled in my story of the one night stand in prison for the cannabis plants that the police had found in my garden. While listening to his tales from the sixties my mind produced flashbacks of memories of the younger me: I had been a victim of a fundamentalist Christian upbringing.

I don’t like to remember those years, I said to Clements. The memories that pop-up when I look so far back still bother me. The “me now” doesn’t like the “me then”. I was a greenhorn in the art of living and carried an enormously big rucksack of suppressed, hidden memories from a sometimes very unhappy childhood.

Laurence Sterne The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman
“The “me then” was a young man who did not like himself, who rarely felt at home with himself. He was feeling insecure, without knowing why he was feeling insecure, his inferiority complex was well hidden.

On the outside he was a handsome tween, on the inside he “knew” he was not good enough. He had not yet found his identity, his form, and he did not know how to find his form.

He searched, he tried out different habits and changed them when in his reading he found new models that might suit him better. The one habit that suited him least was a uniform. He hated wearing a uniform. And he had to wear one for 333 days, serving in the Swiss Army as a recruit and later as a corporal. I still get very uneasy when I look at that picture of myself as a young soldier.

The year of military service was the worst year of my life. I couldn’t deal with authority, with orders that came from above. One day I blew up and shouted back at an officer “You are a stupid asshole!” and spent ten days in military prison; not a pleasant experience at all. I simply couldn’t adapt to that uni-form. I couldn’t reflect on why I was so unhappy. I rebelled against authority. I was a victim of life, controlled by an external source – “fremdgesteuert” – and I hated it.

The most urgent unsolvable problem for the young adult “me” was sex. Unmarried young men - bachelors - were not allowed to have sex in the Protestant Christian culture in which I grew up. In Zurich there was even a law that forbid unmarried young adults to live together, the “Konkubinatsverbot” – prohibition of co-habiting. In defiance of that law my first girlfriend and I co-habited happily for more than a year, until one day her father turned up at the door of our love nest. That was a disaster, he demanded that she return to her family home, sex would be forbidden until we would be married when I would finish my university studies and get a diploma.

My girlfriend obeyed the patriarch.

And then - the most stupid idea of my life - I decided I would give up my studies and get myself a primary teacher’s diploma, that would take only a year.

We got married in 1958, she was 22, I was 23.

Clements wanted to know how the marriage worked out.

I told him more sad stories of my life between twenty and thirty, stories of how I refused to accept the fate that my wife (and her father) had in mind for me, live my life as a primary school teacher. I wanted more from life, but did not know what the “more” might be.
All around me I observed people who wanted more money, who tried to become rich, I was not interested in money, nor was I tempted by success. What exactly it was that I wanted I could formulate only thirty years later, in the middle of my midlife crisis; only then did I realize that I wanted knowing.

At 24 I went back to university to study linguistics, I wanted to know how my mind works, how my brain works, how my language works. I am curious to know what makes the world go round, curious to know what scientists and philosophers, linguists and communication theorists have to say about this unfathomable world of ours.

Never lose a holy curiosity, Clements quoted Albert Einstein. I answered with a Kipling quote:

I keep six honest serving-men,
They taught me all I knew;
Their names are What and Why and When
And How and Where and Who.

How did curiosity help to keep your family fed?
You know, Clements, telling this story is very difficult. The old man who is telling it feels very differently from the man I was when I lived this story. I'm inclined to look at the younger me with pity, a feeling that is not appropriate at all, the young man very much enjoyed what he was doing, working fourteen hours six days a week, teaching English at boys schools and girls schools, running from teaching assignments to university lectures and back to teaching assignments from 7 am till 9 pm. On Saturdays I drove a taxi cab from 5 pm till 5 am on Sunday mornings. I was always tired but I enjoyed my life enormously.

What about your marriage, Clements asked, how did the marriage work out? Badly - we quarreled about money, we had hardly enough to make both ends meet and that was something my wife with her upper-middle-class background was not used to. We quarreled a lot and when I mentioned my secret ambition of continuing an academic career with postgraduate studies in America, my wife flatly refused: You have family responsibilities, she said, give up your adolescent dreams and start earning a living, like everybody else. And - I did. I was offered a job as program editor at Radio Zürich and started making money - like everybody else. It was a fascinating job, I liked to work in the media. Only very rarely did a nagging voice pestered me with: You should have gone on studying! I usually managed very well to keep it quiet, but there was another voice that I could not stop: You are married to the wrong woman! After fifteen years of marriage we were divorced. I had my freedom back, but I paid a heavy price. I fell into the almost deadly trap of trying to change my past by ruminating and regurgitating “I should have …” stories:

I should have kicked her father out.
I should have kicked her out when she returned to her family.
I should never have been married.
I should never have had children.
I should have continued studying.
I should have decided differently.
I should have acted in a manner more adequate to the situation then.
I should have….! I should have….! I should have….!

People started looking at the two foreigners, one of whom showed signs of being quite embarrassed by the rising voice of the other. The last “I should have…” was very loud, my shouting even embarrassed myself, I managed to stop the big show.
I'm sorry, Clements, I said, almost expecting that he might forgive me with another “Nobody is perfect!”. He didn’t. We both smiled and were quiet for a while. I ordered two cups of tea and two rum-raisin ice creams. We enjoyed the treat quietly. The birds started their very loud evening concert outside, it was time to end our story session. We parted with our customary: Same time, same place, next Monday! I started to walk over to where I had parked my bicycle, my thoughts returning to my ruminant attack, my losing self-control over long past unpleasant experiences. I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned. Don’t worry, Clements said and smiled. Think about Vipasana meditation, that will help!

