

Two Poles.

The young man sat, slumped forward, with his head in his hands. His mind was in acute confusion, intense anger, and panic- he wanted to run from where he was. He was only seventeen, yet he felt the weight of his very existence was resting on the decisions he was about to make. The importance and the significance of this moment seemed too much for him, yet here he was about to make decisions. The weight wasn't physical, of course, yet to his mind, this all felt so heavy he believed it could crush him. The young man felt his very survival depended on his decisions.

Yet, the more his young mind asked questions, the more the sense of dread, disorientation, confusion, and anxiety grew because he found little meaning in the absurd world around him. But there didn't seem to be any answers that satisfied the intense immediateness that his present dilemma demanded. He tossed out every answer to every question because his current thoughts no longer seemed like his thoughts; instead, they were espoused beliefs, ideas, and opinions that he had learned from others and taken on as his own. Now, in this moment of needing an original answer for his very survival, he couldn't come up with one that resonated as his truth. All his answers seemed as if he was plagiarizing others and not being original to himself.

So, the young man sat, and he sat, and he finally sat upright and removed his hands from his face. His hands, cheeks, and eyes were wet from his tears, and finally, he let his head fall back onto the chair and rested. The afternoon turned to dusk, and still, he sat. The young man had learned some time ago that when he didn't know what to do, he should do nothing. And now, as he sat still, he began to feel deep inside his brain, a bubble begin to rise through the depths, the disorientation, the confusion, and the anxiety, and as he watched the bubble rising in his mind, it surfaced and popped. Then, he could hear his answer for what his decision was going to be.

His phone ringing in his pocket startled him, yet he answered it. “Hello,” he said.

“Hello, Andrew; this is Michael from the gas station. You were supposed to be here forty-five minutes ago, so where are you?” The man’s voice was stern and confrontational.

Andrew immediately replied. “Oh yes, Michael. I quit.”

After a short silence, Michael spoke, “So Andrew, shall I send your final paycheck by mail, or do you want to pick it up?”

“Oh,” said Andrew, “I’ll pick it up. And Michael? Thank you.” With that, Andrew hung up.

Andrew relaxed into his chair and watched as more answers began to find their way through the now dissipating dread, disorientation, confusion, and anxiety. He could now hear that there were only two questions he needed to ask himself, and he needed to know the answers to these deeply personal questions. He also understood that he not only needed to ask himself these two questions now, but he needed to ask these questions whenever he was at a crossroads in life. As he began to regain control over his reckless thoughts, his mind began to grow calmer.

Andrew was able to smile at how simply such a period of sharp, intense questioning about his core existence was settled. And as he sat in his sparsely furnished apartment, he smiled a faint but perceptible smile. He now knew something for himself, and even though that knowledge was just that he needed to ask two questions, the idea to ask those two questions was his idea and his alone. Andrew had not thought to ask those two questions before. No, everything he had learned until now, or so it seemed to him at this moment, were things he had learned by rote. Andrew kept thinking that his learning thus far had been through memorization and repetition, and by learning that way, he had pleased and satisfied everyone around him but not himself.

He asked himself the two questions: who am I, and why am I here? At first, the two questions were met by answers of who he was not and what he was not here for. At that moment, Andrew learned that he didn't know who he was or why he was here.

This day had been Andrew learning who he was not and what he wasn't here for. His young life had been spent doing what others wanted or demanded he do or getting punished for not doing what others wanted or demanded. Yet his, as yet, rarely used soul seemed to be jostling with his learned personality for space and recognition for himself and himself alone.

Andrew was alarmed that he had been so pliable and tractable for his first seventeen years, and he said to himself, *I am not going to live my life by simply following the options that society offers me, as those options only seem to satisfy those who created them. No, I want to find out who I am, and I want to find out why I am here.*

With that said, Andrew felt hungry, but with no food in his apartment, he decided to walk to the local grocery store.

Andrew's quest to find the answers to his two core questions seemed simple. Asking and answering who am I and why am I here didn't seem like it would or should be that difficult.

And yet, his previous questions seemed to be between two very distinct poles. There was good and bad, going to school or not, getting good grades or not, and those questions were easy to answer.

Now, though, at seventeen and just out of high school, the biggest question being asked of him was what was he going to do next? Within that, one big question was the options people suggested he take, with one option being college. The two poles of getting further education or not didn't seem to be a big decision for him. Andrew didn't know what he wanted to be yet, so college wasn't in his immediate future, and a decision didn't seem necessary.

Some people suggested the military, and he was acutely aware that few people knew him because those who did would never recommend the military as he was anti-war. Andrew was always one hundred percent anti-war.

