



Ten Crutches For Walking In The Present

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Dedication

To Richard De Martino and Hubert Benoit

“Don’t belittle the sky by looking through a pipe.”

from the *Shōdōka* (*Song of Awakening*) by Yongjia Zhenjue

Preface

This book is meant to be read and then forgotten. It's like a pair of crutches you use when you break your leg. You don't keep using them for the rest of your life; when you no longer need them, you toss them in the attic. But, like with anything forgotten, sometimes you find yourself up there, and you see the crutches. For a moment, you remember.

"Walking in the present" is something anyone can do, at least in theory. Walking, in this metaphor, is about movement. About doing. About being alive and embracing everything that comes with it. I know I struggle with life quite a bit. My mind runs all over the place most of the time. It can be hard to "settle down" and simply be present with what's around me.

One of the common complaints about simply existing in reality is that it's "too boring" to pay much attention to. But to me, that says more about us than about reality itself. Frogs, for example, are the champions of "just sitting." They're my heroes. They can sit still for hours, yet the moment a fly buzzes past, they're ready to spring into action. Frogs are masters of living in the present.

I also want to be still, whatever I'm doing, and ready to act.

For humans, though, the "present moment" isn't so simple. Our ability to use symbols can be confusing, sometimes in extreme ways. Many have written about how the map is not the territory, the menu is not the meal. And with good reason. When I see how many people fight and die over ideas, I feel how important it is to search for clarity between reality and the words, ideas, and culture we use to build what I call "human-created-reality." I hope to bring at least a little of that clarity here.

If you're asking why someone should bother striving to be more present, this book isn't for you. I assume you already know that, at least intuitively. These pages are for anyone who wants help finding the present moment more deeply.

The sum of these words is meant to be like a finger pointing at something important but difficult to describe. If a finger points and you catch even a glimpse of what it's showing, that's enough. There's no need to photograph the finger.

So please remember to forget these crutches.

Introduction

I like being a teacher.

Before I retired, I worked as a hospice nurse. I spent a lot of time teaching people about death, about dying, and about caring for the dying. About something as simple as changing the sheets on a bed where someone is bed bound. Before nursing, I had been qualified to teach high school English. For me, it's not a big deal to teach someone something when you know at least a little more than they do. Teaching has been a part of my life, on and off, for about forty years.

At the same time, this book or some version of it has been circling in my mind for nearly three decades. Some of what you'll read here was originally meant for a book I tentatively called *The Portable Practice*. Other pieces came from an essay about faith, or from a script for a video on the difference between symbols and reality. One idea was once part of a poem I never finished. The material here is drawn from many parts of my life, from books and workshops, and my current experience.

The book itself is simple: ten metaphorical “crutches” that might be useful for walking in the present. As I said in the preface, they are meant to be forgotten just as you forget about real crutches once you are done with them.

But alongside the part of me that wanted to write this book, there was another part that thought it was a terrible idea. My loudest internal voice was the one that resisted becoming some kind of “spiritual teacher.” I hated that role. I hated the feeling of pretending I knew more than you did about your spirituality. I hated imagining someone looking at me, expecting me to explain “the truth” or “the nature of reality.” It made my skin crawl. It felt pompous, self-inflated. I felt an urgency to stop myself from going down that road.

And so, time and again, I stopped myself from writing the book I wanted to write. The resisting part of me would slap the book-writing part in the face. I’d shout at myself: “Who are you kidding? You don’t know anything!”

Then I’d answer: “Thanks, Self. I needed that.”

And after a pause, I’d add, “But really... shouldn’t we write a book?”

To quickly review: part of me wanted to write this book, and a larger, stronger part stopped me.

Beneath the wrestling match, I glimpsed another part: a tremendous desire to take center stage, microphone in hand. I wanted to stand there, in the middle of the world, with everyone’s attention on me. I mean, everyone. The whole fucking world. I wanted to spout wisdom so deep it made people’s jaws drop at just how fucking wise and amazing I was. Deep down? I wanted people to be in awe of my awesomeness.

This grandiose part egged me on: “Of course you should write a book about living in the present! Please do it! It’s gonna be a bestseller, dude! You’re going to be invited to podcasts and shows, you’ll give talks, and you’ll be celebrated all over the planet! Finally, people will realize how stunningly extraordinary you are.”

This struck me, on many levels, as a terrible motivation to write a book. The part of me that still wanted to write was like, “Really? You actually want that?”

And the part that wanted to stop me was like, “See what I mean? That grandiose part is seriously batshit crazy.”

I reflected on how weird and distorted this “desire to be amazing” is. I have stories from my past that could, at least partly, explain this tendency. But those are tales for another time. For now, I’ll just say that, as the years passed, I made a kind of delicate peace with this strange desire, this strange voice inside me. I acknowledge its existence. I even began to feel gratitude toward the “preventing part” of me that protected me for so long.

But at the same time, I’m still afraid. I fear my desire to write is like a balloon filled with the helium of grandiosity: if the desire to take center stage fades, the helium would leak out and my writing would collapse along with it.

I’d have nothing to say.

Until recently, that was it: a paralysis sour with the fear of moving.

Oh, and there was also a very small voice whispering, “Don’t you think it might be helpful to some people if...?” But the voice was painfully weak, prone to hiding, and nowhere near strong enough to change anything.

It’s a complicated “action” to write a book. It’s less a single action than a long string of mini-actions. For me, there has to be something coherent linking them all together, a motivation strong enough to carry me through different days, moods, and the shifting circumstances of life. But with 40% of me tangled up in an insecure “wanna be famous” thing and another 40% busy trying to keep it in check, there was only 20% left for actual writing. And 20% just wasn’t enough.

As I mentioned, things went on like this for years.

Here’s what I think happened: the 40% of me that “wanted to be famous” shrank. When I turned 65 this past winter, I saw more clearly how empty fame is. That dream shrank accordingly. It was no longer something to chase or something to resist; it just didn’t matter much either way. It felt like it dropped from 40% to maybe 10 or 15%. And since the dream was smaller, the energy I needed to keep it in check shrank too.

There was more space. Gradually, the 20% of me wanting to write this book had room to grow.

I even did the imaginary math to track my imaginary motivations. I figured maybe 80% of me now wanted to write a book. And that was certainly enough to get started.

But still, I found myself stuck. Damn.

What was the hurdle now?

Aha, I wanted to write to the whole world. I wanted this book to be for everyone. I recognized a leftover aspect from the grandiose part of me.

The “whole world” is just too big an audience. I needed to get more specific.

I have a friend who has meditated for many years. She’s a real searcher, always on the lookout for a deeper truth, a sharper insight. When I told this fellow traveler on the path I was writing a book called *Ten Crutches for Walking in the Present*, she immediately said she wanted to read it.

I knew she would understand what I had to say. So I wrote to her, held her in my mind, and poured out what was inside. When I edit, I still think of her. I ask myself: What will she think of this? Of that?

This was what I had, and this was the time to say it. I chose to write as simply as I could and put it all out there. It no longer mattered what people thought or whether anyone would read it.

So, it’s up to you to decide if any of this is useful. I hope at least some of it will be for some of the people who read it.

I genuinely wish you the best in your one, precious life.

The Ten Crutches

1. There is no such thing as “the past.”
2. There is no such thing as “the future.”
3. All “things” (and “events”) are the same.
4. All “things” (and “events”) are different.
5. You will never find “it” outside of you.
6. You will never find “it” inside of you.
7. You are one with everything evil.
8. You are one with everything good.
9. You will never really know.
10. Your senses are the gates to the present moment.

The Fitting Room

Welcome to the fitting room.

Before we talk about finding the right size for each of the ten crutches, let me show you around.

Simply being in the present is, for me, quite difficult. Even just sitting, the most profoundly simple of “activities,” is not easy. Being aware of my breath flowing in and out, aware of the sounds around me, aware of myself simply sitting there: almost impossible to sustain for more than a few seconds.

My mind is almost always moving. I have fantasies so compelling I lose track of my surroundings altogether. Even at my quietest, my mind produces a constant little buzz of activity like hearing a TV in the next room with the volume just high enough to make you wonder what you’re missing.

But even when I pay close attention, I can feel my mind moving. Sometimes it’s like being in a spy movie, where the agent at a fancy party wears a hidden earpiece and, while grabbing a glass of champagne, hears the voice say: “The target is standing near the fireplace.”

That’s me: a spy on some other kind of mission. A mission to prove myself to myself. A mission to “get someplace.” A mission to become somebody who gets it right, who is OK, who is enough. I am always aiming at a future where everything will be settled and I won’t have to strive anymore.

My internal voice can be relentless. It tells me either: “Yes! That’s it. You’re doing great,” or “Holy shit! You’re totally blowing it right now. What’s wrong with you?” It’s like the childhood game where you’re blindfolded and told you’re getting “warmer” or “colder.” At least back then, there was something real to find. Now, without even knowing what I’m looking for, my present actions still tell me if I’m getting “warmer” or “colder.”

But what is it I’m trying to get?

It often feels impossible to experience the sensory life around me in a simple way. Can I sit still? Can I just walk somewhere? Or do something ordinary like washing dishes while letting myself simply exist in the world?

Ah, to exist without the pressure to “improve.” Without needing to entertain myself with an endless scroll of imagination. What would that be like? What if life isn’t leading to “someplace special”? What if I don’t need to prove anything to anyone and can just live?

This insatiable human desire to “become something” is what I will call, metaphorically, a “broken leg.”

When you have a broken leg, you have to stop and care for it. Broken bones need an “x-ray,” a look past the surface to the inside, to see what the break actually is. They need a cast; the leg must be immobilized while it heals. And that’s where the need for crutches comes in: to help us walk while we are healing.

It’s very important to remember the “broken leg” is just a metaphor. There is actually nothing wrong or broken at all. Of course, it’s fine to want to become something; we set goals for ourselves all the time. It’s incredibly important to set goals and move toward them. There’s nothing wrong with that.

But the problem I point to is different: an existential doubt at the on-going inception of my being. This “self-doubt” might be described as a confusion between being “one” with the entire universe and simultaneously being almost nothing. This confusion forces me to assure myself I am OK constantly.

But my ok-ness can never be definitively established the way I feel it needs to be. I have no more chance of that than I do of arriving at the bottom of a rainbow.

The doubt at the center of my being means everything I do, I do with that doubt. Every action I take to address my lack of ok-ness, I take with that doubt. All my searching for certainty is a manifestation of this central doubt. And because I am searching within my reality, I have convinced myself the answers I seek must be here within the reality I can perceive.

So I have been led to understand two contradictory truths:

- There is nothing I can “do” to correct this situation. No action will change anything about my doubt.
- I must take action. I can’t just let things remain as they are.

This is the broken leg. This constant unease, this lack of knowing how to address the situation, is the “broken leg.”

Before you can get fitted for the metaphorical crutches in this book, you must first acknowledge your metaphorical “broken leg.”

EXERCISE:

Make a journal entry with the following prompts:

What does being present mean to you?

What keeps you from being present?

Just start writing and keep writing for ten minutes. Keep the pen moving across the paper. Even if you have to write “Blah, blah, I don’t know what to write,” it’s important to write continuously and give the creaky wheels of your mind a chance to spin freely. If you reach the end of the ten minutes and are still going strong, keep going until you are naturally done.

Let’s continue to look around the fitting room.

An ancient Greek dude, Protagoras, said something like this:

“People are the measure of all things.”

I think Protagoras meant people have only their descriptions and judgments to rely on. People have to measure. We have to compare. We have to distinguish one thing from another, decide which is better, and decide what we keep and what we discard. Who will do the measuring for us? How can we do anything but measure what is around us?

Do trees measure anything?

Do clouds?

How about frogs?

On reflection, I find Protagoras made a pretty grandiose claim, very human-centric. “People are the measure of **all** things?” Well, maybe just the things we experience. Certainly, multitudes of things exist independently of whether or not people measure them. What does seem true is once people see something, they go ahead and measure it.

If it were up to me, I would amend the original quote to:

“People sure do measure a lot of things.”

Trees must measure as well; things trees perceive must have significance to them, just like things do to us. Is there rain falling? Trees must notice. They intertwine their roots and communicate with each other. (But what do they communicate? Maybe it’s: “Hey there! Hope you are well!”)

If trees do measure, would they consider the statement “Trees are the measure of all things” to be true? I tend to doubt it. I don’t think trees live in a tree-centric world the way we live in a human-centric world.

Simply sitting. Who the hell wants to do that?

Well, me, for one. And all those who meditate, at least those who meditate not to achieve any particular thing.

I understand meditation provides many wonderful side effects. For example, it can lower stress, reduce levels of cortisol (the fight-or-flight hormone), and increase mindfulness and the ability to pay attention. There are plenty of other benefits as well.

But what about those who sit simply because they want to sit? What if there is no ultimate goal beyond the sitting itself? It's like being a frog or a turtle or a lizard on a rock. Simply sitting.

Except when you stand up, you're a human, not a reptile.

Even so, you have a reptilian part of your brain (and some other stuff in there as well, of course). The part taking care of all the body's "automatic" functions is often called the reptile brain.

Even when we sleep, our hearts beat, our lungs breathe, and our food digests. Waste is eliminated from the body. While we are sleeping, working, talking, laughing, crying, watching some dumb video, or reading a profound book, our existence is supported by a part of our brain very similar to what supports a frog.

The other parts of our brain, layered on top of the reptilian brain, give us emotion and thought, planning and imagination, language, and our ability to participate in human culture. Important? Hell, yes. But the truth is, we deeply rely on the reptilian brain to survive.

Let's honor that brain! Let's sit still like frogs, still and aware. I'm not even talking about meditation anymore.

To me, it makes complete sense for a human to want to emulate a frog, to be able to sit as still and as mindfully as one. To be totally aware of one's surroundings. If a fly buzzes past, the tongue can snap out, and you can have a quick snack before going back to sitting. Simple and profound.

It may mean, while riding a bus or subway, putting away your phone and simply sitting there. (Is that crazy to suggest? To stop scrolling and put your phone away for a while?)

I guess if you actually try to sit simply, you'll realize it's not so simple. Because of the extra layers of brain evolution piled on top of our reptile brain, we have emotions frogs don't appear to have. We can think abstractly, which doesn't seem like a froggy behavior. We can reason (within our emotional limits, of course). We can imagine. We can plan.

What else can we do that frogs cannot? We can believe we "look good" in a hat. We can compare a picture of "who we are" with a picture of "who we yearn to be." We can want a second piece of cake we know we "shouldn't have." We can be delighted to find a piece of paper called a "\$20 bill" tucked into shorts from last summer. A frog can't tell a \$20 bill from a \$100 bill from a \$1 bill. We can believe we live "in" a "year" with a particular number.

I think you get the idea.

EXERCISE:

Ask a frog what year it is.

Journal about what happens.

The human brain is *so* complex and *so* capable of fantasy and imagery and symbolism, we can often lose track of the difference between what we've imagined and what is “real” reality. Let's explore what can be confusing.

I assert the essence of the confusion is:

- Using our imagination to invent something socially useful (like money, what year it is, etc.)
- Forgetting we are making it all up
- Treating the things we imagined as real
- Layering more culture around these things and reinforcing their “reality.”

And these things *are* real, within the confines of human culture. But then we forget human culture is meant only for us humans. We think our imagined world covers everything. We believe we are “the measure of *all* things.” We often forget there are many things we will never be able to measure. And even what we do measure also exists beyond any measurement.

This action of inventing and then forgetting we invented can be deeply confusing.

For example, I am writing this book “in” the year 2025, and I am writing this particular paragraph “on” a Friday.

A quick reflection reveals the truth: any year's number is completely arbitrary. It's invented. Somebody picked a “year zero” and started counting, and we just kept it going until, here we are, in some particular year.

But even though the number of the year is arbitrary, *it's still true*: it really *is* this particular year. Yet we need a way to distinguish between what is human-created (true within our culture) and what is true in reality.

This distinction is very important for living in any present moment.

I mentioned frogs before, and I'd like to return to them now. Frogs can help us see the difference between what I'll call “human-created reality” and “reality.”

Imagine you're sitting near a stream in the woods and see a frog on a rock. You ask the frog what year it is. You ask the frog what day it is. As you already know, no frog will ever tell you what

year or day it is. In terms of how we humans count years and name days, there's nothing to share with a frog. Our human-created reality stays with us.

But reality? Reality is the present moment. Anyone can share a present moment with a frog.

Getting "fitted for the crutches" in this book means wanting to be as present to reality as a frog is. While still being able to participate fully in the human-created reality.

If this is your aim, please read on. That's what this fitting room is all about.

To review:

There is something "real" about today being Friday. It really is Friday. It really is the year 2025. And yet, at the same time, it's also us humans making things up and then forgetting we were the ones who made them up. Days of the week and numbers for years are human-invented.

The reality we share with a frog (or a tree, or a cloud, or a spoon) is always, very simply, the now. And it will always include the human-invented reality as long as humans are still around, but will never be limited to it.

Is it possible to loosen our grip on the human-invented?

Can we, even for a short while, share the world with a frog? Or a tree? Or a cloud? Can we experience the world from a more universal point of view?

We will always return to the human-created world of meaning when we need to.

But let's not get trapped there.

Essentially, there is only the present.

There isn't any other time when reality can happen. Even if you're worried about the future or remembering the past, the only time and place to worry or remember is here and now. You can only take a breath in the present.

EXERCISE:

Try to take a breath in the past.

Try to take a breath in the future.

Journal about your experience.

Before we look at fitting the crutches, let's refine what it means to "be in the present."

It can feel like you're in the present when you're worrying about something that may (or may not) happen next week. You might think, "I am worrying *right now*," and, true enough, that makes it feel like the present. You can also be lost in a daydream about the past, say, a time when you were blueberry picking. You're daydreaming *right now*, but again, are you really "in the present?"