Clements had told me about his Vipasana experience on the first day we met. We had been introduced in a sweet shop where ex-pats were hanging out and immediately took a liking to each other. We left the loud company and walked over to the public garden and sat under the big, old trees. We talked about why we had come to Thailand, about the “cultural differences” that sometimes made it difficult to understand Thai people. We chatted about our past lives, about music, about our relationships and about inventions and discoveries that had been useful in our attempts to pull ourselves out of the swamp of bad thinking habits. For Clements it had been through Vipasana meditation.

I had tried with more than Munchhausen’s audacity, to pull myself up into existence out of the swamps of nothingness by studying philosophy. I did not believe that meditation could or would help, for me it smelled of “belief” and beliefs of all kinds smelled exceedingly bad. The idea of perfection was haunting me, beliefs and believers reminded me of my early childhood.

The history of my early childhood

The next story, the history of my early childhood, comes in three versions. The first is a story in pictures:

Me 1935  Me 1936  Me 1937  Me 1938  Me 1939

I cannot comment on the first four pictures. I have no memories of the first three years of my life. I “know” that I suffered from cradle cap, infantile eczema, because my mother told me that I had been a very poor little baby, suffering terribly from rashes so badly that they had to bind my hands and legs to the sides of my cot to prevent me from scratching myself.

14 The vipassanā movement, also called the Insight Meditation Movement, refers to a number of branches of modern Theravāda Buddhism which stress insight into the three marks of existence as the main means to attain awakening and become a stream-enterer. It finds its origins in modernist influences on the traditions of Burma, Laos, Thailand and Sri Lanka, and the innovations and popularizations by Theravāda teachers as Mahasi Sayadaw (“New Burmese Method”), as well as nonsectarian derivatives from those traditions such as the movement led by S. N. Goenka.
I felt horror when my mother told me that story, fantasies of a crucified little me plagued me for many years.

The first memories that I can remember are of a four-year-old little boy. The picture of the little soldier was taken in October 1939.

I was born way back in the last century, in 1935. My memories go back to when I was four years old. I remember the Church Bell is ringing when the Second World War broke out, September 1939.

We visited my father in his “peaceful” Swiss military service. They dressed me up as a soldier and I simply hated it.

See me here with a frozen smile. A very bad early communication strategy which resulted in feeling insecure. My life 1935-1999

The story of the visit to the photographer’s studio I have already told, it must have happened in July 1939.

I remember what “little me” aged four years said to himself when mother seated him in front of a photographer: Why does she dress me up like this to sit in front of a camera, I hate that dress, I hate my hair, I hate the world of the grown-ups.

But is that memory true? Or is it what “me now” interprets? “Me now” does not remember what “me then” said, it remembers what “me then” felt: This is not MEEE!

This photograph was taken when I was six years old and went to kindergarten.

It has taken me many years to be able to look at “little me” in this picture without feeling deep anger, not anger at this little boy who is me, but red hot anger at what made this lovely little boy look out into the world so anxiously, with so much fear. What had made this little boy so afraid? For fifty-years of my life I could not even ask the question. I did not know that I carried a rucksack of hidden unhappy memories that prevented me from being happy. I did not know what was making me angry.

My method for overcoming hidden fears, for getting to the bottom of my rucksack, was studying, studying scientific knowledge. The second version of my early childhood story is a lecture, a sermon in scientific style on the nature/nurture problem.
I had been introduced to that problem reading Tristram Shandy as a student of English literature sixty years ago:

“I wish either my father or my mother, or indeed both of them, as they were in duty both equally bound to it, had minded what they were about when they begot me; had they duly considered how much depended upon what they were then doing; that not only the production of a rational Being was concerned in it, but that possibly the happy formation and temperature of his body, perhaps his genius and the very cast of his mind; and, for aught they knew to the contrary, even the fortunes of his whole house might take their turn from the humours and dispositions which were then uppermost: Had they duly weighed and considered all this, and proceeded accordingly, I am verily persuaded I should have made a quite different figure in the world, from that, in which the reader is likely to see me.”

Laurence Sterne, The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman

My lecture is about many ideas and facts I learnt studying genetics and evolutionary psychology:

Let me begin with the story on what the science of psychology tells us about how we acquire our individual worldviews, our hidden assumptions and presuppositions. What do we know about the evolution, the growth of the feelings and thoughts of newly born humans?

When a human being is born, its first act as a living organism is to cry, is to fill its lungs with air and pressing this air out again, crying out loud. The first moment of life is “suffering”, is “realizing” that life is hard work, difficult to enjoy. As newly born creatures we are thrown into “chaos”, a totally unordered, unknown world which we need to make “real” by learning to see, to hear, to smell, to taste and to feel touch – the beginning of “Thought”, the capacity to make distinctions.

Our networks of neurons learn to “order” sense-impressions. We learn to expect that many “impressions” are repeated, the same, again and again. We learn to generalize, we learn to abstract, we learn to evaluate that some of the “inflictions” that arrive at our brains as nerve impulses, are pleasant and some are unpleasant. But we cannot yet learn to avoid the unpleasant and seek the pleasant.

All this early “ordering” happens - to nobody; the young brain cannot yet think the “Me”. How do we learn to know who we are? Newborns cannot yet ask questions, it takes us about three years to learn to speak and even longer to say “I”. In order to say “I”, we need to learn to re-cognize the “Others” outside – “M-others”, and many more further away others - “farthers”; we need to be “socialized” into our human “community”, into shared belief systems. But no human brain can remember how it learnt to live in a world of other humans.

