

The Man.

The man was living an externally quiet life, and that definition meant he lived alone, he never frequented bars or restaurants, and he was happy and optimistic. Yet his mind and heart were never quiet. In his teens, he discovered writers who questioned the existential reasons for their existence, as he did. These learned writers' conclusions seemed odd to him, and their findings didn't seem to correspond with the facts they presented. To the young man, these learned writers seemed to leap to conclusions. Their conclusions that God didn't exist seemed to be based on the fact that the God they were referring to was the personified God, and while the young man agreed with that, the leap to atheism seemed to him to not make any sense. Their writings stimulated him, and his questions began to reach new depths. The man had gotten hooked at a very early age into questioning nearly everything he heard and read because so much of what he heard and read didn't make sense even at such an early age. As the man re-visited the memories of his youth, as he had so many times, he would often laugh at how much he must have driven his parents crazy with his constant rebellion. But these writers, these learned men who professed existentialism, left him questioning even more and needing to learn much more about life.

The man, however, had learned very early on to keep his mouth shut. Sometimes, he knew from the back of his father's massive, bony hand landing on his face, which he rarely saw coming. Other times, he learned through the corporal punishment dished out by his elders, and other times, the lessons he learned were through his peers, peers who were bullies and better fighters than him, or peers who rejected him and ignored him entirely. He had never known these types of behavior existed, and he didn't like them.

His questions about life kept going unanswered, and until he got valid answers, he was not going to tag along with society and society's conclusions about how and why someone was supposed to live. The earth, the planets, and the entire galaxy were all spectacular to him, and each day, he was astonished by the beauty and perfection of almost everything around him. People, society, religion, politics, education, and even more things did not impress him very much. The divisiveness these things caused troubled him deeply. As he witnessed man's inhumanity to man through racism, war, gangs, meanness, hatred, and false supremacy, he kept comparing all of that dysfunctionality to his unconditional love of the orderly, harmonious, systematic universe he was also witnessing daily. He couldn't accept the societies rules, nor could he remain within that sphere of influence without speaking out. Finally, his aversion to society and people won, and he opted out.

During all of the man's early years, however, the one thing he learned was that he preferred the simplicity of being alone. He loved to be alone. Of course, his young girlfriend had charms about her that fascinated, allured, and delighted him in ways no other person did. But, when she couldn't come out to play, or when she needed to go home, or after his brief visits when she was babysitting, he would morph back into the loner, unaware of anyone else. His play routine included his entire neighborhood and the large, adjoining cemeteries, with their lakes and ducks, abandoned buildings, and freight trains running through them daily. His territory also included all the best hills to race his bicycle down at breakneck speeds, the enormous underground drainage pipes that he would traverse during the dry summer months, the baseball diamonds where he would sometimes join his peers, or he would hike the six miles from his house out to the ocean's coast and back again simply because he could. He loved visiting the fig trees when their fruit was ripe, and he loved life.

No one ever asked him questions about where he had been each day or where he was going, and no one ever asked him how his day had been. He never thought about the lack of parental attention he received until much later in his life. Sure, there were still rules he was told to follow, and he was punished harshly for disobedience. Still, as he later learned, his parents were from a generation that believed if they punished a child harshly, the child would dislike the punishment so much they would immediately begin obeying. Unfortunately, their child was such a nonconformist that he decided he needed to get better at disobeying as the means to avoid their punishment. As a young, still-inexperienced person, he kept getting caught and punished until he had learned many lessons. Most of the lessons regarding his character were learned the hard way, through trial, error, and punishment, while rebelling and disobedience seemed ingrained into his decision-making.

He considered spirituality a form of private devotion, but he also considered incorporating spirituality into his daily life. The man believed that his relationship with god, a non-religious, non-personified god, meant that he had to give to god if he wanted to have an actual relationship with god. Their relationship would not be a negotiated one, where either would ask something of the other and, if they received what they asked for, they would give something back. No, the relationship was not transactional at all. Both gave freely to the relationship because they wanted to. They both gave freely to the other out of love for the other without ever considering receiving something in return. Theirs became a relationship of loyalty and love. The man did not like drawing attention to himself, so he kept his spirituality personal unless asked about it.

As the man would learn during his many decades of contemplation and introspection, there was no other way for him to live or be. He didn't know what or where the switch was that

told him he was to rebel against authority, whether it was beneficial or not. His parents tried to beat the rebel out of him, and they tried other means of punishment to get their son to comply with their demands. Ultimately, they gave up, much like their son had, though he had given up complying many years earlier. More years passed until his parents could finally legally kick him out of his home, and on that day, they kicked him out. An odd and funny thing immediately happened; the now young man began to comply with many rules and regulations that adults must comply with or face very stiff punishments; getting caught now no longer meant a punch in his face or being confined to his bedroom for weeks or even months on end. He had thought those were severe punishments, but he quickly learned through the grapevine of his newly acquired friends that getting involved with the police or going to jail or prison was definitely to be avoided at all costs.