Several well-meaning family members suggested he get a good union job and work with his Uncle at his plumbing business. They said he would get paid well, get good health care, and get a good pension after 35 years or so. But Andrew shouted to himself, *I'm seventeen! Retirement? Really? That begins decades from now. No, I'm not doing that!*

Andrew had always liked creative writing. And that was something he was very attracted to doing. He had written poems and short stories that were well-received.

Andrew had only been consistent with being confused about who he was and why he was here. That confusion led him to read many books that challenged everything he had learned from his Western education, his education by the Catholic church, and being raised in a primarily soulless society.

His life continued; Andrew drifted from one job to another, and Andrew was seemingly adrift. Andrew had no mooring to make his base, and Andrew had no destination to head for. That is until one day, he packed a few things into a duffle bag, collected his money from the bank, and set out to hitchhike across America. Just like that, Andrew left everyone and everything he knew.

Andrew, now several years older, had met a woman who was also a writer, and he liked her very much. He wasn't sure of her intentions but wasn't worried about them either. One afternoon, as they sat outside in the warm sun, he said to her, "I'm not sure you remember me telling you this, but at 17 years old, after a pretty normal first 17 years, I didn't know who I was or what I wanted, but I loved finally being free. I kept trying to conform, but steady jobs bored me. Once I

learned what I was doing, I didn't see the point in doing it day after day, except for the money, of course.” At that, they both laughed out loud. “It wasn't as pleasurable as doing a new thing. And so, I decided to travel. I learned right away I was fearless, happy, and optimistic, and if I met disappointment, I kept going.” He paused momentarily and continued, “People rarely meet a real traveler, so they assume they're like other people. But travelers are not like other people; they're travelers. The name comes from those who travel, right? Most everyone thought I would stop and settle down. But that's not what travelers do. Traveling became habitual for me. Looking back at the places and people I left would have meant taking responsibility for what I did and the pain I caused by simply doing what I wanted. My immediate need was to keep traveling even though that sometimes hurt others, so I kept doing it and refused to look back. The excitement and pleasure of going forward alone were too good even to consider stopping.”

Andrew and his girlfriend looked at each other. Andrew continued, “Some time ago, I learned my life had no meaning. And while it still took a few years for me to figure things out, realizing that my life had no meaning was my catalyst to travel. I had settled for an easy life that allowed me to ignore the shallowness I lived with. Seeking easy things allowed me to learn how to be smooth, superficially gracious, and manipulative when I desired things or there was a job I wanted.”

Andrew took a deep breath and asked his friend if he could continue, and she nodded her approval. “A quote by Victor Frankl caught my attention: “When a person can't find a deep sense of meaning, they distract themselves with pleasure.”

“I then began extricating myself from my very easy situation, but I developed a medical problem that needed immediate attention, and then, finally, my plan to travel came to fruition. Taking the leap and hitting the road took longer than I thought, but I have, since then, learned a lot.”

“Somewhere in all this, God became much more important in my life. I’ve always had a relationship with God, but it became more refined and vital as I lived. I detest religion for many reasons, but the biggest reason is its personification of God, so I decided to spell God using the lowercase g. So, God became god to distinguish the religious God from my non-religious god. It seemed a crucial distinction for me then, but it’s not as important now.

Then I began using Ask, Believe, Receive in my relationship with god: I ask of god, I believe god will give me what I ask for, and then I receive what god gives me. And God also asks of me. That’s what makes it a relationship. God believes that I will give god what god asks of me, and god waits to receive what god asks me for. It’s a relationship, a two-way street.”

After pausing for a moment, Andrew smiled and said, “I’m sorry this is so didactic. And I’m sure my talking this much and for so long has gotten boring for you. But can I finish?” His friend nodded yes, so he continued, “To those I hurt, I repaid with my voluntary, self-imposed punishment for the wrongs I did, and I’ve apologized to those I hurt when I was able to, without expectations. I’ve forgiven the wrongs done to me without expectations, too. I’m living a life of meaning now, and while I’m occasionally lonely, I’m usually happy and optimistic. Mostly, I keep to myself, but now that I’ve met you, I’m happier.”

Andrew took a deep breath before saying, “I like myself now. I pay attention now. I’m astonished by life now. And I write about life now.”

His girlfriend spoke to Andrew calmly and sincerely, “There’s too much meanness today. I’ve lost several friends of twenty or more years because their hearts got mean. My heart isn’t mean, and I protect it. I haven’t watched the news for years, and I love the calming effect my writing has on me, too. I’m glad I’ve met you, too, Andrew. You make me happier, too!”

Then she continued, “As my mind empties the daily trivia that society cluttered it with, and since I don’t watch television or allow it to fill back up with nonsense, I too am free to think my thoughts. And while my thoughts and yours are very different, we are both artists doing our best.” She stopped, smiled, and said, “But next time, it’s my turn to talk for as long as I want. I have to go now!”

The End.

Written by Peter Skeels © October 25th, 2022