Our earliest memories are hidden from us in what psychologists began to call the subconscious. By the time we become “autonomous, conscious selfs”, socialized, speaking individuals, our subconscious evaluation of what is happening to us has turned us into pessimists or optimists, introverts or extraverts, experiencing life from a “sunny” perspective or a “shadowy” one. Do we learn to be sad or happy persons?

Or was it that chance moment when egg and sperma fused that determines what a “me” will be able to think. Do genes determine our destiny? Nature or nurture?

Nature or nurture? This question brings me to the third version of my early childhood story - my story.

From father I get my physique,
Also my earnest nature;
My story-telling bent, glad heart
I have from my dear mother.
Great-grandpapa liked pretty girls,
It shows up in me also;
Great-grandmama loved gold and jewels,
A smack of that’s in me, too.
So if one’s a complex of traits
Inborn and indivisible,
What’s there to call your own, poor wre(tch)   Johann Wolfgang Goethe

A very beautiful poem, I thought when we were made to read Goethe at school.
A very beautiful story, but not my story. I had not inherited a story-telling bent from
my mother, nor had I inherited an “earnest nature”, the capacity to think, to reflect,
from my father. All I learnt when I was a child was to believe, to be afraid and to be
wretched. I was a wretch, an unfortunate, unhappy little boy. Why?

Was it “caused” by the first experience of “suffering” when I was born, an experience
that I cannot remember? Or was my fate determined by my first “imprinting” when I
tried to “order” my world, my first attempts to distinguish pleasant experiences from
unpleasant ones.

My earliest conscious memories go back to when I was three and a half years old, a
little brother had made me jealous. In the next five years four more babies were
born, I remember being punished for not looking after my siblings. I remember being
punished for not obeying, for being a bad boy. Mother would tell father about me
being a bad boy, father would order the bad boy to fetch the carpet beater and then
he would tell me that the Lord had ordered him to punish the bad boy and then the
carpet beater was applied. I was punished by God himself. I was made to believe in
the LORD and the truth of the LORD’s word with a carpet beater and I hated it. I had
problems with beliefs15.

My early years were not happy. I had started life with an “open mind” as every baby
does. There are no memories of how my empty mind was filled with opinions and
beliefs in the first three years of my existence. What I can still remember is how I
was socialised into a rock solid, ontological plus fundamentalist worldview.
I was taught to obey the grown-ups and to believe in authority. In my family we read
the Holy Bible, God’s Word, God’s Orders, every day – at dawn my father gathered
his six children and taught us what to believe and what to think. We had to kneel
and write down our sins committed the day before, then in front of all the others
confess what bad sinners we had been. I learnt to obey and to accept authority, and
I also learnt to view the world as a permanent war, a world war of the dark powers of
evil Sin against the shining Spirit of the LORD. My father filled my mind with stories
about the ultimate authority - the Godfather who was far above. I grew up to be a
very insecure, worried child, an unworthy sinner. Asking questions was strictly
forbidden.

As an adolescent my mind had developed some analytical capacities – I thus started
asking questions, questions which the reflective human mind finds “naturally
puzzling”. How can we know? How can we know, that what we think we know, is
ture? What kind of knowledge makes life worth living? I lost my belief in the secure
foundation of religious faith - I became a doubter, an “ungläubiger Thomas”, as my
fundamentalist father called me. He was worried that I was a "lost soul" and
reproached me with being a "nihilist", when he caught me reading Nietzsche.

At fifteen I also ran into problems with „authority”16. The rector of my teachers
training college to which my fundamentalist father had confined me, was a
protestant theologian, who believed in the literal truth of the Scriptures.

15 For the past seventy years, I have suffered from an „eclesio-genic neuroses”. I cannot „think” about
„beliefs” without getting angry, a problem that will probably stay with me for life.
16 Urs Boeschenstein: On Authority
I pestered him with pertinent questions which for him were exceedingly “impertinent”. At seventeen I was relegated from the college. From then on, I was on my own. I worked in a factory as a handyman, later became a taxi driver to earn my living. At nineteen I went back to school to get my A-levels. At twenty I started to study linguistics and tried to learn to think, to reflect. In those years my belief-system changed. I became a firm un-believer:

I no longer believe in eternal truths, but in an ongoing history of ideas in emerging human thinking. I believe there is no God, there are only ideas of Gods invented by human beings. I believe there is no final Truth, there are only stories told by speaking humans. I believe there are no god given kings, there are only human beings constructing a common social world. I believe that there are no battles to be won, there are only communicative interactions among humans that “appear” in two forms: affiliative togetherness and agonal againstness. I believe that we are slowly realizing that the dichotomy of competition and cooperation needs a new discription, a new evaluation. I believe that we need to study the history of human beliefs, the history of human ideas and I believe that reflecting on the hidden assumptions of the “knowledge” of our ancestors is a necessary step on the path to a new worldview for the future.

**Nobody is perfect! More reflections on the idea of perfection**

Pondering on my unhappy childhood, the history of my beliefs, I came to realize that the firm unbeliever had turned into a preacher like my father, a preacher preaching a prejudice-loaded sermon. Why do I preach? For over thirty years all my attempts to distinguish “knowledge” from “beliefs”, all my studies about the history of human life, about the future of human life and about the meaning of life were tainted by ANGER. I hated believers. When confronted with believers I always fell into the stupid trap of “preaching”. Was it the deeply unhappy little “me”, the wretch, that made me preach “truths” about “knowing”? Was it the imperfect “me” that was taught with a carpet beater to believe in perfection? Was I angry because somehow I could not believe in “perfection”?