The still-young man began to nurture and eventually harvest the reasons for the many experiences of his rebellious and non-conformist youth. He had learned a great deal, which, until now, he put to use simply by getting better at not getting caught for doing the same wrong thing again. But now, layers were getting added to his knowledge. For instance, he had learned that being alone was safe for him. He had learned that he was good and that he was also happy while alone. He had also learned that some people made him happier, that some people hurt his feelings, and that those hurt feelings took some time to recover from. Gradually, the time he spent alone grew, and the time he spent with others shrank.

The man tried working for others. While he was always a good and happy employee, he would quickly become inwardly miserable, especially if his employer said anything negative about him or his work. Negativity towards him became his exit lane. Negativity was so damning to him that often, after experiencing negativity at work, he would not return. He

would wait until lunchtime and then leave for good. Or, he would wait until his shift was over and never return. Something about being personally attacked repulsed him to his core, and he would flee from it. The other thing he learned was that he was goal-oriented, and once he reached his goal, he became disinterested in continuing to do the same thing. Once he had mastered something, he became bored.

His repulsion for how society set up people's lives became the propulsion for his life. He constantly moved from job to job and home to home. He moved from state to state and eventually from country to country. His early learning was a constant source of information he could use as he slowly grew into this new life he was trying to make his own. He made his way almost exclusively alone because he trusted himself to avoid mistakes. Some things he did were illegal, but he did them anyway. He did them alone because he had learned as a kid and teenager how to do them without getting caught—getting caught doing illegal things as an adult had consequences he did not want to experience. He was finally living the happiest and most fulfilling time of his entire life.

And so, his life continued. He had many superficial relationships, yet others that penetrated his heart, and he lived a happy, grateful, and gregarious life. He was not afraid of much of anything, and he didn't trust anyone. That is, he didn't trust anyone completely. He trusted different people to different degrees, but no one ever surprised him by being distrustful because he expected people to fail, like he had failed so many times. He could see the shame in his parent's eyes when he did not meet the level of trust they so desperately wanted him to achieve, and their shame became his shame. He had no idea he was living the life of a shamed person, and he didn't care yet about that influence or other influences that either drove him along his path or halted his progress. He was who he was; he did what he did, and

others either liked him or didn't. He was strong, handsome, and intelligent, which in many ways provided him a life of plenty- plenty of friends and plenty of romance. He left old places and sought new places as and when he wanted, without caring about those he left behind. He was engrossed in the classroom of his life, and the classroom of his life demanded his complete attention. Until that is, he got bored. Boredom caused him to move on and explore the planet that beckoned him.

As he reached his early thirties, he first began to become contemplative. By his mid-thirties, he was married and had children; by his late thirties, he was divorced and a single parent. For him to find himself in the position he was now in was confusing, and he was ill-prepared. He had yet to experience empathy, and because of his upbringing, there was no way he could vicariously experience what he had never experienced himself. There was simply no common thread. He would tell his children to do something, and they would do it. If they didn't do what they were supposed to, he would immediately raise his voice, repeating louder what he wanted them to do, and then they would do what he wanted. Bedtime was never an issue, and when he would say, "It's bedtime," his children would get up, give him hugs and kisses, and go off to bed. This simple and functional family unit continued until his children's teen years. He didn't understand his children's new behavior or like it. The man often said to himself, *Damn it, if I had known this is how my children would be as teenagers, I wouldn't have fought so hard to be the primary parent. I could be the 'Santa Claus parent,' and they would love me!* Of course, there were many factors that he could have used to mitigate their unexplainable behavior, but he only wanted them to listen to him. He wanted them to listen to him because he knew that what he was saying was correct, and if they listened to him, all their lives would be so much better. The man who had never complied wanted his children to do

what he could never do, and because they didn't comply, the family unit completely fell apart. His cherished family was no longer together by the time only several more years had passed. He still had his successful business. He still had his beautiful home. He still had his beautiful sports car, a new truck, and a fabulous ocean boat, but he no longer had an intact heart. The last several years broke his heart into pieces.

He still possessed his well-learned and deeply held traits, one of which was survival. For him, survival sometimes meant catapulting everything except his most basic human needs and then starting again from scratch. This never seemed like a hardship for him. He had given up everything and lived the life of a traveler, or, as people referred to them now, a homeless person. He was a traveler for many years, and when he grew tired of that life, he changed it. Life just never seemed that difficult for him, except for the relationships.