I would say: yes and no.

I hope we can keep the current definitions flexible. I consider "being present" the same as allowing the actual sensory contact of the moment to affect you. And yet, while sensory events affect you, you're also manifesting your personal variation of human-created culture. That means your thoughts, feelings, anxieties, memories, evaluations, and imaginations are all part of the present, too.

The fact is: if you point to any moment and say, "This is it! This is the present!" it's already gone. It's like trying to grab water with your hand or tie a rope to the wind. To become aware of "the present moment," you have to step outside of it, at least a little.

Likewise, if you point to a present moment and say, "This is what's here," you'd better include everything in the universe past, present, and future, or you'll be leaving something out.

The present moment!

It's a tricky thing. All the crutches in this book grew out of recognizing just how elusive the present moment can be. So part of finding a fit for any crutch at any time will depend in large part on what size **you** are.

I invited you into a "fitting room" so we could talk about the elusiveness of the present, at least a little. The crutches you'll find here are for people who want to find themselves more deeply in the present.

But they're also for people who realize simply "being present" isn't always straightforward or clear.

Except when it is.

And how hard it is to put paradox into words.

Except when it's not.

However you define “the present moment” is just right for you (at the moment.) The crutches in this book may help change things for the better; I hope they do. But any change will come only because of one thing: you see something in these pages you find to be true and then incorporate it *as yours* into your life.

I understand many people feel a lack due to real conditions of material shortage in their lives. Many people lack safety. As humans, we've not yet evolved to come together and ensure *everyone* has enough safety and enough support.

But I'm not talking about those conditions. I'm talking about people who clearly have enough and still feel they are lacking.

For now, I want to point to this deeper sense of lack, the profound feeling of not-enough that no amount of material security can soothe. I assert these feelings are nothing more than loud static from our human-created reality. Feelings of lack have no more (or less) reality than the number of a given year or the name of a day of the week.

Human-created reality needs to serve all of us.

The fitting room is a place to dive together as deeply as we can into each present moment we live.

Finding The Right Size For Your Crutches

I hope it's clear by now: I love metaphors. That's why I called this book *Ten "Crutches" For Walking" In The Present*. But let's pause for a moment and notice one way the metaphor breaks down.

"Crutches" help you walk when you have a broken leg. We visited a "fitting room" where you'll find ten crutches. Along the way, we discussed what the "broken leg" might be. I suggested our "broken leg" is the aspect of us yearning for a solution to a problem we can't actually solve. We look everywhere for a solution, both "inside" ourselves and "outside."

But there's no *solving* this particular problem—because it was never really a problem in the first place. We are yearning to fix something we invented. And you can't just "let it go," since even this action is simply more of the same.

So the "broken leg" keeps us from "walking" in "the present." A part of our attention is always, in one way or another, hooked on this illusory and unsolvable problem.

Here's where the metaphor starts to break down:

Within this metaphor, you might expect me to "take an x-ray" of the broken leg, as if we could diagnose the problem more accurately. Or maybe I could help "set the bone" so it heals properly. Or I could "apply a cast" to immobilize the leg. Do I really just expect you to "use your crutches" without a "cast" on your "broken leg?"

Well, as much as I love metaphors, I had to draw the line somewhere. Between the idea for this small book, writing it and then getting it into your hands, I had to create a few boundaries. I set limits. I pursued certain aspects of the metaphor and ignored others.

What I've written here will, I hope, answer some of these questions directly or at least imply an answer. Or at least hint at an implication.

Meanwhile, you'll have to make do with an incomplete metaphor.

Let's get you fitted.

It should feel natural to live in the present, but, unfortunately, it's not. Many people are more influenced by the past or the future than by what's actually happening around them at any given moment. I know I often am.

Fortunately, no crutches are needed to walk in the present. Being present is a natural ability, just as it was when we were infants. Of course, we cannot regress to an infantile state and still function as adults either in our human-created world or the rest of reality. Instead, we must find a way to integrate who we have become as adults with our natural tendency to be present.

We are born with this ability, but we interfere with it. The self-interference comes, in part, from having a self complicated enough to get in the way.

It's amazing, but true: we can conflict with ourselves. We can confuse ourselves. We can forget we have adopted a human idea, and now treat it as real.

However many forms it may take, self-interference is always marked by this: it appears there is (1) a self and (2) the interference. But the interference of the self comes from the self itself. It's the difference between saying, "I am stuck in traffic" and "I am the traffic."

So perhaps we can say more accurately: self-interference is the splitting of the self. The split divides us into (1) the self that feels like "me," and (2) an "interfering" part that usually doesn't feel like me. For example, we may be torn between the part wanting to limit sugar intake and the part wanting to finish the container of ice cream. Which is the "real" you? When there's a struggle, which part will win?

Some people then develop yet another part (3) wanting to heal the split between the first two parts. But this only complicates the situation and does not directly resolve it.

The ten crutches in this book are designed to side-step around this conflict.

During the journey from infant (totally present) to adult (somewhat present-ish), we lose an innocent, unselfconscious way of being in the world. And yet, our capacity to be "in the present" remains the same as the infant's, completely available in each moment.

But it remains unused unless we act. And "doing something" to activate it isn't simple. There is no direct effort to "pay more attention" or "have better attention" that works over the long run.

As I mentioned above, any part of ourselves objecting to being split into parts is simply another part. One aspect of our being cannot resolve a problem that belongs to the whole being.

So what can we do? What if an aspect of us gets hopeless and believes there is nothing to do? That, too, is more of the same. There's no need to be either hopeful or hopeless.

Let's look more closely at this predicament.

If we want to live more deeply "in the present," a completely normal way to think about this effort is by imagining a future where we are more present.

It makes sense because who we are in this now-moment feels unsatisfying. We can tell we are distracted, not present enough. We remember past moments with the same distracted quality, and so we generalize. We believe by modifying ourselves over time, we can plan a way to "get there." So, after we plan our tactics to achieve this strategy, we take the actions we believe will help us get there.

The problem is, it all ends up being more of the same. You can't become more present by leaving the present to make a plan about becoming more present. Each moment of making and carrying out the plan keeps you from experiencing the actual present.

There seems to be no way back to the direct perception of the infant. Fortunately, that's OK! As infants, we didn't know anything about the human-invented world, so we don't really want to go back to an infantile state. Whatever adult life requires of us (including caring for new infants), we are already embedded in a world requiring we be oriented and functional inside a culture.

Every present moment includes all the different human cultures. If we wish to engage wholeheartedly in the present moment, it will only be by carrying with us everything we have learned.

This is where a crutch may come in handy: to become more alive in the present, we need to study (1) who we are. But when we really study who we are, the sense of self can start to dissipate, like fog on a sunny morning. For a moment, we may even forget who we are. So we must prepare ourselves to let go of ourselves, at least a little.

That's because we also need to study (2) what we do instead of being present. But this, too, is part of the self, so it's not much different from (1).

I believe that by studying these two things, we can perhaps walk in the present. Or at least hobble with our crutches a little closer to it.

Thus, this little book.

These ten crutches are designed to help with being present. Getting fitted or finding the “right size” for any of the crutches means deciding how much or how little to engage with what you discover about that crutch. Like any good physical therapy program, you don't want to overdo it. Nor do you want to underdo it.

More specifically, fitting means any crutch will either fit (or not) into your life ***at the moment***. This applies both in a very general sense and a very specific one. You have to gauge, being honest with yourself, what is right for you today, in this present moment, with this particular crutch and the particular set of circumstances you are in.

You also need to assess what is right for you more generally about any crutch. Some of them may have to be set aside for now; there may simply be no way to find a proper, specific fit. That's fine.

One or two crutches may stand out as especially attractive; they may be the only ones you focus on for a while. Again, that's totally fine.

Let your judgment and discretion work freely. You will find the right sizes for you. If you're feeling indecisive, simply choose a smaller size and move on.

And remember, your sizes will fluctuate over time, as you and the circumstances of your life change. It's a journey.

Most people had a rough start in life; in other words, a difficult birth. Even the most normal and healthy births are often difficult for the infant.

Think about what an unborn infant is doing: not much of anything beside growing unselfconsciously. Fetuses exist in a completely dark environment; there is no light in the womb. The temperature is steady, matching the fetus itself. Sound is present, but muffled. The constant beating of the mother's heart and the voices or noises from outside usually never grow loud enough to cause discomfort. Everything physically needed by the fetus, including oxygen, nourishment, and the removal of waste, is handled by the umbilical cord.

Then, within a relatively short time, everything changes.

In the midst of what feels like a timeless, blissful eternity in the womb, contractions begin. They grow stronger. At first, contractions might even feel good. But soon the baby must be squeezed through a space that doesn't really have room for its head. This is why the infant's skull bones are not yet fused; they need to be flexible as the fetus moves through the birth canal. The contractions eventually become strong enough to push the baby out of the womb. They may even trigger the fight-or-flight response in the newly developed nervous system.

So the baby, squeezed as it's pushed through the birth canal (or suddenly yanked from the womb via Cesarean), is thrust into a harsh new environment. There is no way to prepare an infant for the sensory assault our culture accepts as normal.

The lights are often bright and blinding.

The air feels cold on the newborn's wet skin.

The sounds are loud, sharp, and intrusive.

And here's the worst part: the umbilical cord is cut too soon.

After birth, the umbilical cord is still pulsing with each beat of the mother's heart; the infant is still receiving oxygen in those first minutes after birth. In fact, the newborn is receiving all the oxygen it needs just as it did underwater in the womb.

But just as the infant emerges, coping with these shocking changes, the cord is routinely clamped and cut **while still pulsing**. The oxygen source of the past nine months is instantly severed.

This seems to matter little to doctors in hospitals or even at many home births. Those assisting the mother often clamp and cut the cord as quickly as they can.

Lo and behold, this creates a new problem for the infant. Even after its huge, startling transition, there's no time to pause, recalibrate, or rest. Those lungs, which have been underwater for nine months, now have to start working immediately. No wonder doctors are desperate to hear the first breath. No wonder infants are held upside down and slapped. No wonder there's so much tension until the first cry is heard.

Once the still-beating cord is cut, you have, in effect, started to suffocate the infant, forcing the lungs to work right away. If you've ever stayed underwater just a little too long and felt the panic of not being able to breathe, then you have some sense of what most infants experience on the day they're born.

A gentler, more supportive and frankly, much saner approach would be to let the infant transition on its terms. Let the cord pulsate. Let the newborn's lungs have a moment to begin breathing. Those lungs need to move from underwater to air. Can they have a few minutes, please?

*** *Rant warning* *** *Rant to follow* *** *Rant warning* *** *Rant to follow* ***

Holy fucking shit! REALLY? YOU CAN'T EVEN WAIT A FEW MINUTES? Fuck you and your hurry. Fuck you and your lack of trust in nature. Fuck you for not truly considering the needs of each infant. If there's a medical emergency, of course, use every tool available. But don't pretend you're improving anything by trying to outdo nature. Breathing can start without you manufacturing fear. The baby's lungs, in most cases, will start **on their own**. When the cord is no longer needed, it will stop pulsing **on its own**.

Then, and only then, do you clamp the cord and cut it.

Recall how many women died because doctors were too proud to learn to wash their hands. Same idiocy, different century.

The transition to using the lungs can happen without crying or wailing. Of course, keep all our incredible tools at the ready, but hopefully, we won't need to use them. Care for both the mother and the infant with utmost respect.

Ever feel a vague sense of anxiety and not know why? Maybe this is why our anxieties feel so familiar.

Even with the most sensitive, thoughtful adjustments to a newborn's needs, some shock in birth is inevitable. I imagine it can't be avoided. But we can do better.

*** *End of rant* *** *Thank you for indulging me* ***

Here's a little story about what happens when we grow up.

After birth, there are about four years of growing up. And in many cases, even in the best and most privileged circumstances, it just ain't easy.

We have a reptile brain managing our breathing, heartbeat, and basic survival instincts. The reptile brain became active in the womb and continues to keep us alive. During these first four years, as we grow toward being human adults, the emotional centers and the frontal lobe begin to activate. We learn to use language, imagine things, and make simple plans. We start practicing, without fully understanding or comparing, the cultural norms of the society that placed us there. We learn about time, space, money, and other human-invented realities necessary for our functioning.

By the time we are seven, at what used to be called the “age of reason,” our internal representation of “self” has separated from the actual body we inhabit. By then, we have learned we are persons in the world, known to others just as we know others. We’ve also learned how to represent ourselves to ourselves, the same way we can picture a chair while in a room that doesn’t have a chair. We can present a face to the world that, at times, differs wildly from our internal state. We can even observe ourselves as if we were independent of the body we live “inside.”

A split grows between our experience of self-identity and our actual body/emotional being.

This split is impossible for an infant, who hasn’t yet developed the frontal lobe. There is no self-awareness and therefore no conflict within the self and therefore no split in the infant. Calm, happy, upset, hungry, any state is experienced and expressed directly. There is no difference between experience and expression in the infant.

But the gap between experience and expression, entrenched by age seven, only grows more pronounced as we age. By the time we are “adults,” we are operating, in effect, in two separate but concurrent systems of energy, emotion, and behavior. One part of our nervous system is locked behind a screen, formed from the survival strategies of our early years. That same nervous system can also conjure imaginary futures that can delight or terrify us. These systems “read the room” we are in and strategize the best way to react or perform in each situation.

All of this exists alongside the actual animal-body-emotional being experiencing the world through the senses and who is, in fact, already living in the present.

Given all this, how can we expect to live in the present? Everything we experience is, of course, experienced directly. But at the same time, experience makes its way behind “the screen” of our subjectivity, where it’s evaluated, processed, and re-experienced secondhand. Different people have different proportions of these two systems, which can include many fluctuations and variations.

So, from the nature of our frontal lobe, confusion arises. We mistake the inner experience behind the screen for the “real” experience. We may use direct experience in various ways, but always in the service of the inner one, the one we identify with.

This is the great mistake of humanity. Not that the two systems evolve, but rather that we fail to recognize, as part of our development, the inner system’s fundamental flaw. It is a system that

needs to be outgrown. And paradoxically, any direct attempt to “outgrow it” is itself just another expression of the trap.

The trap does not allow for the possibility of leaving the trap using interventions developed in the trap.

Here are some examples of being “in the trap.” Whenever one of these is happening, it means you’ve valued your sense of self over the actual present reality you’re living in.

- Holding on to your anger
- Thinking you are better than another
- Praising yourself and putting others down
- Taking sexual advantage of another
- Lying or cheating
- Stealing from others

I have done everything on this list.

I don’t think of these as behaviors you can avoid. It’s more like this: when you catch yourself doing something on the list, as you inevitably will, you can then correct course. The assumption: if you could fully live in the present and engage completely with what’s around you, you wouldn’t need to do any of those things.

How can we be so certain we are right? Why would one tiny being, stuck to a relatively tiny rock hurtling through the enormity of time and space, claim certainty about anything?

Where did our humility go?

Consider this: we think with a shared language, with shared images and archetypes. The building blocks of our inner experience are shared with all of humanity.

Within our groups, we share cultural understandings of time, space, money, language, even how to use a fork or which hats look good. But all people, all the different groups, are floating in the same field. It’s like we are all raisins in one enormous jelly mold. One wiggle makes all wiggle.

Yet each of us is a locus of control.

Each of us is tied into a web of understanding that makes us both a creator and a product of human society.

At the same time, each of us is a cork on the ocean, rising or falling depending on whether our circumstances favor us or not.

I hope you can find some crutches that fit. Here are ten to help us move out of a confused present besieged by past and future into a present that is actually the present.

A crutch is an aid we use to help us during our rehabilitation. As long as it's useful, use it. When it's no longer useful, throw it away.

The key point is to recognize how much we need crutches.

We need humility to see how far we've strayed from the present moment.

We need honesty to see how lost we've gotten inside our minds.

Introduction To Crutches 1 & 2

I will begin with a consideration of what time isn't. Hopefully, this will help point us toward what it actually is.

I want to start by describing how "human-invented" time is not the same as time itself. This may feel obvious to some, but for others it can be an eye-opener.

Time is a funny thing. We think we know what it is, yet when asked to define it, the words slip away. Still, it's essential to explore for anyone attempting to be more "in the present."

Philosophers theorize about it; physicists measure it; science-fiction writers imagine it; people late for work stress over it. We all, in some way, live "in" it.

Is the future "ahead" of us? Is the past "behind" us? Is time cyclical, endlessly repeating? Or is it a mixture of the linear and the cyclical?

Can you "spend" time well or badly? Can you "waste" it? Can you "invest" it?

Two of the biggest human-invented abstractions in our society are time and money. Many people conflate the two, even treating them as equal. They'll say, with a straight face, as if it's a deep truth: "Time is Money." Does this give you a sense of how easily we become confused about what time really is?

So, c'mon, what is time, really? Can it be separated from the metaphors? Is it different from the ways we try to measure and control it?

Did you ever stop and try to figure out what time is? What is time beyond the way we measure, talk about, and think of it?

Lift your eyes from these words and look around. Are you "moving" through time, or is time moving through you? (This is a real invitation, by the way. Pause. Look around. Try to experience time itself, if you can. These words will still be here when you return.)

For me, certain distinctions are important to name. Naming them helps me see and think about them more clearly. One of the most important is between "human-invented reality" and what I call "real-reality" (which, of course, also includes the human-invented).

This distinction is essential when considering time, or really, when considering anything. In many ways, it's the foundation underlying this entire book.