What is perfection? Who invented the idea of perfection? When did humans start to think in terms of above = good, below = bad? Heaven and Hell.

![Image](image-url)

**William Blake The Marriage of Heaven and Hell**

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17 Urs Boeschenstein  Worldview Revisions
An association lighted up - I had read about “above = good, below = bad” very recently in a book by Lee Smolin, Time Reborn. That book had changed my way of looking at the world, my worldview, my thinking about distinctions, about Good and Bad. I had taken it along to Thailand to study it again. I got up to get the book from the shelf, remembered that the passage on “timeless perfection” was on page 13, opened the book - and there it was:

The universe, for the ancients, was split into two realms: the earthly realm, which was the arena of birth and death, of change and decay, and the heavenly realm above, which was a place of timeless perfection. For them the sky was already a transcendental realm; it was populated by divine objects that neither grew nor decayed. This division was the origin of the connection of elevation with transcendence. God, the heavens, perfection - these are above us, while we are trapped here below. 

Lee Smolin

We are trapped in a vale of tears Christian thinkers teach us, in a world that is necessarily imperfect, a world where all change is bad, where everything new is decreasing God’s perfect creation, where Sin is not obeying the timeless perfection of God’s commandments, eating the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge, wanting to know.

Why had I never been able to reflect on the utter stupidity of these basic assumptions of the Christian religion: God’s timeless perfection, human sin, human search for forbidden knowledge. How did I ever get caught in such restricted thinking? Why could I not quietly say to myself: It’s OK not to be perfect!

Before going to sleep that evening that sentence kept returning and later that night I dreamed about my father preaching from the Bible. He painted God’s handwriting in the air and said in his deep preacher’s voice: Mene mene tekel upharsin.

Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting, thou art shit, not worthy – not good enough!

Next morning, my “Mene, mene tekel upharsim” dream still rang in my ear: Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting! – found wanting what?, I shouted loud, wanting “perfection”? - the heavenly realm above, the place of timeless perfection is a horrible lie, an illusion. My stream of thought shifted in to fast drive: What presuppositions allow humans to assume that there is a transcendental world without time, a world of eternal verities that the ancients called the Good, the world of perfection? My worldview does not require an all-powerful, all-knowing creator who with a “fiat lux” conjured up a universe. My universe is a process of interaction in time, it is a world of becoming, a world of creative change. There is no perfect heavenly realm above, nor is there a Hell below. My reflexion process went on. It thought: “Perfection” is a very dangerous und very stupid human invention.

In nature, in the universe, there is no such thing as perfection, there is nothing absolute, nothing eternal, no final truth.

And then I thought of Clements. How would I be able to tell my friend about the surprising flight of contemplative imagination that his good advice to remember vipasana meditation had led me.

18 Lee Smolin Time Reborn Penguin Alan Lane, 2013
19 Mene Mene Tekel Uphansin Daniel 5: 24 Then was the part of the hand sent from him; and this writing was written. 25 And this is the writing that was written, MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHAR SIN. 26 This is the interpretation of the thing: MENE; God hath numbered thy kingdom, and finished it. 27 TEKEL; Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting.
On vipassana meditation and perfection

I'm not perfect. Never have been. Never will be.

I thought a lot about vipassana meditation, I told Clements when we met again on the following Monday. I thought about “me” not being perfect, about “me” suffering from attacks of very stupid thinking and very stupid behaviour. My embarrassing shouting performance last Monday when I fell into the trap of trying to change my past by inventing “I should have...” - stories made me realise that I still have a lot to learn. It made me realise that I’m not perfect, never have been perfect, and never will be perfect. It has also made me realize that I do not want to be perfect, Clements. I do not want to be purified, I do not want to achieve enlightenment.

All I want is to be at home in the universe, to be happy, to be happy every day. To achieve that I need to remind myself every moment that it is okay not to be perfect. I also needed to find out what had damaged me in my early years.

It was my fundamentalist father who helped me overcome my anger that had festered under the cheese dome of Christian beliefs and had been my invisible prison for so long.

20 S.N. Goenka The Art of Living 1986: By observing the respiration or the sensations, we are in fact observing mental impurities. Instead of running away from the problem, we are facing reality as it is. As a result, we discover that these impurities lose their strength; they no longer overpower us as they did in the past. If we persist, they eventually disappear altogether and we begin to live a peaceful and happy life, a life increasingly free of negativities. The more one practices this technique, the more quickly negativities will dissolve. Gradually the mind becomes free of defilements, becomes pure. A pure mind is always full of love - selfless love for all others, full of compassion for the failings and sufferings of others, full of joy at their success and happiness, full of equanimity in the face of any situation. What is necessary, then, is to “know thyself”—advice which every wise person has given. We must know ourselves, not just intellectually in the realm of ideas and theories, and not just emotionally or devotionally, simply accepting blindly what we have heard or read. Such knowledge is not enough. Rather, we must know reality experientially. We must experience directly the reality of this mental-physical phenomenon. This alone is what will help us be free of our suffering. This direct experience of our own inner reality, this technique of self-observation, is what is called Vipassana meditation. In the language of India in the time of the Buddha, passana meant seeing in the ordinary way, with one’s eyes open; but vipassana is observing things as they actually are, not just as they appear to be.
On an early summer day in 1983 father assembled his six children to a rare family reunion. He was 74 years old then and all his six children were adults in their forties, the youngest Catherine just 40, the eldest, me, 48. There was not much contact among us. Each of us lived his or her life in distant places, in different surroundings and we never talked about the terrible indoctrination that had been inflicted on us when we were very young children. Each of us tried to deal with it in isolation until that summer day in 1983.