This time, the now in his life, his response didn't need to be so dramatic. He didn't need to move and give up everything he had acquired over the past nearly twenty years. This time, he kept his physical life intact, including his wealth and possessions, but his emotional life suffered complete devastation. He divorced for the third time, and his relationships were purely for physical enjoyment. Once a woman wanted more than that from him, he would cut her off. He wanted their company, and he wanted to be their company, and once that always short meeting was accomplished, he wanted them to go, or he wanted to go.

Again and again, he couldn't understand why the people he was in these relationships with didn't listen to him. He told people what he wanted from them and what he could give them. At first, they agreed, but they always wanted more as time passed, and he had no more to give. He had already told them that.

Getting emotionally close to people had confused him for most of his life, so he withdrew from those people until there was no one left to withdraw from. His children, of course, were not a part of that equation, and he had given his life and heart to his children, who then abandoned him for their mother. He felt his children had murdered his heart, leaving him bereft of hope for his future. He didn't understand how such a thing could happen to him after all he had done for them. That was when he remembered sympathy and its cousin, empathy. As he sat alone day and night, even feeling most alone when others were physically present, he had wanted and hoped for friendship from his children. He wanted a phone call or a visit from them and for them to ask how he was doing. Of course, had they phoned him, he would have lied, not wanting to burden them with his problems.

The man somehow managed to live through his loneliness and the sheer agony of being so thoroughly humiliated by his children leaving him. The man retreated into himself as he always did before having his family. His children were the only time he had ever given himself entirely to others and lived for two others. Now, he needed to relearn how to live alone once again. He needed to learn to stop caring for those who had left him. He needed to stop thinking about them every morning, every afternoon, every evening, and every night because that's precisely the entirety of what he had been doing for the past eighteen-plus years. Most of the clothes they had outgrown, and some of the clothes they still wore they had left behind. Their toys were still in their rooms, their smells permeated their bedrooms, their pictures were still stuck on the refrigerator's door, and the endless other reminders of their lives together proved how much he had lost. Yet the man managed to survive the knives now stuck in his heart, the pain, loneliness, and the sheer agony of having been and still being so thoroughly hurt and humiliated by his children leaving him.

Only once did he nearly succumb to his grief and sadness, and though he came close to submitting, he did not. He rose again from the bottom of the pit of pain he was consumed by to begin, once again, to regain his life. It took time to happen. The man was now a decade or so older, and finally, he was healing from the inside out. At this point in the man's life, he learned more about empathy. He didn't learn empathy from anyone because no one had ever taken the time to show him any. He was adamant about that, and instead of railing against those who had wholly betrayed him, the man attempted empathy. He wanted to see if he could be empathetic to the reasons for their behavior. And, trying as hard as he could, he couldn't do it. The man was now bereft of resources, and if he were a car or truck, he would have stopped because he was out of gas. He was out of gas for them, and he was out of gas for everyone. He had nothing to give to anybody. But each time they gave him something, a phone call or a text message, perhaps pictures of his grandchild, he would feel like he was no longer on empty and that there was a little something back in his tank. And then they would leave him alone again, and he was left without the consistency he longed for and needed.

As the number of years he expected to live grew less and less, the man stopped expecting anything from his children or anybody else. He had stopped expecting anything long ago, but hope is a difficult flame to extinguish. The man had always hoped, but now all reason for hope was gone. This situation was precisely why he had never wanted to be in this position in the first place. He had wanted a family, but he had wanted a family unit. A unit with a husband, a wife, and two children, but that didn't work out, and he was left with the children and never left them. He gave them all he could, both physically and emotionally. The man believed that he had done the best he could. The man admitted to himself and his children

that he had made mistakes, yet he still couldn't understand why his children let his mistakes define him. Indeed, they should know that a person's mistakes do not define them.

So, as he grew older, he hoped that someday his children would realize he did the best he could and that his best was very good. He wanted them to love him, and he wanted them to understand that raising them wasn't easy. He also hoped that someday someone would see through his veil of personal accomplishments and his veil of happiness with his life. The man would never remove those veils again because he had done so for his children, and they had crushed him. These veils were staying. And the most cunning part was that he was the only person who knew they were veils, and he wore them to protect his heart from further damage.

His heart was again intact, though beating through so much scar tissue that its functionality for love, happiness, and optimism was severely impacted, but it was beating to a good beat and beating strong again.

And so, as the man looked at where he was in his life, it was much like reading a good book. He could see the thickness of the part he had read and the thinness of what was left. He didn't get to where he was in the book without having read all the preceding pages. Parts of every book are happy, details in some books are unhappy, and all books have a beginning, a middle, and an end. It was the same for him now. The thickest part of his life had already been experienced, and the thinnest part was still to come.

The End.

Written by Peter Skeels © May 6th, 2022