We need ways to mark time and break it into days, hours, minutes, and seconds. We do this to organize people and events. Before mechanical clocks and widespread media, many people were unaware of their birth year or the exact day of their birth. Birthdays weren't celebrated; people simply didn't mark time that way.

Now, of course, everyone knows their birthday. And with a common system of time, you can tell lots of people to show up for work at 9 am, and they can all (try to, at least) arrive together. You can make contracts with deadlines. Keeping track of time has become fundamental to our culture and way of living.

But no squirrel, tree, or cloud will ever share the “time of day” with you. Hours and minutes are purely human inventions.

I like the squirrel test because it’s easy to imagine. But use a dog, cat, or even your pet parakeet if it’s more your style.

As you read this, think: what day of the week is it? Whatever your answer (there are only seven), it can be shared only by humans. No squirrel knows it’s Tuesday or Saturday.

Another example: What year is it? Everyone “knows” the current year, but hardly anyone stops to consider how human-invented a “year” really is. Could you explain the year to a squirrel?

When you sit in a park with a squirrel or a tree, or a cloud, you’ll see there’s only the present moment. And not even that, really. The moment you say, “This is the present,” you’ve already turned it into another piece of human-created reality.

Of course, this is the present moment. What else could it be? When else could it be?

But when you get a blank look from a squirrel, a tree, or a cloud, you can just let all the descriptions go. Let go of the urge to define it.

You can have an experience of “right now.”

This distinction between human-created reality and real reality is **incredibly** important, so it's worth examining some non-temporal examples to clarify it.

PLACE

Let’s back up and take a wide view of all the people on the planet, each one of us.

All of us, in all the different places, in all the different buildings, speaking all the different languages: we all live within a particular version of human-created cultural reality.

What is a “human-created cultural reality”? It’s the set of agreements a culture makes about what to call things, how and when to do things, what not to do, what to talk or think about, and what not to.

A simple example is the name of the place where you live. From a young age, we learn the name of our town, city, or village. For instance, I was born in Connecticut, and at about 30, I moved to New York City.

The city is “really” named New York City. But the name itself is entirely invented by humans. At one point, it was called New Amsterdam. Before that, the Lenape called the island Mannahatta (“island of many hills”). Long before that, no humans were there at all; an ice sheet a thousand feet thick covered the unnamed land.

The trees don’t know the name of the city. The squirrels in the park don’t know it. The clouds passing overhead don’t know they’re drifting above New York City.

The current name, New York City, exists only because humans created it. That’s why it can be called “human-invented.” Even so, it’s still a real, human-invented name.

This may seem obvious, but the distinction matters. The city really is named New York City. Yet if we decided tomorrow to rename it, the name would change instantly. That’s the nature of human-invented reality: it exists only because humans perceive and uphold it.

Meanwhile, the trees in New York City, the soil, the rocks, the pavement and grass, the squirrels in the branches, the clouds overhead, none of them live in the human-created reality. Their reality is different. It lacks the cultural layer we humans add. But all those beings still live somewhere.

We can also perceive the real reality we all live in. Humans can see trees. Squirrels can see trees. Shared reality is simply reality. But to contrast it with the human-invented layer, I call it “real-reality,” since humans can modify it, but cannot create it.

We live our lives by laying the cultural, human-invented reality over real reality. To us, the tree or the squirrel seems to be “in” New York City. But that’s only a partial truth.

The squirrel is in real reality. We are in real reality. The entire “city of New York” is in reality. But because human-invented reality is part of real reality, we say the squirrel is “in” New York City, whether it knows it or not. This is our human grandiosity and self-centeredness showing up.

You can tell a squirrel or a tree all you want about “New York City,” and they’ll only respond with silence. And a quiet invitation for you to perceive real reality.

MONEY

Show a squirrel a \$100 bill and a \$1 bill. Which will it take back to its nest to chew up for insulation?

The two bills differ only slightly in the numbers printed on them, as well as the pictures stamped across them. But they’re more alike than different. In real reality, they’re simply rectangles of paper with particular ink markings. Yet because we’re steeped in human-created reality, one paper “obviously” appears to have more value than the other.

And inside our cultural, human-invented reality, the \$100 bill is more valuable than the \$1 bill. A \$100 bill found on the ground creates a completely different feeling in a human than a \$1 bill does.

A “line of credit” on your “credit card” means nothing to squirrels except, perhaps, the little rectangle of plastic with a shiny stripe on the back might be fun to chew.

This is why I like the “squirrel test.” Whether with a squirrel, cat, or dog, it can help you recognize real reality and notice how much of our cultural reality is layered onto any given moment.

Do you see how important it is to flip back and forth to toggle between human-invented reality and real reality? Otherwise, you’ll miss the sameness of the \$100 and \$1 bills. Most people see only the difference.

And what’s true of paper bills is also true of checks, credit cards, and money represented digitally on a screen as being “in” a bank account. *All of it is made up.* The “value” of gold? Other cultures saw it as pretty and shiny, something to make ornaments from, but never something worth fighting over. No more than they would fight over who gets to own which cloud.

BACK TO TIME

Even though in real reality there are no seconds, minutes, hours, or days, we still recognize how much we need them, at least in our current culture.

Similarly, there is no past and no future. Except, of course, there are.

Because in the human world, even though these things are invented, even though they belong to the human-created reality, they’re still true. Human-invented reality is a subset of real reality. It really is some particular year right now, and we really are living “in” that year. But the first year of our calendar (or any calendar) started at an arbitrary point. Maybe it didn’t seem arbitrary to those who created it; their cultural values made it feel obvious. But certainly anyone outside the system can see how arbitrary it is.

There are many calendars we can look at, just to see how arbitrary a “year” can be. Let’s start with ours.

Christian (or Gregorian, after Pope Gregory) Calendar

- **Current year (at this writing):** 2025
- **Used by:** Many nations and communities worldwide

Year zero basis: The Julian calendar began when a 6th-century monk, Dionysius Exiguus, calculated what he believed to be the year of Jesus’s birth. He designated the year as 1 AD, which made his own time 525 AD. Historians now believe he miscalculated by about 4–6 years.

Technically, there was no “year zero.” The count moved straight from 1 BC to 1 AD.

Our current Gregorian calendar, adopted in 1582, continued the Julian system but added a more accurate leap-year rule. This adjustment was made to keep Easter from drifting out of spring, eventually sliding into winter or even fall over the centuries.

Both calendars originally divided time into “Before Christ” (BC) and “Anno Domini” (AD, meaning “year of our Lord”). Today, most people instead use BCE (Before Common Era) and CE (Common Era) to divide time.

Hebrew Calendar

- **Current year (at this writing):** 5785
- **Used by:** Jewish communities worldwide
- **Year zero basis:** The Hebrew calendar counts from the traditional creation of the world, according to rabbinical calculations. These dates are based on biblical genealogies and other traditional texts. In this system, year 1 corresponds to 3761 BC in the Gregorian calendar.

Islamic (Hijri) Calendar

- **Current year (at this writing):** 1447 AH
- **Used by:** Muslim communities worldwide
- **Year zero basis:** The Islamic, or Hijri, calendar begins with the Hijra, the migration of the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina. This event marked a crucial turning point in Islamic history, when Muslims were first able to practice their faith freely. It occurred in the Christian year 622 CE and the Jewish year 4422.

(Anything feeling arbitrary yet?)

Chinese Calendar

- **Current year (as of this writing):** 4723, The Year of the Snake
- **Used by:** Chinese communities globally; also used by Korea, Vietnam, and other East Asian countries (who often use it alongside the Gregorian calendar)
- **Year zero basis:** This calendar is traditionally attributed to the Yellow Emperor (Emperor Huangdi). The calendar was established to help with agricultural planning and seasonal rituals. It was started in the Gregorian year 2697 BCE.

Ethiopian Calendar

- **Current year (as of this writing):** 2017 (very close to the Gregorian calendar)
- **Used by:** Ethiopia and the Eritrean Orthodox Church

- **Year zero basis:** Calculated from the Annunciation (the announcement of the birth of Jesus to Mary). However, it is dated differently from the Gregorian calendar; it considers the Annunciation occurred 8 years later than the Western calculation.

This small survey of different calendars is a wonderful way to integrate the idea of how arbitrary the number of the current year is.

TRICK QUESTION:

Which calendar listed above would a squirrel consider the best to use?

Did anyone ever tell you, when you were young, you had your whole future “ahead of” you?

What can that possibly mean?

Anytime you look “ahead,” you only see what’s literally in front of you. Maybe the rest of the floor and a wall. If you’re outside, you’ll see something, but not “the future.” The future only exists in imagination. There is no “place” for it to be, separate from this moment.

We are, in fact, owners of a brain/mind functioning much like a very sophisticated computer program. We generate endless scenarios. Some of us predict better than others. But any “future” that happens or could happen still only arrives in the present moment.

Have you ever wanted to put the past “behind you”? As if you could throw what happened over your shoulder?

As you read this, I don’t know what’s literally behind you, and maybe you don’t either. Turn around for a second. What you’ll see is what’s behind you now, not anything from the past. The past exists only as memory.

Now that we’ve immersed ourselves in human-created time, I hope it’s clear: we’re swimming in it. We carry an almost constant awareness of the time of day, the month, the year we’re “in.”

People sit around a table in meetings and say things like, “Going forward, we will now do such and such.”

Huh? ***Going forward?*** Toward what?

What kind of metaphor is that? How can you “go forward” in time?

Everyone around the table in a meeting is sitting in one place. No one is going anywhere, at least not until the meeting ends. So how does it make sense to say “going forward”?

If you go forward, you’ll hit the table.

After distinguishing clearly between human-created reality and real reality, we can finally ask an important question:

When it comes to time, what kind of time do you actually share with a squirrel?

In other words, what is the real reality of time?

You don't share "2:45 pm" with a squirrel. You don't share "it's two hours until my appointment" with a squirrel. You don't share "today is the anniversary of such-and-such" with a squirrel.

If you can set aside human-invented time even briefly, then you'll be able to use these first two crutches.

We're almost ready for the first two crutches. But before leaving this introduction, there's one potential mistake I need to mention.

In the realm of human invention, we can say in the "past" there were "things" (stories) that happened. Even though those stories can only be told now, in the present, people often arrange the past in ways that suit them, mostly to leave themselves free of responsibility for their actions and their impact.

Another human invention is denial. Many people, especially when trying to justify harmful behavior, will ignore the past. Or distort it. Or rewrite the stories of the past, our history, and call their false version true. They may even accuse others of falsifying history to cover the fact they're doing it themselves. They deny the past, deny things that truly did happen.

This is dangerous territory. By helping people into the present, I don't mean you should become a blank slate with no mind and no memory. That's not it at all. And I don't mean history is up for grabs because it's all "just a story." There are still such things as truth and lies.

The past is held in our consciousness in the form of a story. And that story, with all its details, is not shareable with a squirrel or a tree or a cloud; it's only shareable with other humans. The present, too, is held in consciousness, and also in the form of a story.

So, use Crutch 1 well, all the while remembering it's not true.

And at the same time, Crutch 1 is very much true.

Your humility and integrity are called on in every moment.

Crutch 1: There Is No Such Thing As “The Past”

The past.

Let's take me as an example. What about my past?

I have a 3–4” scar between my navel and my pubic bone. Of course, the scar comes with a story.

After I was born, my parents noticed my belly button wasn't healing. In fact, it was leaking. Turned out a tiny tube inside my umbilical cord hadn't closed properly. This tube, called the urachus, carried urine away when I was a fetus. The doctor diagnosed it as a patent urachus, which is just the fancy Latin way of saying it was an open pee tube. It needed surgery.

So, at three months of age, I was taken to the hospital for a few days to have the surgery and recover.

I also have a scar on my leg from when I was seven. It came from climbing a tree and falling, not all the way out, but from a higher branch to a lower one.

In my family, I was the oldest of three boys. My first younger brother was born when I was two and a half, and the next when I was eleven.

I went to a preschool, then kindergarten; more grades; then another school. I had this teacher, then another; lots of different ones. I grew up, went to college, quit college, traveled around and so on. Plenty of stories.

Listen: I'm writing these words at 65 years old. How could I not have a past?

And of course you have one, too.

So why would anyone say “there is no past?”

How can it be true there is “no past?”

First: remember this is a crutch.

The meaning shows up when you consider your past, whatever it is, in the particulars. It's always a story about what happened. But the story is never about what actually happened. Stories can certainly point to something true. But in the end, they're still stories, invented with language and cognition.

When you tell a story about the past, which parts are fiction? Which parts are true? For this crutch, that's a discussion for another time.

True stories vs. false stories: none of that matters here. What matters is the nature of the story, or maybe more clearly, the made-up-ness of the story. By its very nature, description always invents. Whether the event you talk about “never happened” or “really did happen” makes no difference to this crutch. The realm of this distinction belongs somewhere else.

When you use this crutch, you see the past we record in our minds as “real,” but only in the same sense that the year 2025 is “real.”

As stated in the introduction, it really is the year 2025 right now. But at the same time, it’s completely a story. It only exists because we picked a year to start, then counted forward, and eventually forgot we made the whole thing up.

There is no “true” calendar, just as there is no “true” past.

As also mentioned in the introduction, this is unfortunately dangerous to say. Sometimes people do horrible things and then want to deny them. They create stories of a past where they didn’t do the horrible thing. They take advantage of the fragility of the past to sow confusion and further destructive agendas.

All I can say is: people are capable of being truly cruel and doing truly horrible things. It’s not such a big step afterwards to deny it and want to pretend it never happened.

Another way stories about the past can go wrong: someone, innocent of a particular crime, is then accused of committing the crime.

There are many ways the past, to whatever extent we need/use it, can be distorted and abused. But again, the misuses of the past we share are beyond the scope of this work to address.

Because of these dangerous tendencies, before using the idea “there is no past” as a crutch, it is best to stay oriented in some way. The guideposts I recommend are questions like these:

Where is the love?

Are you trying to grow love more and more, in wider and wider circles?

What boundaries do you need in order to love well, good, and true?

Even though the past is a story, it is always (and can only be) retold and remembered in the present. The “past,” however you tell it, can only exist in the present.

- The rock you subject to carbon dating is a rock you hold in your hands right now. The test result is currently being read.
- The breath you take right now is in the present. There is no way to take a breath in the past.
- Scratch your nose. Then tomorrow: 1) remember how you scratched your nose and 2) scratch it again. See the difference? There's a huge fucking difference between remembering how you scratched your nose yesterday and scratching it right now. Right now is the only time you can scratch your nose. The rest is either remembering a scratch or planning to scratch (see Crutch 2).

You are always walking in the present. Everything you do, you do in the present.

You may walk more fully in the present if you use this crutch.

We all tend to hold on to the past, to the way we did things, to the way we are, to how things happened. But when you use this crutch, you can see all of the past, every single drop of it, is imagined.

EXERCISE:

Imagine you have a ball of clay (or get one if you can). Hold it in your hand. Look at the ball of clay. See how it's a ball.

Now shape the ball of clay into a bowl.

Look at the bowl. See how it's a bowl.

Recognize: the clay is the clay; it's always there. The ball is "in the past." Only the bowl exists now. The ball no longer exists.

Reflect on how there is nowhere you can go to "see" that ball again. There is no place where the past exists, no place you can travel to find the ball you started with.

It makes for fun science fiction to imagine time travel (especially if you try to resolve all the paradoxes along the way), but there is no way to go "to" the past.

Take the bowl of clay and make it into a plate. Or turn it back into a ball. Or throw it at the wall if you want, or balance it on your head.

Just recognize: the clay in this metaphor symbolizes reality, taking on all the different shapes and forms it does. The you who exists today is the "bowl" of clay/reality formed out of the "ball" you were previously. And by previously, I mean moment to moment. Each sensory impression, each tick of the universe, your clay/reality/being is changing, changing, changing.

But only in a vast, open present moment.

You can and must be aware of “the past.”

But Crutch 1 is about holding on to the past loosely. It’s about tempering awareness of the past with the knowledge that it’s a story, the mind forming and remembering, creating in much the same way it creates knowledge of what year it is.

The present is plenty to live in, plenty to carry. And you are indeed within it. Crutch 1 is about being in the present moment, with an abiding awareness the past is only a story.

Of course, we have a past.

Except we don’t. We have clay reality taking different shapes.

The word recognize is made from two Latin root words:

- “re” means again and
- “cognize” means to become aware of

When you “re-cognize,” over and over, the story-nature of the past, you can slowly become more present.

Anything “from the past” is always re-cognized by you in the present. This is not about the past being accurately represented or not. This means anyone discussing the past can only do so from the present.

Remember: Every breath is taken in the present. Each moment of “the past” is recalled in the present.

EXERCISE FOR CRUTCH 1:

If you’re anything like me, you probably skip most exercises in most books. I usually just read the exercise and imagine I’m doing it. So if that’s you, I get it. But still, I really encourage you to actually do these. There’s a good chance they’ll give you a deeper experience of what I’ve been trying to say in words.

For the best results, do this exercise with someone reading it to you. You might find a partner or gather a small group where one person reads to the others. Another option is to record yourself reading the steps and then follow along with your recording.

1. Get a coin.
2. Hold both of your open hands out in front of you, with the coin in the palm of one hand.
3. Notice which side of the coin faces up: heads or tails. (I’ll give these instructions as if you’re using a coin, but they can work with any small object having two different sides.)