We had a pleasant meal in a restaurant on the river Reuss, in the village where Cathy lived. We exchanged photos, told stories about our families, our own children, about our jobs – smalltalk! No one mentioned problems until after we all had enjoyed the big cake that mother had prepared for her brood.

I watched father, he seemed to be a bit tense, sometimes looked at some notes he took from his coatpocket and then he began to speak: Hmm, I have, hmm, invited you to tell you all that I have..., hmmm......I want to ask for your forgiveness. I have come to realize that my belief in the Lord and the cheese cover of Christian beliefs that my education inflicted on you were a big mistake. I beg your pardon.

I was struck as I never had been before, left the company and walked down to the river overwhelmed by tears. All of a sudden anger welled up, the “sample without value” memory resurfaced: I am riding on the kiddy seat of my father’s bicycle. We have to stop at a railway crossing. He gets down from the bike, looks at me smiling and tells me: You are a “Muster ohne Wert” – a sample without value! To little me this meant: You are a bad boy. You are not good enough. You will never be allowed to go to Heaven. The “good” Lord will not accept you!
Bloody shit – I cried out loud.

Returning to our table I found the company divided. Cathy and my brother Willy were sitting apart. The other three, Barbara, the believer in Astrology, Hanna, the believer in the Spirit, and Reini, the believer in making money, all three simultaneously were talking to father: No, no, no – you never made a mistake, we had a very good and healthy childhood, we are glad you gave us rules to live by…. I sat down with Willy and Cathy. We did not talk. A little later Willy pointed to the car, I nodded and we left. All the way back to Willy’s home we kept quiet. We did a lot of talking next morning. I told him my Bloody shit story. Willy, the artist, burst out with his version of that same story. And then we told each other of our fights with the Old Man, thirty years of unpleasant memories and asked ourselves what had made it possible for our seventy-four-years-old father to be so courageous. We both agreed: his finest deed.

Some days later I went to visit my parents. I told my father of my life-shattering experience and the story of the “Muster ohne Wert”- the sample without value. “Yes, I can remember that moment. I know that I hurt you deeply. I did not mean to. You know - it has taken me fifty years to get out of my cage of beliefs. Maybe it will take you as long to overcome your anger, your inferiority complex”.

And then he smiled and added: “I can see that you are on the way; you seem to be a happier person all of a sudden”.

A happier person? By shattering my glass dome prison, my father had indeed helped me to begin to find a new “meaning of life”: a tiny bit of happiness – joy of life! But I had a hard time learning to smile happily.

A few weeks later, on another visit, I brought father a book with Meister Eckhart’s sermons. One in particular I wanted father to read: Meister Eckhart’s sermon on blessedness: Blessed are the poor in spirit: Beati sunt pauperes spiritu (Matt. 5:3) Meister Eckhart used the Middle High German word “selig” and I had looked up the etymology of that word and discovered that it goes back to an Indo-European root *sel – happy, of good mood. In English it became “silly”. Meister Eckhart preached about happiness – sillyness. The poor in spirit are are happy.

silly (adj.) Old English gesælig “happy, fortuitous, prosperous” (related to sæl “happiness”), from Proto-Germanic *sæligas (cf. Old Norse sæll “happy,” Old Saxon salig, Middle Dutch salich, Old High German salig, German selig “blessed, happy, blissful.” Gothic sels “good, kindhearted”), from PIE *sele- “of good mood; to favor,” from root *sel- “happy, of good mood; to favor” (cf. Latin solari “to comfort,” Greek hilaros “cheerful, gay, merry, joyous”).

The word’s considerable sense development moved from “happy” to “blessed” to “pious,” to “innocent” (c.1200), to “harmless,” to “pitiable” (late 13c.), “weak” (c.1300), to “feeble in mind, lacking in reason, foolish” (1570s). Further tendency toward “stunned, dazed as by a blow” (1886) in knocked silly, etc.
Full of “sillyness”, I told my father smiling, I even learnt to accept that I was “feeble in mind, lacking in reason, foolish” to which the word “happy” had transformed in Shakespeares lifetime, and “stunned, dazed as by a blow”. I had quite literally been “nockled silly” by my father’s shattering the dome of hidden anger.

At the end of our “silly”, “happy” meeting – talking about Meister Eckhart’s sermon on “silliness” - I told father that I would start out on a totally “silly” journey to Finisterre in Spain – to the end of the world. My father wished me a “silly” time!

El peregrino

A trip to “finis terrae”, the end of the world – to explain what had made me decide to undertake such a crazy trip, I need to tell the story of how the deeply insecure adolescent “me” managed to survive his adult years between twenty and fifty. He did it by becoming a well known TV personality. The troubled hidden inner life – my inferiority complex - had also become the energy source for a very successful career in the mass media world. After graduating from Zurich University I became a songwriter and performing artist, went on to work for Radio Switzerland, then, a step up, to work for Swiss Television, then, another step upwards, became a free-lancer, selling “ideas” to various media.

In 1982 I had sold a colleague at Swiss TV a “freakish inspiration” for a film on what had survived on the “camino francés”, the medieval pilgrims route to Santiago de Compostella. To gather ideas for writing a filmscript, I could not invest eight months for walking the 2500 kilometers to the relics of Jacobus Major, I could not do it “andando”. But I also “felt” I would not be able to find my “ideas” travelling by car. To “reconnoiter” ideas, I decided to travel from Einsiedeln in Switzerland to Santiago in Northern Spain by tricycle, a three-wheeled “bike”, I needed to pack my instruments safely. Father Roman, a monk at Einsiedeln, with whom I had worked together on projects for Swiss TV, invited me to spend the night before the start of my “pilgrimage” at the monastery and next morning he accompanied me to the gate, wishing me a good TIME.

I did NOT have a good time! On the first few hundred kilometers travelling through Switzerland my arse hurt from riding my trike, my mood was at a low ebb. One of my other selves pestered me with: Give up, go back, get your car and do your investigating work like normal 20th century person, stop being crazy! But – stupid “silly” me persisted, travelled on through France, uphill, downhill, on and on, and after four weeks I reached the Spanish border town at the foothills of the Pyrenees.
Tengo Tiempo!

Looking out of the window of my “hostal” at Valcarlos, I saw it was drizzling - Pyrenees-wether! After breakfast I set off, pulling my tricycle uphill to the Col de Ibaneta in pouring rain. I arrived at the highest point of the pass, at “Roland’s Chapel”, dripping wet inside and outside. I saddled my trike and started to ride downhill. I was freezing, I felt miserable and promised the freezing wretch that he could change his clothes in the next dry place along the road. And then someone brought the trike to a standstill. He shouted: Its NOW that you want to be warm, change your clothing NOW. And I did, in pouring rain. When I had finished digging out the dry stuff from my bag, I undressed, changed my underwear, packed all the wet stuff in a spare bag, and continued downhill.

Less than two hundred yards later, I turned round a bend – and there, out of the mist, I saw my dry haven – the monastery of Roncesvalles and on the left side of the road a restaurant. I entered.

It was midday, the restaurant was empty. I sat down at one of the tables and waited - for a long time, nobody came. After about a quarter of an hour and old woman appeared. I asked for something to eat - in sign-language - I couldn’t speak a word of Spanish. The women did not answer, she just disappeared.

Some minutes later a younger women came to announce – in broken French – that in Spain lunchtime was at three in the afternoon, and that there was no cook in the kitchen anyway. I asked in French, if I could just sit and was granted permission, even with a trace of a smile.

I looked out of the window to the monastery on the other side, the mist was clearing, the rain had stopped, I had a good time, as Father Roman had wished me at my departure from Einsiedeln.

I really had a good time, dug out my Spanish dictionary and my beginners book for learning Spanish. I looked up “time” – in Spanish tiempo, the beginners book supplied “I have” – tengo. Tengo tiempo – my first Spanish sentence: I have time, I always have time – Tengo tiempo! I closed my diary and just sat there enjoying having time.

Then I heard somebody coming along the gangway, the old woman, carrying a soup bowl which she put in front of me: Para el peregrino – for the pilgrim! Pide para nosotros a Santiago! Pray for us at Santiago. How could the pilgrim who was not a pilgrim prey?

The journey, I thought, is teaching me something important: to learn to have time. Hic et nunc! Life happens here and now, I had discovered. Life does not happen in the past. Nor does life happen in the future! We always live our lives in the present moment!

Tengo tiempo! I travelled on – at a slower pace than before, stayed some days in Pamplona, enjoyed meeting some students at Burgos who invited me to stay in their secret smoking pot dig in the old town wall, crossed Castilia helping farmers in the field.

And then I got stuck at Astorga. Although I had learnt to travel slowly, I had not yet acquired the knack of travelling day by day without aim, I was still following the pilgrims chant: “ultreia!” – forward, forward. Pilgrims needed to travel on, to reach Santiago, only there would their sins be forgiven.

I had reached Astorga early in the morning, it was too hot to ride during the daytime and I had taken to starting before sunrise. I walked through a town that was still asleep and decided to go on.
On my way out of town I had to cross the very wide old cattle market square. Right in the middle of it there was a painted road crossing. There was even a painted stop sign, so I stopped – and saw a small Seat car coming from the other side. It came nearer slowly, and nearer, and nearer and then – at a snail’s pace the Seat hit my trike. A short, very fat Spaniard crawled out of the car shouting: Sorry, sorry, all my fault, I slipped off the brakes! We looked at the trike’s broken back wheel. He promised to call his insurance agent and ran away wobbling to a callbox at the edge of the square. Fifteen minutes later the insurance man arrived and the three of us carried the broken trike to a cycle repair workshop. The mechanic looked at the broken wheel and said: Can be fixed; but, today is Saturday, fiesta!, tomorrow, Sunday, fiesta!, Monday, fiesta!, Tuesday, fiesta!, Wednesday, fiesta!. You can pick up your contraption on Thursday afternoon.

There I was, stuck! Being stuck was a hard lesson to learn, I hated being stuck, But I was lucky, I did learn my lesson. The insurance man had helped me to find a nice hostal, “A Room with a View”: Antonio Gaudi’s Palacio Episcopal.

I had seen it on my early morning arrival at Astorga, but only the outside, the museum had still been closed. Now, being stuck in my room with a view, I had all the time to go and see the inside. I spent hours in the “comedor”, the dining hall, watching the light that came in through the coloured glass windows change from morning light to evening light. Like a newborn baby I learnt to see.