4. Prepare to make a plan in your mind.
5. The plan is this: you will flip the hand with the coin over so the coin lands in the other hand. This action will make the other side of the coin face up. Imagine holding the coin covered for a moment before lifting your hand to reveal it. Remember: this is just a plan you make in your mind while holding the real coin in one hand.
6. Feel how the present moment holds your plan. Notice how the plan hasn't happened yet.
7. Note how the time before you picked up the coin is completely gone. That's the past.
8. Look at your hands, open in front of you. One holds a coin. Experience as deeply as you can what "now" is. Now is when you exist. Now is when you hold a plan for the future. Now is when you can remember picking up the coin and checking the instructions.
9. Still looking at your hands, consider the immediate "future," when you'll flip the coin into the other hand. Where is this future? Can it be anything other than what your mind creates?
10. When you're ready, flip the coin. Keep your hand covering it.
11. Notice how the flip, moments ago, was part of the "future." Now the flip is in the "past."
12. Observe and reflect. What's the difference between the future (of planning the flip) and the past (of having completed it)? What's the same? Can you feel how the Now is simply now, and any past or future require your mind to describe them?
13. Notice how your "now" has changed. You can't see the coin anymore. Your hands feel different, pressed together instead of separate. Become as present as you can with everything around you. Immerse yourself in the present.
14. Toggle between being immersed in the present and remembering (in the present) the moment before the flip.
15. Slowly remove your hand and return both hands to the palms-up position.
16. Notice and reflect: the coin has switched hands, and its facing side has changed as well. This particular "now" used to be the future. Soon it will be the past. Soon the exercise will be over. But for now, stay here and observe the present.
17. Keep observing. If you like, repeat the steps. See how deeply present you can become.

Lessons?

I hope you can see from this exercise the "past" and the "future" don't really change or disappear. You can say "the past does not exist," but that's never quite the truth. It's a fabrication.

Crutch 1, in a way, is realizing when someone insists "There REALLY IS a past," that too is a fabrication. Reality is more complicated than a simple yes or no can capture.

The human past relies entirely on the human mind. This becomes clearer the more you see it. The present moment doesn't need a past or future. But because we are human and live partly in a human-invented reality, we carry them.

If you're going to carry the past and the future, carry them lightly.

And sometimes, you can even set them down. They will take care of themselves.

EXERCISE:

Read this quote from a 13th-century fellow named Dogen. It's from a piece he wrote called *The Time-Being*.

Each moment is all being, is the entire world.

*Reflect now whether any being or any world is
left out of the present moment.*

Create a journal entry to help you carry out the reflection he suggests.

Crutch 2: There Is No Such Thing As “The Future”

As it happened, at the time I started to write about Crutch 2, I was having what I sometimes call a “sad day.” I think I used the word “forlorn” when I reflected on what I was feeling.

Often, when starting a day’s writing, I free-write a bit about how I am feeling. It’s something I do to clear my mind, never expecting to include it in the book. But I will share some of what I wrote today.

But the point is to name the mood, the depression, the dip in hope, the loss of vision for the future. It’s the kind of sadness where you stare out the window on a rainy afternoon.

So here I am, writing the chapter called “There Is No Such Thing as ‘the Future,’” while I struggled to picture my future and the future of my country.

Norman Mailer was once quoted as saying, “Being a writer means being able to work on a bad day.” I imagine I will never feel like a “real writer,” but I have learned how to keep writing on the bad days.

Here is another thing I found scribbled in an earlier draft:

What about these projects of mine? They feel less and less interesting. I feel like I’m moving forward with this stupid idea for a book without much hope of it being read or useful.

Do I want to make some money with it? Of course.

Do I want it to be read by millions and have people really like what I’m saying? Hell yes.

Do I feel like I could drop this project without missing it, and the world wouldn’t miss it either? Yes. A flat, simple yes to both.

But something kept me going. I envisioned a future where the book existed, a future where I did my best to write it, publish it, and then let it go into the world.

It’s strange to sit in a mood where all my awareness says, “I don’t give a shit anymore,” while yet another part of me still pushes on with the writing. It’s oddly comforting to feel big enough to hold those contradictions. And to take actions today that will have fruition in the future.

So, let’s talk about how there is no future!

Not that there are so many new things to say about the future I didn't already say about the past. The future is, after all, once again, made up.

Perhaps it's even easier to see the invented nature of the future than of the past, how we do not "have a future" unless we imagine one.

At times, what looks like the future feels predictable. For example, a raw egg falling toward the floor will break when it hits. But does this mean you can actually predict the future?

All predictions of the future happen in the present, in this very moment, the only moment there is. All the mental activity of prediction, planning, and worrying is happening now. Whether you're bored or surprised, there is still only the present, unfolding, unfolding, unfolding.

The only way to have a future is to imagine it, for the mind to move. And it is important we can do this. Our human minds are made for it. It's how we invent tools, gain insight, and extend our abilities. The foot we use to walk becomes a wheel. The hand pushing something becomes a hammer driving a nail into wood. The voice we use to speak to the person beside us can travel around the world through a telephone.

Someone once saw a log roll and then imagined slicing it so only part of it would roll; that was the wheel. Someone else saw how a rim with spokes captured the essence of a wheel. All those insights happened in the present. All the activity to build the wheel happened in the present. Once the wheel existed, one could recall the inspiration, the building, and the dream behind its creation.

You can hold a wheel in your hand and be fooled into believing there really was a "past" when the inspiration happened, or a "past" when the first wheel was built, and "back then" there was a future. And you can be fooled into believing you are now living in that future.

No.

There has only ever been the present moment.

The future can be anxiety-provoking.

It's important to see through the invention of the future and use this mental fabrication for what it is: a tool. There are no threats except those currently happening.

Just as you can predict a dropped egg will break, you can also predict the Huns, visible a distance away, will keep riding toward your mountain village to burn and loot. You can act now to prepare. I am not suggesting you say, "Lah-dee-dah," and wander about as if there is no such thing as unfolding danger.

I am only pointing out it's essential to separate the real from the imagined.

Take the case of a bear. When you see one a hundred yards away, do you shrug it off because, at this exact present moment, you're still safe? Of course not. If you receive information something bad may happen, you receive it in the present and the steps you take to avoid or lessen the danger also happen in the present.

You don't live as if the present is all there is. You never act as if there is no future.

Of course, there is a future! But it exists only because we can form images and make predictions calling for action right now.

EXERCISE:

Read this short passage from a text called the *Genjōkōan* written in Japan in 1233 by Dogen. (The Japanese teacher quoted in the previous chapter.) It says everything I have been trying to point to with these Crutches 1 and 2.

Firewood becomes ash, and it does not become firewood again.

Yet do not suppose that the ash is the future and the firewood the past.

Understand that firewood abides in the phenomenal expression of firewood, fully including past and future, yet independent of both.

Ash abides in the phenomenal expression of ash, which also fully includes past and future.

Journal your response to reading these few lines. Don't worry about being coherent or rational. Allow your hand to write whatever is coming through you at the moment.

Introduction To Crutches 3 & 4

We can recognize, when we describe our world, these “descriptions” are human inventions. And it’s essential to pause and consider the implications of that.

Words are only metaphors, only sounds we humans make. We can “understand” them simply because we have the kind of brains that can do the language thing. Just as birds build nests and beavers build dams, humans build cultures, and we use language to do it.

A foundational lesson from Semantics 101: a word can never *be* the thing it refers to.

Take the word “world.”

It’s a placeholder, a pointer. No two people could mean the same thing when they say, “the world is...” Whatever anyone calls “the world” must include the sum of their experience. And no person can fully say what *all* their experience is.

So in everyday speech, “the world” often just means “the whole planet.” But even then, most people are really only picturing the surface and usually a very small piece of the surface. There’s far more to this ‘world’ than the thin skin we walk on.

Here are some ways to use “world:”

- The news spread quickly “around the world.”
- This has made a big difference “all over the world.”
- When we were kissing, “the whole world” seemed to disappear.

I once did some calculations I found fascinating. If you’re not a number nerd like me, no worries, I wrote this so you can skip the math and still get the gist.

Let’s assume the lifespan of the Earth is about 8 billion years (give or take a few thousand millennia). This figure comes from my quick research, but it’s currently seems our best guess. The Earth is roughly halfway through its life, having lived about 4 billion years so far.

Now, let’s assume the Earth’s mass is approximately 5.9722×10^{24} kg. That’s based in part on the behavior of the moon and other objects in the solar system’s gravitational fields and so on.

OK, so here’s what we have:

Earth’s lifespan: 8 billion years.

Earth’s mass: 5,972,200,000,000,000,000,000 kg (read as: five septillion, nine hundred seventy-two sextillion, two hundred quintillion kilograms).

Now compare this to a human:

Lifespan: about 100 years.

Mass: about 70 kg (just over 150 lbs).

Let's calculate the ratios. I'm going to include the math for those, like me, who geek out on this sort of thing. But if numbers make your head spin, feel free to look at the pictures on the next page. Or just skip ahead to the conclusion. You'll still get the gist.

1. Ratio of human to Earth (in time):

- Human lifespan: 100 years
- Earth's lifespan: 8,000,000,000 years
- Ratio of lifespans: $100 \div 8,000,000,000 = 1.25 \times 10^{-8}$.

This means a human lives **one-eighty-millionth** of the Earth's lifespan.

2. Ratio of human to Earth (in mass):

- Human mass: 70 kg
- Earth mass: 5.9722×10^{24} kg
- Ratio of mass: $70 \div (5.97 \times 10^{24}) = 1.173 \times 10^{-23}$

This means a human's mass is about **1.17 sextillionths** of Earth's mass.

Now comes the fun part.

Let's imagine a creature being in the same ratio to a human as a human is to the Earth.

In other words, how short a life and how small a body would a creature need compared to a human so its proportions to us match our proportions to Earth?

With pictures...

What is the size of a tiny creature



Compared to a human



So that it is the *same ratio* as

A human



compared to the Earth?



Well, now it gets really interesting.

For Lifespan:

Creature lifespan (???)

is to -----



Human lifespan (100 years)



Human lifespan (100 years)

as =

is to -----



Earth lifespan (8 billion years)

CONCLUSION:

When you run the numbers, the creature will have a lifespan of about 40 seconds.

In other words, from the Earth's "point of view," each human lives about 40 seconds.

For Mass:

 Creature mass (???)

is to -----



Human mass (70 kg)

as =

is to -----



Human mass (70 kg)



earth mass (5.9722×10^{24} kg)

CONCLUSION:

When you run the numbers, the creature will have a mass of approximately 8.21×10^{-19} grams.

This is incredibly small. It's so small that a single bacterium is *millions of times heavier*, and even a virus particle is *hundreds of times heavier*.

To get into the right range of smallness, you'd need to look at a single protein molecule. A small protein like insulin (about 50 amino acids) or a cluster of 30–50 carbon atoms would be roughly the size of this “creature.”

In other words, from the Earth's “point of view,” each human is about the size of an insulin molecule.

EXERCISE:

When you say, “I live on a planet” or “I live on the Earth,” do you feel yourself living only about 40 seconds in relation to your planet’s lifetime?

Do you sense that, in terms of mass, you’re about the size of an insulin molecule compared to the size of the Earth?

- 1) Set a timer for 40 seconds.
- 2) Imagine a creature as small as an insulin molecule, about to be born on the back of your hand.
- 3) Get ready for the creature to be born when the timer starts.
- 4) Start the timer. The tiny creature has just been born on the back of your hand.
- 5) Connect with it. Please give it a name. Care for this imaginary creature with love.
- 6) During the last 5–10 seconds of the countdown, ready yourself for the creature’s death.
- 7) Let the timer’s end signal linger like a death toll.

Journal your thoughts and feelings to the exercise.

Extra journal prompt: How would you react if this tiny, short-lived creature feels the need to save you?

If you do this exercise with a friend (or in a small group), share your reflections together after you write.

I hope you can see why I focus on how we invent things, how our words can get confused with the actual reality we’re trying to describe. I believe for most people, the pictures we make of humans in relation to the Earth are wildly distorted.

We humans **love** to be sure of things, but it’s just not our fate to have much we can ever be certain of (unless you choose to ignore most of the universe). And honestly, plenty of people have no problem ignoring most of it!

Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle hasn’t stopped many folks from being utterly certain. I mean, wow! There so many of us are so sure about so many things: even to the point of fighting over them.

Fighting over words and ideas?

It’s really crazy, especially if you imagine us all as small as insulin molecules living 40-second lifespans.

Words are metaphors. They're sounds. Or squiggles on paper. They *point* to meaning, but *in themselves*, they aren't meaningful. It's like when you're hungry and go into a restaurant, pick up a menu, and see the words eggplant parmigiana.

You don't eat the menu.

When I worked as a hospice nurse, we had to document every visit. Seemed reasonable to me. However, I observed considerable confusion between the actual patient's value and the value attributed to the notes about the patient.

The notes had many purposes: to record each visit and what happened; to track trends; to prepare other team members stepping in if the regular nurse couldn't; and to reassure state and federal regulators we were following the rules and treating patients well.

From a field nurse's point of view, notes often seemed more important to the administration than patients. Administrators would deny this, of course. But the pressure administrators felt around conforming to regulations often overshadowed any genuine concern for the patients they might have had.

When I compared the time I spent writing and reviewing notes with time spent providing actual patient care, I came to a stark conclusion.

I called it "eating the menu."

Imagine sitting on a bench in a park, feeding peanuts to a squirrel.

What's actually happening?

To say "feeding peanuts to a squirrel" is to flatten a *huge* amount of activity into a few words. You're human in the picture, your heart is beating, your lungs are breathing. (They have to be; otherwise, you'd be dead on the bench, and the squirrel would probably help itself to the peanuts.)

But because that's so obvious, you don't bother to say it. You sum it up with words. Still, your eyes are seeing, your ears are hearing. Your hand is reaching for the bag of peanuts, a motion that requires tremendous coordination of neurons in the brain, muscles firing, and the eye guiding the hand. Your fingers grab a peanut, and now the peanut moves out of the bag and toward the squirrel.

And we haven't even gotten to the squirrel yet. The squirrel's heart is beating as well; otherwise, feeding it wouldn't be an option.

The squirrel was once a baby. Where was it born? What's its backstory?

So much is left out!

Then the squirrel takes the peanut and starts to chew the shell, another tremendously complex event. And that's not even mentioning the air, the tree that gave its wood for the bench, or the sun that gives life to both you and the squirrel. And what about where those peanuts came from?

All of these things and more: the sun, the air, the dirt the peanuts grew in make it impossible to trace "it all." Why do we even say things like "it all"? Because we need words that point to simple things which are, in truth, beyond description.

So much is packed into the phrase "feeding peanuts to a squirrel."

The point is, it's easy to get lost while saying something simple. It's easy to forget everything we leave out. And it's easy to trick ourselves into believing we've conveyed the whole meaning, when that's impossible.

We actually think things like, "I know what I'm talking about." I hope you can see, to some extent, we do. And to another extent, we don't.

Like, not at all.

I can honestly say the phrase "feeding peanuts to a squirrel" contains *the whole world*.

But does the sentence above really convey my meaning?

If we're talking about "the whole world," can words ever capture what that truly means?

Any word that refers to anything, a "thing" plucked out of the endless, ever-changing stream of unified reality, is already an oversimplified story.

In this sense, all the words and stories we tell ourselves are the same. They're all profoundly made up. The roots of the word "description" come from Latin: *de* means "down," and *script* means "writing." To de-scribe is to write down. To make maps and menus.

Menus and maps are real, of course, but only as themselves. What does a menu, a list of foods in a restaurant, actually do? It points to something else. But it can never be the food itself. So easy to forget.

Eggplant Parmesan: is it steaming hot on a plate in front of you, fresh from the kitchen? Or is it words on a menu? Or words in a book?

New York City: are you walking the streets, surrounded by smells and sights and sounds? Or are you looking at a map?

Everything on a menu is the same; in one sense, it's just words on a page. And every location on a map is nothing more than lines and squiggles.

So coming into the present moment with Crutches 3 and 4 means recognizing (“re”-“cognizing”) each moment is completely, totally, and uniquely different from every other moment.

We can remember and describe, but each “moment” is, in retrospect, only a hugely simplified abstraction of what actually happened. Because we map each moment onto the peculiar way we name things, we lose track of the raw experience. We lose track of what the thing is in and of itself.

This becomes especially true when we start categorizing moments, labeling them “good” or “bad,” or calling events Right or Wrong.

It's important to realize ***each moment exists apart*** from our abstractions, apart from all the ways we separate it from other moments. It is also distinct from our dividing events into “important” and “unimportant,” or however else we choose to categorize them.

Coming “into the moment” means letting go of every story. And the story isn't just the description; it also carries the feelings we attach, the labels of good or bad. Labeling is natural, but we easily get caught up in how “real” our stories feel, forgetting we're, quite literally, making shit up.

Take this example: you're sitting on a park bench, feeding peanuts to a squirrel, when three different people walk past.

Person A glances over and smiles. They see you feeding the squirrel and admire your patience and generosity. They wonder if they might one day want to do the same. At home, they tell their spouse how kind people can be.

Person B glances over and scowls. They think you are making the squirrel lazy and dependent, maybe even aggressive. They wonder if they should tell you to stop it. At home, they tell their spouse people are idiots.

Person C is thinking about an argument they'd had with their spouse that morning. They're lost in their head, running through things they wish they'd said. They don't notice you at all.

Did all 3 of those people walk past the “same event?”

Have you heard of an experiment Stanley Milgram ran in the 1960s?

Here's the essence:

A subject walks into a laboratory and is told they're part of a study on memory and learning. They're told they've been "randomly assigned" the role of teacher. Their job will be to teach word associations to another subject, a "learner" they haven't yet met.

What the subject doesn't know is they're the only real participant in this experiment. Everyone else, including the learner, the assistants, and the authority figures, are actors working with the experimenters.

The subject is told the teaching method is unconventional: they must administer electric shocks of increasing intensity whenever the learner answers incorrectly.