The evenings I went out, the “fiesta” was on, music and dancing in the streets, I heard “threehole pipes” being played, accompanied by fast drumming. On the second evening I gathered all my courage and joined the band with my own minstrels pipes. It worked, my first “jam session”. The minstrel, me, had been a solomusician for many years, had never met other threehole pipe players, and never experienced the deep joy of playing together.

On Thursday morning I went back to the mechanic’s shop – my trike was ready, time to travel on. The last few hundred kilometers to Santiago were heavy, from Astorga to the next town Ponferrada pilgrims have to climb their first high mountainpass, and there were many more passes to cross until they finally reached Santiago. I travelled very slowly, I had a lot to think. Many nights I spent in the open, watching sunsets and waking up to sunrises, thinking, thinking, I very slowly learnt to catch flies.
Catching flies!

Flies? Flies are those thoughts that come up to the top range of my subconscious thinking, but do not come into the conscious thinking range, those troubled memories that I suppressed immediately. Watching sunsets such borderline thinking happened with increasing frequency. I decided to try to catch such non-thoughts, catch them on the fly. I would hold the “flies” in my fist, trying not to kill them, open my fist slowly to look at them. Then sometimes I would smile, or even laugh out loud: Poor little wretch, is that all! How can you be afraid of such little beasts. I learnt to remember the beasts, to reflect on them again and again during my mountain climbing in hilly Galicia.

But there were also many relapses into my old thinking habits. I got caught in a bad depression when I finally reached Santiago. It was a total anti-climax. Stupid (silly) me forgot his “sillyness”. I had travelled for more than seventy days trying not to plan, not “expect”, but there I was, at the planned destination of my journey - and I was disappointed - nothing happened, no sins were forgiven, no “blessed” soul was reborn.

On the next day I escaped, climbed my trike again and aimed for the endpoint of the prehistorical, celtic pilgrimsroute, “finis terrae”, the end of the world, seventy kilometers in the West. For thousands of years humans had been travelling West, from Canterbury to Land’s End in England, from Chartres to Finistère in France and from Jacca in the Pyrenees to where I arrived after my very long journey – Finisterre in Galicia.

Standing on this rocky hill near the lighthouse of Finisterre, I caught a “fly” again: Stop here! Wait for your soul to catch up! You have been travelling much too fast. My “soul” (which I did not believe I had and called my anima, or my intuition) was telling me: Stay here until you learn to “stop the world”\(^{21}\). I obeyed, and stayed at “finis terrae” for three full months, the pilgrim who was not a pilgrim needed time for a “transformation”. He needed to metamorphose into a real pilgrim, a pilgrim who very slowly learnt to “stop the world”. It was the strangest experience of my life.

\(^{21}\) Carlos Castaneda: The Teachings of Don Juan, A Separate Reality, Journey to Ixtlan, Tales of Power
How I learnt to stop the world watching Atlantic waves

I had found a small hostal overlooking the harbour with a pleasant bar on the ground floor where I would sit and study my “Spanish for Beginners” book. I was the only tourist in town, nobody mistook me for a “peregrino” until one day a pretty young lady approached my table and asked me in English: “Excuse me. I have watched you for some days sitting here learning Spanish from an English book. I am a student of English at Santiago University and I wonder if you could help me. I’m studying middle English and I don’t understand a word. It’s very difficult.

She sat down, took a large folder out of her satchel and confronted me with a photocopy of the beginning of Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales.

Whan that Aprill, with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote
And bathed every veyne in swich licour,
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heath
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his halfe cours yronne,
And smale foweles maken melodye,
That slepen al the nyght with open eye-
(So priketh hem Nature in hir corages);
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages
And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes
To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;
And specially from every shires ende
Of Engelond, to Caunterbury they wende,
The hooly blisful martir for to seke
That hem hath holpen, whan that they were seeke.  

Geoffrey Chaucer

It was a text I knew by heart - and so I recited it. She listened with big eyes. “Where did you learn that?” she asked and I told her that thirty years ago I had studied Middle English at Zurich University.

It was the beginning of a very pleasant collaboration, I taught her Middle English and she taught me Spanish. We met almost every day, one hour translating Chaucer, one hour reading Spanish newspapers. One day during those language lessons she transformed me into a peregrino. I was explaining the word “palmeres” to my student, telling her that pilgrims to Jerusalem carried a palm leaf as their sign:

Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages
And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes
To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes

She smiled and asked: “Are you a pilgrim?”
I answered: “No, no, no! I am a crazy filmmaker, not a pilgrim”.
But she insisted: “Yes, you are a pilgrim! You should wear the sign of the Santiago pilgrims, a scallop shell”.

22 Back then, in 1984, there were not many tourists coming to “the end of the world”, as a matter of fact, there were none at all. The boom of pilgrims in their thousands came only about ten years later, in the early nineties.
We went for a walk along the beach collecting scallop shells, returned to our meeting place at the bar, spread our treasure on the table, she pointed to a particularly fine specimen and told me: “I want to sew that on your jacket”. Next day she brought me back my embellished coat: “So! Now you are a real peregrino!”

She handed me a paper and told me: “The peregrino should learn this by heart, it is your pilgrims poem”, and then she read it to me:

Caminante, son tus huellas
el camino, y nada más;
caminante, no hay camino,
se hace camino al andar.
Al andar se hace camino,
y al volver la vista atrás
se ve la senda que nunca
se ha de volver a pisar.
Caminante, no hay camino,
sino estelas en la mar.

Wanderer, your footsteps are
the road, and nothing more;
wanderer, there is no road,
the road is made by walking.
By walking one makes the road,
and upon glancing back
one sees the path
that must never be trod again.
Wanderer, there is no road
Only wakes upon the sea.    Antonio Machado

Antonio Machado’s poem was a flash of insight that transformed my whole outlook on life. Yes indeed - “a volver la vista atrás se ve la senda que nunca se ha de volver a pisar”. I had been a ruminator, a regurgitator pondering on past mistakes all my life.

The newborn peregrino in a flash realised that he needed to change that. I ordered two “fundadors” to celebrate. We drank in silence, enjoying each others company, looking out to the harbour where the large fishing boats were returning their catch to the market.

I told Christina I would want her to look at a book, and went up to my room to fetch it. It was a book with the title “El camino iniciatico de Santiago”. I had found it in a bookshop at Astorga during my unplanned sojourn being stuck. Next day Christina brought it back, exclaiming: Wow, this is fantastic! I agreed - smiling. But your Machado poem is even more fantastic, I told her, I have learnt it by heart on my daily walk yesterday evening.

From the fishing port of Finisterre on the eastern side of the lighthouse peninsula with its soft sandy beach I had climbed up the steep hill and down on the western Atlantic side to the pebbly beach to watch the Atlantic breakers rolling in from the west of the “Costa de la muerte” up to six meters high, rolling on and on. I happily shouted my newfound “caminante”-wisdom against the waves:

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Caminante, son tus huellas
el camino, y nada más;
caminante, no hay camino,
se hace camino al andar.

Wanderer, your footsteps are
the road, and nothing more;
wanderer, there is no road,
the road is made by walking.

I had started off at Einsiedeln a fake pilgrim, and I ended up at Finisterre, watching the Atlantic breakers rolling on, a real peregrino.
“Last night I learnt to be at home in the universe”, I told Christina pointing to her peregrino sign on my jacket, “you have transformed me into a pilgrim, a caminante, a happy “silly” wanderer”. “Why silly?”, she asked, and I answered with my Meister Eckehart story on “sillyness”.
“This is fantastic!”, she repeated, “your book “El camino iniciatico de Santiago” is all about “happiness”, the story of mediaeval stonemasons travelling to Santiago “for to seken straunge strondes, to ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes” seeking inner peace, preparing for an inner death on their camino and being reborn as “silly” ignorant at the end of the world”.

Mid-September 1983 our learning sessions came to an end, Christina returned to her studies at Santiago and we met only on Sundays when she came back to Finisterre to stay with her parents. But for me the holy days were not yet over,

I stayed on, continued to walk out to the lighthouse and down to the beach to watch the waves. One of Christina’s friends was a piper, he played the Spanish bagpipes, the gaita, I learnt to play that instrument “anando” - walking my daily walks.

Se hace camino al andar – playing. I was a lonely traveller again, but with a difference, I walked with music as a companion. And - most amazing - I walked with many voices accompanying me. I no longer had to catch flies, my anima and my many other hidden selves began to talk, we had most interesting conversations One day, sitting on the wet edge of the pebbly beach, the edge where the breakers would no longer roll over me with the out running tide, one of the voices asked me: Why do you come out here every day? What do the breakers tell you? What indeed, I thought. And then the wide awaken conscious me formulated: The breakers are telling me the history of the universe, the story of an ongoing process, waves rolling on and on, always the same and never the same.

Walking back, my bagpipes under my arm, I reflected on that ongoing process. The universe is not a thing that I can see, it is a process that I cannot see. Life also, is a process that I cannot see. And then, with a smiling face, I realised that I had lost my ontological worldview, I had lost my secure ground.

The breakers had helped me to experience a process, to transform my solid weltbild-house into a float. My seeing and hearing began to change. I saw flowers and trees, I saw animals and people where before I had been blind. Like a newborn baby, I learnt to see beauty afresh every moment.
Some weeks later, on a sunny autumn Sunday afternoon, Christina came along to my caminante ritual. We walked through the vegetable gardens behind the town, up the steep hill to the top. We sat down and looked out to the wide ocean.

Christina told me of her nice success with the Chaucer-reading class. The prof had congratulated her and lauded her progress in Middle English. She had been very “silly”, she said. We continued downhill to the beach. I told her what the breakers had taught me, my discovery of the phenomenon of “process”, waves rolling on and on, always the same and never the same.

The breakers came in really high that afternoon, they had been a heavy storm on the Atlantic further west. Must be higher than six meters, Christina ventured; yup, quite impressive, I retorted. But then came an unexpected question: Do you think the moving waves can think? Is the universe a thinking process? I had no answer. I did not know.

Then a voice whispered: Jenseits von Gut und Böse and I voiced that: Jenseits von Gut und Böse! What does that mean? Christina asked. I explained – Beyond Good and Evil, the title of a Nietzsche essay.

I do not know if the universe is a thinking process and if moving waves can think; but I know that I can think and I also know that you can think, humans can think, they can even think that they think. Cogito ergo sum. But - my mind was working very fast - we cannot think about Good and Bad as transcendental truths, somewhere outside us.

And then the preacher took over: There are no eternal truths, there are…. I heard a voice that I had heard before, it said: Stop! and talkative me did stop. I looked at Christina and smiled. We continued to watch the “eternal” waves for a while, smiling, and then we trotted back over the hill, when we arrived at my hostal Christina said: Do you know that you just stopped the world as Don Juan did?