The experiment begins. At first, the subject gives low-level shocks. Each wrong answer raises the intensity. Authority figures in white coats, clipboards in hand, mark down results and calmly urge the subject to continue. These actors say things like, "You must go on. It's essential for the experiment."

The actor-learner, strapped into a chair in the next room, verbally protests, as if he is receiving actual shocks. He demands to be released. He groans, cries out in pain, and even insists the shocks are endangering his health. But the men in white coats reassure the subject: the experiment is safe and it must continue.

Before running the experiment, Milgram asked both professionals and laypeople to predict the outcome: What percentage of subjects would obey? How many would stop once the man strapped to the chair begged them to?

The predictions were far lower than what actually happened.

In reality, about 65% of participants continued delivering shocks all the way up to the highest levels.

Milgram later wrote: "The essence of obedience consists in the fact that a person comes to view himself as the instrument for carrying out another person's wishes, and he therefore no longer sees himself as responsible for his actions. Once this critical shift of viewpoint has occurred in the person, all of the essential features of obedience follow."

I mention this experiment because we can all find ourselves in a "present moment" like the subjects in Milgram's study.

Perhaps, for them, the moment was reduced to nothing more than "pushing a button." The responsibility for what happened when the button was pressed didn't feel like theirs.

But each of us is more than the sum of our sensory impressions. We exist within many contexts: a social context, a cultural context, a human-invented reality, all just as much a part of the present moment as any sensory event.

Those human-made factors are always part of the moment. And they include our moral and ethical responsibility to care for each other.

What are you taking into account?

What aren't you taking into account?

What is the story you're telling yourself in your head? How accurate is that story, and how much do you trust it?

What are your guiding principles? How do you decide what counts as a guiding principle?

What are the essential aspects of walking into a laboratory like those subjects in Milgram's experiment? What does it mean to see people in white coats, with badges, or in uniforms?

What does it mean to "obey" an authority figure?

And what is "ethical" behavior, anyway? How do you know what's right and what's wrong?

It is beyond the scope of this work to offer in-depth ethical guidance. But here are some simple questions to ask: Is love involved? Does your love reach outward in wider and wider circles? If you object to something, can you object with love and compassion?

Contexts can be hard to evaluate without some ethical frame. I offer Crutches 3 and 4, trusting you'll use them for the good of yourself and others.

Crutch 3: All “Things” (and “Events”) Are The Same

This is a crutch to use very sparingly.

Each day brings new events, and each event is different. In fact, every occurrence of the “same” event is still different. Yet sometimes life feels repetitive, like eating spaghetti too often and suddenly not wanting another bowl.

What can make all things “the same” is you. You are the one doing the describing.

We are each, to ourselves, the ones who describe everything. The fact is we are, to ourselves, “the measure of all things.” And that, in turn, makes all things the same.

Every “thing” and every “event” became so through *your* description.

When you sit with this, you realize you’re simply describing things to yourself once again. You are describing descriptions.

So in trying to use this crutch, you discover the best way: use it thoroughly for a moment, then throw it away.

After you throw it away, let the world exist, just for a breath, beyond any and every description.

Crutch 4: All “Things” (and “Events”) Are Different

This is a wonderful crutch useful in many situations.

The present moment is vast, wide, and alive. Why do we act the way we do?

The absolute uniqueness of each moment becomes clearer the more present you are.

Many people imagine what it would be like to leave Earth in a spaceship. But Buckminster Fuller, in his 1969 book *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth*, pointed out we are already on one.

Many think of Earth “going around the Sun” as if our orbit were a giant circle repeating endlessly. As if, when Spring arrives, Earth is “back in the same place” as last year. But that’s not how it works.

The Sun is moving.

Our Sun, and the solar system tagging along, orbits the galaxy’s center, taking about 250 million years to make a single rotation. And the galaxy itself is moving as well. Toward where? Honestly, I don’t know and I don’t care. I already have enough to focus on in life.

The point is: you, me, and Earth have **never** been in the same position twice.

Ever.

We’re hurtling through space on our little spaceship together. And that makes it all the more important to live in the present, openhearted, so we can care for each other and create a workable life for everyone aboard.

Exercise:

One way to use this crutch is to bring it to repeating events. Here are some examples:

- Brushing your teeth
- Using a toilet to release bodily wastes
- Waking up in the morning after a night’s sleep
- Regularly traveling somewhere, such as a daily work commute

- 1) During a “repeating event,” notice what is truly unique and unrepeatable about this particular instance.
- 2) Notice what makes this event appear “the same” as another is human-invented. The mind is busy comparing and contrasting instead of fully engaging.
- 3) Explore how abstraction makes events seem “the same.” When you highlight certain aspects and ignore many others, sameness appears. For example, “putting toothpaste on a

toothbrush” can slip by unnoticed. But when you really pay attention, you see how uniquely it unfolds; how it will never happen in exactly that way again.

Use this crutch to see a truth: every present moment does not, will not, and cannot repeat.

Notice moments in your life when you feel bored, unalive, or “trapped in a rut.” At the very least, please put down your phone; better yet, stick it in a drawer in another room. Don’t try to fix or distract yourself from the boredom. Simply sit in a world so vast, so wide, and so endlessly mysterious it’s beyond comprehension.

When you catch your mind spinning a story, gently let it go. Release your human-invented descriptions of how things are the same.

You can also let go of the stories about how things are different. ***Drop the stories*** and experience the things themselves.

Use this crutch well.

Discover how utterly unique and beyond description each moment is.

Introduction To Crutches 5 & 6:

If you look closely at how consciousness naturally works, you'll notice a split and an unavoidable divide built into the very nature of self-awareness.

This split separates us into subject and object.

SUBJECT

By subject, I mean the “experiencer,” the one having the experience, the self who perceives and makes sense of sensory impressions. The subject is sometimes called the ghost in the machine.

We bring the subject into play when we say:

- “I” do something (e.g., “I am brushing my teeth”)
- “I” know or don’t know something (e.g., “I know who I am” or “I don’t know who I am”)
- “I” have something (e.g., “I have two hands”)
- “I” am something (e.g., “I am a good person” or “I am a student”)
- “I” want something (e.g., “I want to eat an apple”)
- Anything involving the experience of being an “I,” including all perceptions.

OBJECT

We are things with dimensions, measurable, subject to gravity. We are lumps of flesh, bags of skin holding blood and bone. We are all bodies needing to breathe, eat, drink, and eliminate waste. Other animals, with organs and behaviors much like ours, remind us of this.

We are one of many creatures on this planet. We can be seen and heard by others. We can be bumped into if someone aren’t looking. A strong wave in the ocean will lift us and toss us like a cork.

We exist as a thing in the world.

We are objects.

AT THE SAME TIME

We are a single being.

But it’s rare for humans to experience both aspects as a single being. For most people, most of the time, the unity of subject and object isn’t a dependable way of being in the world.

ALSO AT THE SAME TIME

We are aware of subjective experience occurring “in” our objective body.

This is because our attention hasn’t matured. Most of us, including myself, can only flicker back and forth between subject and object. We shift between subjective awareness of ourselves as perceiving, thinking, wanting, deciding beings and awareness of ourselves as objects who just did (or are doing, or want to do) this or that.

We carry both truths through every moment. It’s like holding the edge of a small piece of cardboard up to one eye. One eye can see the edge. The other eye can see the surface. But the piece of cardboard isn’t **really** divided into edge and surface. It’s a single piece of cardboard.

SO

Because we cannot experience our subjective and the objective aspects at the same time, we reach a false conclusion: they must be separate.

We start to think of ourselves as the rider on a horse. The mind, the experiencer, the soul, the decider, the intelligence is the rider. The rider sits on top of a horse: the body, the animal, the object, the machine, the “thing” carrying our intelligence.

As the “rider” of the “horse,” we desperately try to direct its movements and behaviors. But the illusory split creates a condition: we cannot control the horse directly. The subjective intelligence is not unified with the body-object. There is always a gap in time, however small, between the desires of the subject and the actions of the object. This means the horse can only be trained indirectly by the rider, as if from a distance.

The horse, the animal, the “lower self” will act however it acts. We, as subjects, know what happened only through observation and memory. We then review events through our own standards and those of our culture. This leads us to approve or disapprove of “ourselves” after the fact: giving the horse a caress (approval) or the whip (disapproval). We want the horse to act in ways we approve of and avoid acting in ways we disapprove.

BUT

This way of experiencing ourselves contains an error, a mistake we can mitigate but never fully correct.

The error is this: we are not truly divided beings. We are not, in truth, riders on horses. This image is an illusion, a trick of mirrors in the mind. We experience it that way only because we don’t yet know better. Our being has not yet ripened to the point where the truth of our unity is obvious.

We are not a mind, or a soul, or a psyche living “inside” a body.

A better image is a centaur. This is the mythical creature from Greek mythology, melding the head, chest and two arms of a human and the body and four legs of a horse.

We are single creatures, whole beings. There is, in fact, no division between our “minds” and our “bodies.” It only seems that way because our attention has not yet developed enough to perceive itself perceiving itself.

We are, in reality, centaurs living under a delusion: our belief there are two separate beings, one the intelligent rider (the “higher” being), the other the animal horse (the “lower” being).

Important to note: the split itself is not wrong or bad in any way. It is simply a natural byproduct of how our consciousness develops.

However, many things we do in response to this split can cause a lot of trouble.

This one illusory split gives rise to many others.

It creates the sense of an “inside,” a subjective space where all we sense, feel, think, and want, the space where our dreams unfold.

This “inside” then appears separate from the “outside,” everything beyond the body’s surface or limits, where the rest of the universe occurs.

We then experience life as if there truly were an inside opposed to an outside. Over time, this false baseline becomes so ingrained it feels like the very structure of our being.

We are single beings caught in an illusion (a misinterpretation of real sensory input) leading to a delusion (a false belief held with conviction). When we imagine ourselves as “a rider on a horse,” we experience our two aspects as either aligned or opposed. Sometimes rider and horse appear to want the same thing; sometimes they are “at war” with each other. Oftentimes we live somewhere in between.

A deluded centaur can only experience separation between subjective awareness and the world “around” it. A unified reality seems forever beyond its grasp.

It’s essential to understand this split does not occur within consciousness by choice. You do not actively “make the mistake” of dividing inside from outside. The split is built into the very nature of self-aware consciousness. After birth, as we move from the pure, integrated awareness of an infant into the increasingly complex awareness of a child, the split becomes woven into our sense of self.

So the mistake is not caused by parenting or upbringing. It is not the result of culture, circumstance, or childhood events. Of course, growing up occurs along a spectrum from traumatic to banal to pleasurable to privileged, but regardless of life’s particulars, the delusion is unavoidable. It arises from the very nature of human consciousness itself.

I believe our deepest human longing is to regain the unity of our being. Once the unity of infancy is lost, and the adult feels “something is missing,” the search begins.

What matters to this search?

The recognition: looking “inside” ourselves or “outside” ourselves will never satisfy that longing.

Our desire to be “whole,” to be “better,” to “get it,” to “understand,” to be “powerful,” to “help” all of these are strategies for easing the ache. Many are worthwhile in themselves. ***But believing they can address the longing itself is a mistake.***

This belief arises from the same error built into consciousness we have been discussing.

From our deepest seat of awareness, the first unconscious building blocks of self-recognition, we miss our centaur-nature. All we perceive is a “deluded rider on a horse.” Without reflecting carefully on this condition, we can’t help but search for relief in three directions: 1) the world around us, 2) the world inside us, or 3) some mix of the two.

Some may find this way of thinking unbearable, even despairing. If that’s you, put the book down and let it go. Or skip ahead to Crutch 7.

These ideas are for those who feel some truth stirring in them through these words, and who wish to explore further.

One more thing to note:

As mentioned earlier, we all create a representation of ourselves, a so-called “self-image.” More than a single image, it may be better described as a “central star-image” orbited by “satellite images.” This complex constellation is a representation of “me.” It functions much like a representation of a chair, or a table, or even “what year it is.” Since we recognize ourselves as an object in the world, we represent ourselves accordingly, just as we represent any other object.

But, just as we can mistakenly believe it “really is” a particular year, or there “really is” such a thing as money outside of human invention, we can also become disoriented into thinking our story about ourselves gives us a “real existence” in the terms of that story. And in a sense, it does. Yet more often, the human-created reality of our self-story obscures rather than reveals our actual existence.

You might think it simple to exist exactly as we are, without adding anything.

But who can do it?

Crutch 5: You Will Never Find “It” Outside Of You

The first important thing about this crutch involves what *not* to do with it.

What you **don’t** do with this crutch is decide to avoid action simply because things “don’t matter.”

It may be true: many things you do either don’t matter or won’t matter. Collecting broken shoelaces or gluing together a mile of grocery store receipts, for example, is probably not on anyone’s to-do list. But just because nothing outside you will ever be the thing to solve your deepest human longing, don’t buy a ticket to apathetic do-nothingness.

You find yourself in a given situation and act accordingly, as best you can.

As a human, you can gain new information, points of view, and experiences. In other words, you can learn. This learning helps you decide whether to stay the course or to change.

If you, on reflection, agree you are a centaur under a delusion, remember: that’s the end of the metaphor. The beginning is always a rider on a horse, perhaps imagining they are a centaur. The mistake this metaphor points to is not so simple to correct, and ***all efforts to correct it*** are still just the imaginings of the rider.

You can’t change this fundamental misconception with imagination.

Once again, we will never realize our “centaur nature” by rearranging things outside us. (Or inside us: see Crutch 6).

So: the new car you want to buy, the new place you want to live, the new job you want to get, the new partner you want to have, improving this or that circumstance in your life: whatever way you try to rearrange things outside yourself, none of it will help (or hinder) you in realizing your centaur-identity.

This crutch can help you become aware of the deep longing at the center of your being, the longing to become whole again. And how this longing can be translated, fractured, or morphed into a wide variety of secondary longings and desires. I am (pretty boldly, I might add) asserting every single desire to change your circumstances outside yourself carries an expectation: by doing this thing, you are moving yourself “on the way” toward satisfying that deep longing.

But this is far from the truth.

What you do or don’t do in the world around you has nothing to do with whether you will remain in a state of rider and horse. Even if you catch some experience of being a centaur, so what? You still have to deal with the rest of the world exactly as it was before. That’s not an accomplishment.

Especially because there is never a clean moment when you can simply drop the whole searching business and fully enjoy being a centaur from then on. The illusion runs so deep in all of us that even glimpsing a fraction of the truth is a lucky thing.

So do what you do wholeheartedly! With grace and gusto! With gentleness and precision!

Crutch 5 points out only this: no pursuit will help (or hinder) me on my way to realizing myself as a centaur. Nevertheless, I am certain *I* must “do something,” as if nothing except me could ever help.

Some people make the mistake of believing they have carte blanche to do “whatever they want.” They refuse to take others into account, asserting their own needs as the most important factor in deciding what to do outside themselves. Great wealth and privilege can certainly exacerbate this trait, but it’s not limited to the wealthy or privileged.

Others make the mistake of believing there’s no point in doing this or that or anything at all. They feel it makes no difference what they do. They don’t see meaning anywhere. This kind of childish pout, even tantrum-thinking, sometimes takes root in adults and ends up shaping their philosophy.

It’s worth pointing out the similarity behind the ignorance in both of these conditions. Both are looking at a path outside of themselves for a solution to this issue. One sees a path worth taking, but needs to ignore many people to accomplish selfish goals; the other sees a path blocked and ignores people as well, in order to remain inactive.

Countless things are worthwhile, and it is deeply important to do them with as much awareness as you can muster. Your efforts to make the world a better place for all of us are vital.

All I am saying is the effort you make to do this or that will never dissolve this central subject/object illusion. No change you plan, attempt or accomplish outside yourself will bring you to the recognition you are a whole being.

One of the main purposes of this crutch (and all the crutches) is to free up attention.

Because so much of our attention goes to controlling the horse we believe we’re riding, not enough is left to perceive reality clearly. We feel off-balance, unsettled, like something is missing. We long to find this “thing,” this “key” to unlocking the secret of being whole.

The emotional certainty of “having found the right thing” or the “true thing” can signal you are actually very far from the truth. Or, just as easily, it may mean you are standing in exactly the right place.

Any truth expressed in words about a reality as complex and paradoxical as ours is almost always spoken in language that immediately contradicts itself.

Or not.

As a final note:

The things on the following list are positive. But the same applies to their inversions. For example, the first item on the list is being loved, adored, or made famous. The inversions are being hated, reviled, or made infamous. Many would agree it is better to be loved than hated. But not everyone. Some people actually prefer hatred be directed at them.

Whatever floats your boat!

The point, as I've repeated, is simply that these activities cannot lead "the centaur" to recognize what is already true. All of them are done as if you were a rider on a horse; therefore, none can bring escape from this illusion. Of course, do them if you wish, just don't believe at the end of the road you'll find "it."

Here's a partial (and positive) list of things that may (or may not) be worthwhile for you to do outside yourself, but will never help or hinder you in recognizing your centaur nature.

Use this list to open and deepen your attention to the present by letting go of one of humanity's core distractions: the hope "I will one day transform myself into someone who has met my deepest longing."

Many of these overlap with each other. Once you get the hang of this crutch, you can use it in your daily life. You still do the things you choose to do, but you see them all as the activities of a rider on a horse. The crutch is meant to create space for the question, "How do I realize myself as a centaur?" to arise and grow and simply exist in order to be forgotten.

Finally! Here is a partial list of how people look "outside":

- Trying to be loved, adored, or made famous by the world outside you. This includes being admired, envied, or seen as worthy of attention.
- Enjoying the outside world: eating good food, accumulating wealth, buying new and "better" cars, houses, or things, finding pleasure in status.
- Serving the outside world: loving or acting on behalf of a person, a child, a country, a political cause, helping the "oppressed" and the "weak."
- Creating or joining an activity/project: a work of art, a scientific discovery, writing a book, founding a political or social movement, starting a religious order.

Crutch 6: You Will Never Find “It” Inside Of You

Please remember, these crutches are meant to help you relax and enjoy the scenery. It's only because we are so accustomed to searching inside ourselves (and outside ourselves) we repeat it over and over, hoping for a new result.

Once again, if this kind of practice makes you uncomfortable or hopeless, please set it aside.

The illusion of experiencing ourselves as a rider on a horse (a ghost in the machine, a soul in a body, a mind or psyche separate from the animal body) leads to an important consequence. With this limited awareness, we have no option but to keep track of what “the animal” is doing and try to manage its behavior with whatever standards we use.

The “rider,” in this metaphor, is a partial expression of what I’ll call Universal Intelligence. Just as light refracts when it passes through a prism, the intelligence of the universe refracts through us, splitting into our personal version of intelligence. But before this refracted intelligence can activate us in a way appropriate to our situation, it finds itself caught inside the rider/horse illusion.

Moment by moment, as intelligence refracts into our separate yet connected human lives, much is lost because the illusion consumes so much energy. To uphold its claim of individuality, it assesses and evaluates everything in personal terms. The rider/horse illusion can only take things “personally,” can only be affected as an individual; it cannot directly participate in the universe. It is trapped in fear, endlessly evaluating each event: “Am I OK?” “Do I exist?” or some smaller version of this, such as “Will so-and-so approve of me?” or “Will this undertaking succeed?”

The fear created by the rider/horse illusion is significant. It prevents us from fully engaging in many present moments of our lives. The rider, with this refracted intelligence, is separated from the horse, the living body facing the world. In effect, the horse must confront each situation alone, unguided directly by the Universal Intelligence animating it. The whole being, with intelligence taking form as a rider distracted by managing the horse’s behaviors, fails to sense reality directly and participate fully as a centaur.

This creates a cycle where self-criticism and the drive for self-improvement grow intense. The rider, feeling lost and cut off from its true nature, demands from the horse what the horse cannot give. And even if the horse manages to improve, becoming kinder, more attractive, thinner (God help us!), or achieving some outside goal like those described in Crutch 5, the victory is always short-lived. Soon, the achievement proves insufficient, and the chase begins again. The point is this: just as outside events are used to prove “I’m OK,” internal states are also pressed into service, measured as supposed progress the rider insists the horse must achieve.

In effect, the horse has been abandoned by the rider in favor of standards and attempts to become.

Once again: the coming list is NOT saying these goals are unworthy of pursuit. You (and I) may choose to pursue them or not, as we see fit. There have been many times in my life when I set out to change inner behaviors or attitudes; they were causing trouble for me and my loved ones, and it made total sense to change them.

But these goals of “self-improvement” are only worth pursuing if you have your reason for wanting them. As I mentioned, I have pursued and continue to pursue many of the goals on this list. But none of them can, and none of them will, lead the centaur to realize it is a centaur.

They will not solve the problem of the central illusion.

But why not?

Because the central cause of the illusion rests in what we can call the “deepest seat of consciousness.” From the very first and tiniest “chunk” or “heap” of consciousness building in a flash to a full-fledged moment of awareness, we carry this illusion of being separate. Whatever you do as a “you,” as this separate being, whatever plan you make or goal you set, your consciousness *already carries the mistake*.

Which means all of your actions carry it.

That’s OK. But it means your actions can only ever accomplish what they accomplish. They cannot and never will solve the central issue.

Doesn’t this make things hopeless?

Not at all. There is still plenty to hope for. Just not particular outcomes to particular events.

The vast and spacious space “inside” you never stays still. Just like the outside, the inside is ever-changing. A constant stream of activity runs through the mind, across the mind, and at times can even feel like the mind itself. We all have personal preferences. But for many of us, the mental ruminations about what we want for ourselves, the things we think are good, beautiful, or true, are centered on the self.

Self-centeredness is a strength. It’s a superpower.

It’s also a tremendous weakness.

It is our strength because we need to know who we are (as best we can) and maintain the boundaries of our existence (as best we can). It is our weakness when we maintain those boundaries by ignoring the needs of others. The importance of others’ needs is equal to our own: no more, no less. A moment of honest reflection will reveal that. There is no truthful way to justify one person’s (or one group’s, or one nation’s) importance as greater than another’s. The

only way to claim yourself as “more important” is to ignore the truth of our shared place in an incredibly vast universe by narrowing most attention to the self.

Knowledge of the self leads to self-care. Doubt of the self leads to care for others. Both can grow and expand together.

From another angle:

Our “inside” is subject to a stream of thought and feeling focused on the self. When you assess the contents of this mental stream, you find this simply becomes more content of the mental stream. So any evaluation of your thought, your “meta-thought,” is, in the end, simply more of the same.

Saying to yourself, “I’m thinking too much,” or “My mind is so busy,” or “I wish I could focus better” are examples of this. These thoughts can be useful, and you may apply them or not according to their time and place. They often motivate people to learn meditation or explore various spiritual paths.

The essential point is: trying to force the mindstream into one arrangement over another is futile if your goal is to manifest your whole being as a unity. The entirety of your being is already present as a unity.

Your lack of awareness of this truth (or mistaken identity with the illusion covering it) does not depend on the qualities or contents of the mind-stream.

Once you get the hang of this crutch, you can use it in your daily life, especially when you strongly object to or approve of a particular internal state.

Objecting or approving of an internal state means one aspect of you has evaluated another aspect. That’s actually a good sign.

This is what I mean by training. We are training ourselves to become better, by whatever criteria we use. One aspect of us thinks it knows how to make “the whole being” better.

But pause and evaluate it first. Sometimes the mind is right; other times it’s way off.

Ask yourself: Is the training or improvement you’re considering worthwhile, healthy, and likely to contribute to more love in yourself and the world?

Once again, the crutch is designed to create space for the genuine question: “How do I realize myself as a centaur?”

Here is the list. Many of these overlap with one another. These are things you might be tempted to do internally to address the experience of feeling separated from your “true nature.”

Once again, all of these things are important in their proper time. The only point is, they cannot solve this central issue for you. They all are examples of a subject perceiving an object.

- Perceive or seek something amazing, whether Beauty in the natural world, art, or an intellectual truth or discovery.
- Undertake to “improve myself” by becoming a “better” person: discover “who I am;” develop “my gifts/potential;” feel the satisfaction of demonstrating “what I am capable of;” train myself to have better attention, a calmer mind; train myself to become more generous, patient, kind.
- Attempt to become a “better” person by training for “higher” states of consciousness or increased “spiritual” capacities: loving and serving a religious cause; trying to become “one with God;” seeking an “elevated” or “superior” state of consciousness; striving for a “Total Realization” that transcends the present state of “ordinary” consciousness.
- Commit to upholding a moral code, ideal, or standard independent of circumstances in the outer world.
- Strive to be an agent of “justice” or “love” among all people of the world (this also applies to Crutch 5).
- Experience adoration of something or someone in the outside world and thereby lose the experience of self in the adoration.

Afterward To Crutches 5 & 6

On reflection, I can see how these two lists (from Crutches 5 and 6) are intended to make you hopeless, but only about something that never had any real hope to begin with.

Still, I worry a misinterpretation of these crutches could make someone feel hopeless about everything. So it's worth belaboring the point from a few different angles.

I describe humans as creatures who, due to our (relatively) recently developed frontal lobes, can *easily* get confused about reality. We can believe money is real, rather than invented, and then actually fight each other to accumulate it. We can feel separate from the universe we're intimately embedded in. We can even think things like “merging back into the Universal Oneness” would mean losing our individuality. And we can just as easily search outside ourselves or inside ourselves, trying on beliefs and strategies like clothing, in an attempt to resolve this confusion.

Let's say Person Q decides to drive in order to resolve their existential confusion. They drive North, but after many miles, their confusion remains unchanged. They drive East and find the same thing. They wonder if the best direction is down, into the earth. Could it be up? But how could a person drive up or down anyway? It's all so confusing. Maybe they should try driving South.

Then Person Q hears someone has written a book about using “crutches” to help “walk in the present.” One of the crutches is a list of all the directions that will not help end the confusion.

- North
- South
- East
- West
- Up
- Down
- Any combination of these directions

“Does this mean I shouldn't drive anymore?” asks Person Q.

“Not at all,” says the person who wrote that stupid book. “Drive wherever you want. Just know: no direction will resolve this confusion for you. It isn't about driving or direction.”

Not about driving? Not about direction?

As far as the subject-object split goes: no.

That's how it is with my lists, too. I hope this comes through clearly to anyone reading.

When considering this deep yearning, you can slowly become aware: nothing outside of you will bring relief from expecting “something” to change, “something” to be different. You also realize that no changes inside you will help either.

(And, once again, for some people, Crutches 5 and 6 may be the wrong teaching, because they still need to follow the lists in order to find a better equilibrium.)

In reflecting on this, you may find yourself in a present moment where nothing outside you helps and nothing inside you helps. Where, then, can you look?

That's exactly the point!

Because there is no past, there's nothing that has gone wrong and needs to be corrected. Because there is no future, there is nothing to wait for. Whatever you believe will help resolve this issue in the future can only exist right now.

Your expectation for change is no longer outside you.

Your expectation for change is no longer inside you.

Your expectation is no longer tied to something you will someday perceive.

Your expectation is no longer even tied to you, eventually perceiving it.

The “perceiver” and the “perceived” are, as subject and object, in a very mysterious way, the same thing.

Could there ever be a “you” to experience there is no such thing as “you”?

Introduction To Crutches 7 & 8

Humans are in a tough situation.

They are inherently one with everything in the universe; floating clouds of energy, temporary accumulations of existence coming together in a form for only a short time.

And yet, despite this intimate identity with the universe, many humans feel alone and separate from it. We strongly tend to ally ourselves with what appears to support us and fight against what seems opposed to us. The vast majority of the universe gets ignored.

Because of the way my attention, mind, and emotions work, I tend to see myself as the center of the universe. I live my life based on what is happening to “me.”

Of course, with a moment’s reflection, it’s easy to see most things as simply happening. It’s only from our unexamined, self-centered point of view that it feels like things are happening TO ME. The rain falls, and suddenly **my** picnic is postponed along with all the feelings that come with it.

Because of our self-centeredness, however gross or subtle, we favor our point of view over all others. We become subjectively affected by things. We like events to go “in our favor” and dislike those going “against us.” This like-dislike duality common to all life easily leads us to equate “Good,” “Positive,” “Right,” and “True” with what we like or believe, while we equate “Bad,” “Negative,” “Wrong,” and “Lies” with what we dislike or disbelieve.

Thus, when we look out at the world, it’s easy to take sides. For our personal configuration of reasons, we support or oppose various causes according to these internal judgments. We tend to see the world in terms of friends/enemies, good guys/bad guys, family/strangers.

But, as discussed with Crutches 3 and 4, our storytelling ability can blind us to other truths. It is important to recognize we spend a lot of time, attention, and energy trying to do good while believing we are avoiding evil. No one wants to feel evil (at least most of us don’t, though some real-life villains may revel in it).

If you reflect on the unity of the universe, you will see whatever we call “good” and whatever we call “evil” arises in the same way. It’s only our label that divides them. And that’s fine.

I’m simply pointing out: our existence is more intertwined with the universe than we usually acknowledge. To live in the present, you must realize your identity with all the present moment contains. And any present consists of both evil and good.

Crutch 7 is almost impossible.

Crutch 8 is much easier.

Crutch 7: You Are One With Everything Evil

I find this the single most difficult crutch of them all.

Please use it sparingly or not at all. It really isn't for everyone.

To see where this comes from, reflect for a moment on what the universe is made of. For you, it may be “energy,” “atoms,” or “quantum particles.” Some people say the universe is like an ocean of energy, with solid matter as tiny bubbles of foam on the surface.

The point is simple: we are all made of the same stuff.

One image I use comes from a short claymation film I saw years ago. The opening shows a vast expanse of undulating clay. Two hands pop out of the clay (made of clay, of course), pressing down on the surface to help a body climb out of the ocean of clay. Now there is a “separate being” walking around on the surface. Other beings emerge. Soon, they built a whole city out of clay. Every brick, every building, every car and driver, every street: all clay. When a clay person robs a clay bank for clay money, they point a clay gun at a clay teller and fire clay bullets at clay police from a clay getaway car.

That's the point.

It is our default position to identify with ourselves, our family, our tribe, our nation, whatever it is we claim as “us.” We also identify ourselves by who we are not. We have enemies, fear strangers, and see those in opposing political parties as “other.” We know we are “not them.”

The claymation film (and Crutch 7) reminds us: whatever reality you see, whatever present moment you are in, you are made of the same thing as everything else happening.

And this includes everything bad, evil, and just plain wrong.

If this feels hard to accept, you are not alone. I find this Crutch the most difficult to work with. Anyone doing something bad is still my brother or my sister. Those who carry out harmful actions are part of **my** being.

I can't realistically claim to be only on the good side of everything. Neither can you.

I can't place anyone doing harm or evil on some “other side,” separate from me, as if I have nothing to do with them. It's just not true. I can still think I am right, still disagree, still wish they would stop, still protest, still try to stop them. But in a way, I'm always looking in a mirror.

Just sayin'... deep down, we are all the same. Acting in our best way doesn't change the truth: we are made of the same stuff as any “evil-doing person.”

The point of Crutch 7 is to use this (hard and very difficult to accept) truth as a way to relax more fully into the present moment.

We do this by letting go, as best we can, of the mental “scorekeeping machinery” we set up. We let go of tracking right and wrong as intently as we do. We let go of the scaffolding by which we maintain our certainty. These activities pull us away from the present moment. We compulsively throw precious attention into constantly checking we are on the “right side,” that we “are not evil like them.”

Use this Crutch sparingly and wisely, and only when needed.

Crutch 8: You Are One With Everything Good

Most people would rather use Crutch 8 than Crutch 7, even though they both follow inevitably from the same idea.

Many aspects of being human are truly wonderful to identify with. I will get to these in a moment. But first, let me remind you both of these identities with “evil” and with “good” (Crutches 7 and 8) are, in the end, just another story.

It is our lot as humans not only to be ourselves but also to imagine ourselves. We create stories about who we are and then repeat them back to ourselves as if they were true.

I remember, some decades ago, working in a co-operative day care center. It was snack time. One of the kids was on the verge of speaking; she could manage a few words here and there, but couldn’t yet form sentences.

As I started pouring juice into her cup, I said, “Here is your juice.”

She looked at the cup filling and said, “Juice.”

I said, “That’s right. I am pouring the juice into your cup.”

She said, “Cup.”

She had been hearing those words all her life, but now it was all coming together in a brand-new way. Her eyes lit up and she got very excited. She suddenly understood each thing had a name. She pointed to the table and asked, “What’s this?” (What she meant was “What is this called?” or, more accurately, “What is the word for this thing?”)

I said, “Table.”

She nodded with delight and repeated the word. Then she moved on to napkin, cookie, chair, like popcorn popping, each word an explosion of understanding. Everything had a name! It was wonderful to witness.

When you think about it for more than two seconds, you realize there’s no way the word “table,” the sound “TAY-BUL,” is an actual table you can set a cup of juice on. Of course not. How could it be?

If we were speaking Spanish, the sound for the same object would be “mesa,” pronounced “MAY-SAH.”

Whatever excitement we once had in learning words is long gone. That little girl wasn't going to remember the exact moment her mind began to grasp the link between words and things. Most of us forget we humans created the words in the first place.

And when you remember you, too, are one of the named objects in your world, things get more complicated.

Once you come to believe you have a name (which, of course, you do), you can easily get lost in thinking you are limited by it; or rather, limited by all the things you supposedly are and all the things you are not. If you accept those limitations and stop exploring, you become stuck, trapped in the narrow space of what your name seems to allow you to be.

With no sense of identity beyond what's happening, it's easy to feel insecure. We know for sure we don't want to identify with what we consider evil, but we often feel unworthy to identify with what is good. We can feel like charlatans or impostors, as if we're running a scam on everyone who doesn't realize how insignificant we believe ourselves to be.

And the truth is, we are indeed very close to being nothing.

If you consider the Earth, you might be surprised at how huge it is or, rather, at how small we are by comparison. When I did the math, I was shocked. As small as a molecule of insulin? How could that be?

Collectively, we humans have already added enough carbon into the atmosphere to alter the climate. But individually? Each of us is hardly anything.

In other words, it's easy to feel like you are almost nothing and to be justified in that.

The point of a Crutch like this is that we are neither "nothing" nor "everything." But we can use these words, concepts, and realities, and mix them with the ways we habitually think of ourselves. This mixture opens the door for new thoughts, feelings, and perceptions to emerge, a new sense of what it means to be present.

What are some of the good things you can identify with in any given present moment? Even if you can't identify with them in a particular moment, they still are yours.

1. Wisdom

Archetypal wisdom reaching deep into the mists of time *is yours*.

2. Clarity

Clarity and the ability to cut through bullshit with a “sword of truth” *are yours*.

3. Patience

Patience and perseverance and the strength to move steadily in a direction *are yours*.

4. Compassion

The ability to bear witness to suffering, your own and that of others, *is yours*.

EXERCISE:

- 1) Plan to sit quietly for 10–20 minutes. Set a timer so you’ll know when the time is up.
 - ✓ No phones, no screens. Intentionally give yourself nothing to do.
 - ✓ Sit upright, with your spine erect.
 - ✓ Let your hands rest quietly in your lap.
 - ✓ Keep your eyes half-closed.
 - ✓ Just sit.
- 2) Notice your breath moving in and out. Simply watch this movement.
- 3) Notice thoughts coming and going across your mind, treat them like clouds drifting across the sky.
- 4) Continue to sit, aware of your breath, the sounds around you, your body, the thoughts coming and going, your breath again, etc.
- 5) When the timer goes off, take a moment to stand and stretch briefly.
- 6) Sit back down.
- 7) Reflect quietly on whatever you consider good. Take a moment to really feel your identity with what is good. Allow your identity to become much larger than you may be accustomed to.

Use the Crutch wisely and sparingly.

A few moments of reflection like this can become a part of your life.

If you don’t recognize good things as “part of you,” that’s exactly the point.

They are not just a “part” of you; they are more deeply woven into you than that.

So deeply, in fact, they dissolve into your being until they are no longer separate from “you.”

Crutch 9: You Will Never Really Know

I don't think this can be said too often: stories are necessary, but they can never fully capture reality.

There's a whole field of study called semantics, which explores the relationship between the word and the thing. Its core lesson can be summed up as: "the map is not the territory," "the menu is not the meal," or "the word is not the thing."

Forgetting these lessons can cause a lot of confusion.

You may remember this from childhood: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me."

It's a good way to point out the difference between a) actual actions causing physical harm and b) verbal assaults that don't leave visible wounds. But this childhood defense against bullying ignores the realm of emotions and how human-made words, carrying feelings of hate, can indeed cause hurt and even harm with nothing more than sound waves.

Even though words are not the same as the things they describe, words themselves are things. And as such, they can do harm or good.

Stories can describe many things, but they always leave something out.

Just ask Kurt Gödel and his Incompleteness Theorem. Even mathematicians have to accept they can't capture everything, not all at once, and not even in perfect sequence. You cannot build a formal system both complete and consistent, even for something as basic as arithmetic.

There will always be holes, gaps, incompleteness, and something left out. Even in math!

Most people have little trouble admitting there's plenty they don't know. If you don't know what the surface of Pluto looks like, who cares? If you don't know the Latin name of some insect again, who cares? I'm sure if you set your mind to it, you could come up with ten more examples.

The real trouble with how much we don't know comes when we become certain about something.

EXERCISE:

Think deeply about the certainty with which so many people hold their beliefs. Reflect on people who seem absolutely without doubt.

Start journaling. Write down specific examples of people who are completely certain about “such and such;” draw from both the present and the past.

Now think about what grows out of such certainty. Journal about the consequences you notice. What happens when people are certain?

Did you laugh? Cry?

Before getting further into “not-knowing,” let’s discuss a few ways you can say, “I don’t know” having ***nothing to do*** with what I am talking about:

Factual or Procedural Uncertainty

Probably the most straightforward category.

This is simply a gap in your knowledge about something specific. If you don’t know Nebraska’s capital, you can just say, “I don’t know,” and trust there’s a definitive answer you could look up. This kind of “not-knowing” is simply an absence of information that’s possible to learn.

You might also not know how to complete a mathematical proof, drive a forklift, or perform brain surgery.

This form of uncertainty is really about lacking a specific piece of information or not yet understanding the process, strategy, or technique required to solve a problem.

Probabilistic Uncertainty

Sometimes “not-knowing” takes the form of probabilities.

Examples include predicting the next number at roulette, determining who will win a particular sports game, or even predicting the outcome of a coin flip. Probabilistic uncertainty is also fundamental to quantum mechanics, our current explanation of the building blocks of our universe.

But these are all cases where, while indeterminate in the moment, they won’t remain unknown forever. You can always find out the result by waiting for it to happen. So this group of uncertainties is not what I mean by “not-knowing.”

However, in many fields, for example, ecology, economics, and climate science, there are countless complex and interdependent factors. Precise prediction becomes impossible. This begins to approach what I’m talking about: the moment when you realize you have no idea what to predict.

Still, the not-knowing here is more an acknowledgment of a system’s complexity. There’s often an expectation that someday the result can be known, and maybe even predicted.

So what kind of not-knowing am I trying to point to?

You start by recognizing the limits of human knowledge itself, and you move to the meta-level of not-knowing. You begin to see “knowledge” as always partial, contextual, and fallible. This holds regardless of the subject matter.

You also recognize your motivations, if you’re honest, are at least somewhat mysterious to you. They are unknown and will remain unknowable. Why do you want to write a novel? Why did you fall in love with this person and not a different one? Self-reflection may offer you an answer, but any certainty about your internal desires, motivations, or drives is fragile at best.

You spend time acknowledging the deep human areas of not-knowing. You ask fundamental questions about meaning, purpose, and consciousness. You wonder what the human place might be in the universe.

You get radically uncertain. And you realize this uncertainty is actually a foundation of human existence.

After all, the ground we are standing on is, in truth, mostly empty space.

Here are some ways to think about *how little we are able to perceive* of what’s around us. We can realize how limited our senses are (even counting the help of various tools we have invented).

- **SEEING**

We see (our visual faculty) with what we call the “visible light spectrum.” This visible light bounces off what is around us, enters our eyes, is converted to an electrical impulse, which travels to be processed into images by our brains.

But the light visible to us is only a tiny fraction of the electromagnetic spectrum. How small?

Here are 2 facts about the electromagnetic spectrum...

1. A long radio wave can be 1000 meters long. (over half a mile)
2. Visible light is about 400 to 700 *billionths* of a meter.

How can we wrap our heads around this?

EXERCISE:

- 1) Imagine you will be leaving the Earth to travel for 1 billion kilometers.
- 2) Close your eyes.
- 3) Imagine getting into your version of an imaginary spaceship. Push some imaginary buttons and set the ship to travel 1 billion km. Strap in and take off!

- 4) Now relax. Enjoy the ride. At our current level of technology, a trip this far would take at least months, possibly up to several years. But since it's an imaginary spacecraft, we can go **much** faster.
- 5) Zip past Mars.
- 6) Go safely through the Asteroid Belt.
- 7) You pass Jupiter at some point. Keep going!
- 8) Imagine your imaginary ship stops. Have a cool computer voice announce, "You have traveled one billion kilometers from Earth."
- 9) Look around. You are floating somewhere between the orbits of Jupiter and Saturn.
- 10) Now look back toward Earth. At this scale of a billion miles, the size of the visible light spectrum is around 2-5 New York City blocks long.

All the wonder of your vision, all the information you get from your eyes, everything you know from seeing "what's around you," *all the certainty you generate from your visual experience* comes from a tiny-tiny-**tiny** part of the electromagnetic spectrum of energy.

In other words, there's a lot more going on than what we can see.

• HEARING

Humans can typically hear within a specific range.

Elephants can detect vibrations down to 1 Hz, which is about 20 times lower than our lower limit.

Bats can detect frequencies up to 200 kHz, about ten times higher than our upper limit.

Just as with seeing, there's a vast range of sound happening all around us we will never hear with our ears. It's only available through machine translation.

Younger people can often hear higher frequencies than older people. If you're old enough, you know what it's like to miss hearing some of what's happening around you. But in truth, we all experience this to some degree.

Spend a moment noticing all you cannot hear. Let it remind you to hold some doubt about the world you think you're so sure about.

• SMELLING

Humans can detect roughly a trillion different odors, though our sensitivity threshold is usually in the parts-per-million (ppm) range. We have about six million olfactory receptors.

Dogs, by contrast, have around **300 million** olfactory receptors. Some can detect substances at concentrations as low as parts per trillion, making them anywhere from 10,000 to 100,000 times more sensitive than humans.

Imagine it: a world of smells surrounds you, ones you'll never experience.

• YOUR TIME WINDOW

You are sitting in a chair and looking at a wall a few feet away. On the wall are two light bulbs, three or four feet apart. Both bulbs are off.

Now imagine this:

- One light bulb turns on.
- Then, about 1 second later, the second light bulb turns on.

It will be easy to tell which one was first and which was second because the event happened within your time window.

Now imagine the light bulbs are off again.

- One light bulb turns on.
- The other one turns on $\frac{1}{2}$ second later.

It will still be easy to tell which bulb went on first. Half a second is well within the normal human time window.

Our time windows usually starts to get fuzzy at around one-tenth of a second. If one light goes on and the next follows a hundredth of a second later, they'll appear to almost everyone (unless you're in a deep state of meditation) as happening at the same time.

But they didn't happen at the same time. That's why slow-motion replay became so popular. With video, you can even watch a hummingbird flap its wings, something you can't perceive within your natural time window.

On the other end of the time window:

- One light bulb turns on.
- The other light bulb turns on 1000 years later.

Sorry, but you're gonna miss it. Too far outside the human time window. (But can you imagine a being who would be able to perceive it?)

Things around us are happening all the time. During our lives, we can perceive many things. What happens too quickly for us to know about? What happens too slowly?

EXERCISE:

- 1) Spend a minute each day wondering what is happening outside your time window.
- 2) Allow yourself to grow less and less sure about things in general.
- 3) Journal about how this makes you feel.

• THE SIZE OF OUR BODIES

In case you notice, the following calculations are from an earlier Crutch. I believe the same point is worth making here as well.

Assume your mass is 89 kilograms (about 196 pounds, for those less comfortable with the metric system).

Assume the planet Earth's mass is 5,970,000,000,000,000,000,000 kilograms.

When you compare your mass to Earth's mass, you begin to see just how staggeringly small you are:

89 kg is to 5,970,000,000,000,000,000,000 kg

As (approximately) 1 is to 6.7×10^{23} .

In other words, a human's mass is **one six-hundred-seventy-sexillionth** of the Earth's mass.

If you imagine a creature whose mass is one six-hundred-seventy-sexillionth of your 89 kg mass, can you see how tiny that would be?

You are ***that small*** compared to your home planet. From Earth's point of view, you're about the size of an insulin molecule. From an insulin molecule's point of view, you are the size of the Earth.

EXERCISE:

- 1) Look at your arm and imagine a single molecule of insulin resting on it.
- 2) Notice the difference in size between you and that molecule.
- 3) Now, sense how this is the size you are compared to the Earth.
- 4) Ask yourself: ***what are you sure of?***
- 5) Journal your thoughts and feelings. If you're with a partner or in a small group, share and discuss.
- 6) Sing a spontaneous song about being small. Singing can unlock aspects of your consciousness that usually stay quiet. Sing ***out loud***, sing freely. If you don't censor yourself and truly let go, you may be surprised at what comes out.

• THE LENGTH OF OUR LIVES

Assume you live 100 years.

Assume the Earth will have lived about 8 billion years by the time the Sun expands to engulf it.

The fraction of Earth's life that your life represents is:

100 years out of 8,000,000,000 years.

This is the same as 1 in 80,000,000. In other words, your lifespan is one eighty-millionth of Earth's lifespan.

If something lived one eighty-millionth of your 100-year life, that would be about 0.00000125 years, just under 40 seconds.

You are that fleeting compared to your home planet. From Earth's point of view, you live only about 40 seconds. From a creature's 40-second lifespan, your 100 years are like 8 billion.

EXERCISE:

- 1) Set a timer for 40 seconds.
- 2) Center yourself. Imagine a little creature will be born, grow up, live and then die during the 40 seconds after you start the timer.
- 3) Take a deep breath. Start the timer
- 4) Imagine this tiny creature, no bigger than a molecule of insulin, resting on your hand.
- 5) Say hello to this creature. Please give it a name. Introduce yourself as someone who will live 80 million times longer than your new friend.
- 6) Will you feel sad when your creature dies after a life of "just" 40 seconds? Should Earth feel sad when you die? Remember: to your creature, 40 seconds is like 100 years.
- 7) When the timer goes off, take another deep breath. Journal your experience. If you're with others, share and discuss.
- 8) Set the timer again for 40 seconds.
- 9) Take another deep breath and center yourself.
- 10) Spend a few moments pretending to be the Earth, looking at you. Imagine being an entire, enormous planet focused on something the size of a molecule of insulin, which is you.
- 11) Return to yourself, in the present moment, with the 40-second timer ready to go.
- 12) Take another deep breath. Prepare to be as present as possible during your "lifespan" of 40 seconds.

13) Start the timer. Put it down and leave it out of sight.

14) Live your 40-second life fully present.

Journal afterward: *What were you sure of during your 40-second life?*

Discuss with others.

Change of pace.

Let's look at some real-world consequences of being certain. I'll use the example of hand washing.

Hand washing is now seen as a medical necessity. Can you imagine any doctor performing surgery and refusing to wash their hands?

But that wasn't always the case.

Before the 1840s, there was nothing in the culture or the practice of medicine about cleaning your hands before treating a patient. Even if you were coming straight from the *fucking morgue* after having your hands *inside a dead body* during an autopsy, you might walk directly across the hall to deliver a woman's baby.

In the United States in 1843, Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. published The Contagiousness of Puerperal Fever. Holmes dared to suggest doctors *were actually spreading childbed fever* between patients. He faced fierce opposition just for raising the idea.

This is worth repeating in all capital letters:

MEDICAL DOCTORS WERE PERFORMING AUTOPSIES AND THEN **ATTENDING TO WOMEN GIVING BIRTH WITHOUT WASHING THEIR HANDS.**

It seems unbelievable today, but it was common practice at the time. And because it was common practice, it was heavily defending. "It's just what we do." Why doubt yourself?

In 1847, Hungarian physician Ignaz Semmelweis observed and confirmed: maternal mortality rates were significantly higher in doctor-attended births compared to those handled by midwives. If doctors washed their hands, maternal death rates were significantly lower. He basically invented modern statistics in order to show his results. They were clear and undeniable.

Doctors of the day heard Semmelweis's report and essentially said, "No way. That's ridiculous!"

Semmelweis responded by implementing a strict chlorinated-lime hand washing policy at the Vienna General Hospital. Maternal mortality rates plummeted from 18% to 2%.

Was that enough evidence to change standard practice?

Short answer: no.

The prevailing theory of disease at the time blamed illness on “bad air” rather than germs. Diseases were “known” to be caused by miasma (from the Greek for “pollution”), a form of “bad air” associated with the foul odors rising from decaying organic matter.

Well, this kind of made sense at the time. Dead bodies really do smell horrible. Noxious air was thought to contain poisonous particles, or “miasmata,” that could cause illness when inhaled. What doctors believed made sense, what they were sure of, was to keep dead bodies away from pregnant women so the miasmata couldn’t make them sick.

This strong belief made blaming the lack of hand washing for disease seem preposterous.

So, despite very dramatic ***and reproducible*** results, the medical establishment rejected Semmelweis’s findings.

The truth was, no doctor wanted to admit their unwashed hands might be killing patients. Who wants to see themselves as an inadvertent killer? This is a great example of certainty being based on maintaining the fictional story we have of ourselves.

Dr. Charles Meigs of Jefferson Medical College even declared: “Doctors are gentlemen, and gentlemen’s hands are clean.” Many senior physicians saw hand washing as unnecessary and refused to change practices they had relied on for decades.

How many women and children died because of unwashed hands?

In 1850, Dr. Francis Willis, a prominent American physician, wrote in a medical journal that Semmelweis’s theory was unacceptable. To accept it, he argued, would be “to admit that we, the physicians, with our educated hands, are the chief source of contagion.”

Uh...yeah.

That’s it exactly.

But critics of Holmes and Semmelweis focused more on protecting their medical dignity than on the evidence or on saving lives.

Over the last few decades of the 1800s, hand washing was still slow to catch on, even as evidence for germ theory mounted. By 1900, only about 10% of American physicians regularly washed their hands between patients. The American Medical Association didn’t formally endorse hand washing until ***after 1910***, about 50 years after Semmelweis’s results became known.

Doctors, I don’t think, set out to be unreasonable. They didn’t say outright, “I refuse to look at evidence that I’m causing harm.” But this was the effect of the positions they took.

Their sustained opposition, even in the face of hard evidence, revealed how professional pride and refusal to accept responsibility sat at the emotional core of this resistance. It's an example of the emotional need to believe in our own stories.

It shows how dangerous it can be to hold certainty in things we should not be so sure of.

I can get pretty revved up when I am talking about uncertainty. Let's go off in another direction and see what we can find.

Faith 101

When people fight over things they have "faith in," I see confusion about faith vs. belief as the real issue. From my point of view, many people misunderstand faith and get confused between faith and belief. This one misunderstanding can get directly in the way of being present and open-hearted. It can also lead to the kind of certainty for which some people will fight, kill, and die.

I offer these ideas about faith vs. belief for your consideration. If they resonate with you, please feel free to use them as you see fit.

I start with this thought: People already have Faith.

I refer to this as Faith "pre-existing" in us. Others may refer to Faith as a "theological virtue," meaning Faith is something God has already given you. You don't have to do anything to earn it; you *already* have it. That's what I mean by pre-existing.

But the Faith already within us can be covered, obscured, hard to find, or difficult to identify. We get in our own way and are unable to manifest it. We might say the pre-existing Faith in us is "sleeping," and we have to do something to help it "wake up."

What does all this have to do with "I don't know?" The essence of the Faith I am talking about grows from questioning our beliefs. We all still need beliefs to be oriented in the world, but fighting for the supremacy of one belief over another is just silly. Being so certain of your beliefs is what obscures Faith.

While I mentioned how small a human is compared to the Earth, I could just as easily have pointed out how absolutely huge a human is compared to subatomic particles.

Or, if you're thinking about how fleeting life is, you might compare a 100-year lifetime to a nanosecond (one-billionth of a second) or a picosecond (one-trillionth of a second). Then you might think, "Wow, one hundred years! Plenty of time!"

EXERCISE:

- 1) Consider all the molecules, atoms, and subatomic particles that make up your body.
- 2) Recognize how *every single one of them* existed billions of years before you were born.
- 3) Consciously breathe in oxygen that is billions of years old. Consciously exhale carbon dioxide that is billions of years old.
- 4) Recognize your human form is about 60% recycled water. Every water molecule in your body, every single one, has been used millions of times before. The water in you has been in clouds, in oceans, in animals, in other humans. It has been ice, floated through the air as vapor, and flowed as rivers across land toward the sea. Some water is leaving your body right now through your skin as perspiration.
- 5) Urinate. Say thank you to the water as it leaves your body. Wish it well as it lands wherever you pee, knowing it will keep moving, mixing, and taking new forms.
- 6) Imagine some of the water in your body was once in the pee of another creature.

The point of the preceding section is simple: we need to forgive ourselves for being confused. Being human is incredibly difficult.

We are small and large at the same time.

We are fleeting and eternal at the same time.

Both are true.

How do we explain ourselves to ourselves?

I see humans as natural explainers. We use stories to make sense of the world and of ourselves.

For example, no one really knows how the universe began. But every human culture in history has had a creation story.

So how do we describe what it means to be human while still honoring the truth that we don't know? In other words, what makes for a workable story?

Here is my way of reconciling these opposites. The goal of this story is to draw a clear distinction between Faith (don't know) and belief (where certainty tends to live). It's just a story, like any other, but it helps me make sense of what would otherwise be confusing. I hope it's helpful for you to consider.

Once upon a time, a creature called Human came into existence.

Like all other creatures, humans have three essential responses to the world:

- 1.) We can **like the event** (be attracted, think it's good, move toward it, want it, cultivate it, love it, need it, desire it)
- 2.) We can **dislike the event** (be repelled, think it's bad, move away from it, not want it, destroy it, hate it, abjure it, desire its opposite)
- 3.) We can **ignore the event** (not care about it one way or another, likely not even notice it at all.)

These three basic responses are common to all living things. Even a little amoeba in a drop of water has them. The amoeba swims toward food (likes the event), swims away from acid (dislikes the event), and ignores what it neither likes nor dislikes.

Humans are just like amoebas in this sense, except for one huge difference: we have a strong tendency to tell ourselves stories. And not only that, our stories are usually self-centered. We also tend to believe those self-centered stories without much doubt. This creates conditions where “like” becomes greed, “dislike” becomes aggression, and “ignoring” becomes not caring.

So what conditions create such certainty in creatures like us? Humans could very reasonably live in doubt about almost everything. What makes us such ardent believers in our own beliefs?

Humans grow along an arc from infant (completely helpless, dependent, and interdependent) to adult (able to care for self and others, still completely interdependent, but able to feel and appear to self as independent). During this growth, an awareness develops that one's experiences are entirely one's own. This convinces most people they are, in fact, alone in the universe. A being completely interconnected with all creation becomes convinced they are utterly alone.

Navigating the aloneness, in which Faith is completely asleep, and the intimate interconnectedness, in which Faith has awakened, becomes a problem every human must solve. Who can help the lonely human? No one. Who can feel their deep interconnectedness? No one. That is the nature of the being-alone problem. Deep down, I know I am interconnected and interdependent. But because of the sleep of my Faith, this awareness, whether vague or profound, is not enough to displace my certainty of needing to act on my own behalf. **I** must address **my** existential situation “by myself.” At the deepest level of my consciousness, I am not aware of anything that can help me.

Except for beliefs.

I remind myself my existential “aloneness” has no real basis in reality. The truth is: “something” created me and is, at least to some extent, “taking care” of me.

For example, we need to hydrate ourselves. Adult humans can (and must) water themselves. Who else will swallow water for me but me? Still, the distribution of water inside my body is not done by “me.”

Food is digested, but not by “me.” A cut finger heals; again, not by “me.”

These examples show “something” working in our favor, though it’s hard to find a fully satisfying name for what that “something” is. This is because *“The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.”* Whatever you might be inclined to call this “something,” a name can never be what created “it all,” which includes your capacity to name things, but is never limited by that.

To the extent an adult feels and experiences themselves as alone, they locate their “center” inside their own body. This center has a physical home in the belly. Responses to the events of the world, how they’re experienced, processed, and acted upon, begin in the belly. This is the seat of our individuality and aloneness. Events and situations land here as energy.

The belly evolves into the center of our desires. Because of our perceived aloneness, we are required to face our deepest struggles by ourselves. The energy there becomes desire. Shaped by the self to support and defend the self, these desires grow into greed and aggression (alongside the ignorance we all carry).

We take each event personally. We are personally affected by the things that happen. We desire change, act, plan, and strategize accordingly. The energy in the belly feels like “my” energy, and “I” must decide what to do with it. My attractions and repulsions are all self-centered. My desires permeate this energy.

When this energy rises, it moves to a second center: the emotional center, the heart. As we mold our self-centered desires, we also form self-centered hopes about how these desires will unfold. We hope for things to go “our way.” In other words, a) we hope to keep what we desire, or b) we hope to avoid what we don’t want. Either way, we aren’t engaging with the world on its terms; we interpret every event in terms of how it affects us.

All of our hopes are personal. They take the form: “I hope **for** this to happen” or “I hope **for** that not to happen.” You simply fill in the blank with what you want to go in your favor. Even seemingly altruistic hopes will often be self-serving at their core.

And this is completely normal. There’s nothing wrong with personal hopes; who doesn’t have them? For most of us, this stage lasts a lifetime. But if you step back and consider it from a universal perspective, why would an entire universe ever be arranged to grant or obstruct your particular hopes?

To recap:

The personal energy lands in the belly and is marked by primordial, self-centered desires. It then rises from the self-centered belly to the self-protective heart. So now we have self-centered desires and self-centered hopes.

The energy continues to rise.

It moves upward to the head, the intellectual center.

As creatures who must make sense of things, we are compelled to explain. We **must** explain ourselves to ourselves. We need to understand why we a) want what we want and b) why we don't want what we don't want. We also need to make sense of our hopes. Why do we prefer some things and shun others? Why do we call some outcomes "good" and others "bad"?

And so our self-centered energy, having created desires and hopes, now creates beliefs.

Just as hopes are marked by "hoping **for** such-and-such," beliefs are marked by "belief **in** such-and-such."

You recognize beliefs by their certainty. You notice them when people (or yourself) cling strongly to this or that or the other idea. From this perspective, it doesn't matter what the content is. The theist's "belief **in** God is essentially the same as the atheist's "belief **in** there-is-no-God. They are essentially the same.

From this perspective, all beliefs are the same. **All** beliefs form when personal energy rises in an individual from the belly to the heart to the head. We then, within the limits of our social reality, make sense of the world with our beliefs. We can finally explain ourselves to ourselves.

It is important to make sense of the world. I don't say these things about beliefs lightly. In fact, this very story is one way I make sense of the world for myself.

But, as we've seen, there are many reasons to doubt the ultimate truth of any story we tell. If you find comfort, meaning, purpose, or truth in a particular story, of course, you will keep using it. If this story speaks to you, use it. If belief in God or atheism speaks to you, use that.

But what about doubt?

We humans don't have much business being certain. Sure, let's explore the universe and come up with as many stories as possible. But fighting over what is true or false should be a big clue we're on the wrong track.

We are like children on a playground, fighting for millennia. Some of us look around, anxious, waiting for a teacher, a principal, a grown-up to step in. But no grown-ups are coming to make things okay for us. We have to figure this out ourselves.

Given this story I'm using, I think Saint Paul's words about "Faith, Hope, and Agape" (in his *Letter to the Corinthians*) are the best place to turn. It's a concise reminder for navigating this difficult terrain. (By the way, I use "Agape," the original Greek word Paul used, rather than "charity" or "love" to remind me I don't think anyone has found a good English translation.)

Faith, Hope, and Agape are often called theological virtues, meaning they are God-given (for those who believe in God). Earlier, I called them pre-existing. But whatever your beliefs about the universe, you don't need to believe **in** God or anything in particular to find these three virtues useful. They're a great way to understand how we can live in a world where our desires, hopes, and beliefs seem to dominate everything.

To review: Faith, Hope, and Agape are each pre-existing. Every human is born with these capacities; like Jung might say, we're all born with access to Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious. But even though these are already in us, they are "asleep" and require effort to awaken.

To repeat: There's nothing you have to do to obtain them; they are already yours. But because you don't have automatic access, you must cultivate them. Otherwise, they remain asleep.

Cultivation allows them to slowly awaken while you consciously attend to reality and unconsciously drop the things keeping them asleep.

To say it another way: Faith, Hope, and Agape are asleep in you. They're already yours. But you keep them asleep through your actions. Correct understanding is essential. You don't need to take possession of them; you can't. They don't belong to you.

You need to stop interfering in their awakening.

What keeps them asleep? The very things we've just described:

- 1) The strong personal desires you chase at any cost;
- 2) The very personal hopes you cling to;
- 3) The strong personal beliefs you reinforce with certainty to keep the whole game running.

Your attention on these three keep Faith, Hope, and Agape asleep. They lock your attention on your personal world instead of the actual world. They blind you to the many things you've been ignoring. They prevent you from experiencing life beyond your personal "likes" and "dislikes."

We are currently occupied with our personal life at the expense of our universal life, our human life. We fail, again and again, to see how much we have in common with everyone and everything we encounter.

To be clear: I am not advocating for or against any particular course of action. Each person must decide what is right and wrong by their light. I'm simply saying our preoccupation with the personal self, while true, good, and necessary, is incomplete. It leaves out the rest of the universe, which we imagine is not directly involved with us. But it is involved with us. It *is* us. And by looking at the world in only a partial way, we miss the universal.

Many mystical traditions point toward these truths. What makes them "mystical" is going beyond any particular content or story. They transcend positive or negative events, people, and outcomes. Mystical truths don't help you decide what to eat for dinner, what kind of car to buy, or which political party to support. Mystical truths don't care which high school football team wins this weekend.

What is an example of a mystical truth?

Form is emptiness. Emptiness is form.

Truths like this are always available to explore, no matter what is happening in your life, from the most wonderful and desirable moments to the most awful and unwanted.

When you encounter a truth like this, especially within a practice of study supported by teachers who help keep you from drifting into purely personal interpretations, the sleep of your Faith begins to change. As Faith awakens, it has no story. It has no particular words or descriptions, positive or negative, to attach to. Faith has nothing it is certain of. Attachment and certainty, the strong personal conviction in the “rightness” of an idea, belong to the world of beliefs.

Faith is marked by stillness. Faith is marked by “not-knowing.” It is a manifestation of our deepest intellectual capacity because it transcends the personal mind. What emerges is spontaneous, tentative, and adapted to each situation. There is no “Faith *in* such-and-such.” There is no blank to fill in. There is simply Faith, joined with the “certainty” of “I don’t know.” Once revealed, this Faith cannot be lost, contradicted, or argued about. There is nothing to prove.

It is simply Faith.

Beliefs, by contrast, are marked by a story, by words, by descriptions. Beliefs are always “belief *in* such-and-such.” They are our attempts to make sense of the world and are essential for our development. However, they are also marked by certainty. Under certain conditions, please will believe in things they feel everyone should believe. And so, many who hold “true” beliefs often end up fighting with others who hold different “true” beliefs.

Faith and beliefs coexist in a mind where Faith is awakening. This is normal. Beliefs are necessary to orient us in the world and to function in society. We will always carry at least some belief, no matter how much our Faith awakens.

But again, there is nothing to “do,” directly, to awaken Faith. What matters is engaging with truths transcending good and evil, right and wrong, here and there. Mostly, what happens is this: you become aware, through ordinary contact with the world, that your beliefs are personal stories you cling to in order to feel “right” or “good,” or simply to feel like you “know what’s going on.”

As Faith awakens, two things begin to happen at once. The personal energy of desire, hope, and belief continues its upward pathway from the belly to the heart to the head. At the same time, the universal “I don’t know” begins to enter the head and mingle with your beliefs. It may stay there for a lifetime. But over time, it can spill over and begin traveling back down the body, from head to heart. With Faith leading, it becomes possible for Hope to arise.

Hope (with a capital “H”) is the universal companion of Faith. Hope manifests as the “I don’t know” is lived with greater clarity and humility.

By contrast, the personal kind of hope (small “h”) is specific, marked by hoping *for* such-and-such. You hope the job interview leads to a job; or your car will run until the next service station; or your date will become a relationship (or maybe just hope you’ll get laid.)

Just as Faith is marked by stillness, so too is Hope.

Just as stories mark beliefs, so too with hope. Beliefs take the form of “belief **in** such-and-such,” and hope takes the form of “hope **for** such-and-such.” There is always a blank to fill in with hope.

Faith and Hope, marked by stillness and “I don’t know,” might make someone appear foolish to those unfamiliar with the practice. As Faith builds and “spills down” to the heart, Hope begins dismantling the personal hopes at the center of one’s emotional life. It can feel sad, at times, to “lose all hope.” But personal hopes gradually reveal themselves for what they are: partial, incomplete, self-centered; they leave out the rest of the universe, while clinging tightly to your little corner of it.

The attachment can finally begin to fade. The world is vast, wide, complicated.

You may genuinely wonder, without any knowing: what **is** the best thing to happen next?

Questions like this are endless and ultimately unanswerable. When Hope begins to replace hope, the experience may feel like sadness, because suddenly there is nothing to hope (small “h”) for. Deep in the heart, the mechanisms that produce personal hopes continue to run, sometimes with no conscious content. They persist, even as we collaborate in the awakening of Hope. At this stage, there is nothing to do but persevere.

If Faith and Hope have awakened, even a little, and things keep “spilling down” from the head to the heart to the belly, then Agape may begin to coexist with your desires.

EXERCISE:

- 1) Identify a belief. For now, just make a note of it.
- 2) Spend a few moments reflecting on this section. It’s a long one, with many different threads, but the main takeaway is uncertainty.
- 3) Remember: it’s not about being “OK” with uncertainty. Uncertainty is our fundamental nature. The task is to get accustomed to living in it.
- 4) Once you’re oriented to as much uncertainty as you can manage, either a) sit still and look around or b) chose a simple household activity (peeling carrots, sweeping the floor, etc)
- 5) Immerse yourself in whatever there is to perceive.
- 6) Reflect on this: the more actively you perceive and participate in the actual, sensory world around you, the more still you can become. Remember: stillness is not about being physically still.
- 7) Allow the world to “touch” you through your senses.
- 8) Within your stillness, call to mind the belief you identified in step 1.

- 9) Hold the belief as you continue to exist in reality.
- 10) Notice how the mental activity of believing in something specific pulls you at least a little out of the present moment.
- 11) Let the belief go. Become still again, whether sitting or doing your simple activity.
- 12) Rest in as much not-knowing as you can while fully experiencing the world around you.
- 13) Notice the world is always changing, even if only a little. The changes announce themselves as they touch you through your senses.
- 14) Notice, too, how there is no difference, no matter the flux of sensory input, whether you are huge or tiny, fleeting or eternal.

At some point, you may realize:

1. How clear it is you **really** don't know. You simply do the best you can and make your way through the world as humbly as possible. Of course, you have to assume some things are true, but you hold them as lightly as you can, and stay open to changing your mind if something better comes along.
2. We're **all** in the same boat. **No one** really knows what's going on. Nevertheless, among all the people, some present themselves as if they do know. Anyone that certain is fooling themselves. And probably trying to fool you as well. (Be careful with true believers: they get angry if you point out anything that makes them doubt. They may accuse you of the very worst things they are doing.)
3. It's OK not to know. It has to be, because that's how it is. Use the Crutch of "not-knowing" to stay present. When you carry too many things you're sure of (without any real basis), the present moment bends through your filters to give you "evidence" to support your beliefs.

You can work with this Crutch for a lifetime.

It's worth it.

Crutch 10: Your Senses Are The Present Moment

When I think about human beings, I see us as basically the same. We all need to breathe. We all need to eat and drink. We all need to shit and piss. Beyond the physical needs, we also have social needs: to belong to a group or tribe and feel valued by them; to love and be loved; to do work that supports others and to accept the work of others that supports us. We all need stories. We all need meaning.

With so much in common, why isn't it easier for us to get along? At least part of the reason, it seems to me, is how difficult it is to be present in our own lives. Even sitting quietly for ten minutes can feel impossible. How can we find common ground with people we disagree with when we're so certain of what we believe? With minds that race and jump from one thing to another, how can we truly perceive the world we share, not just with other humans, but with all beings?

It seems essential to have a good working model of how the human mind functions. What follows are five modes of being conscious, five different ways of existing in the world. All humans share them. But only one of these modes is directly about having our senses open to the present moment.

- #1: Deep sleep, without dreams
- #2: Sleep, with dreams
- #3: Awake, absorbed to varying degrees in personal and social thoughts
- #4: Awake, open to sensory experience
- #5: Awake, engaged in abstract thought

#1: Deep sleep, without dreams

This mode is essentially the off-switch of human consciousness.

The mind needs to rest and recharge every day, and deep sleep serves this need. In this state, there is no dreaming. The mind is still. It produces no thoughts, no images, no sense of self.

During deep sleep, the body continues its basic animal functions: the lungs breathe, the heart beats, and the kidneys filter blood and produce urine, etc. Deep, dreamless sleep is more or less the same for all mammals.

#2: Sleep with dreams

From the place of deep sleep, the mind stirs and begins to function. It now thinks and creates images in the mode we call dreaming. While usually reached from deep sleep, this mode can also appear during a light nap; when it shows up in a modified form while awake, we often call it creativity.

The dreaming mind uses images drawn from past experiences. One way to understand dreaming is as a way of "thinking about things," reflecting on our lives without the heavy baggage of self-centered concerns that usually dominate waking thought. Because we can think more

directly here, without filtering intelligence through personality, the meaning of dreams is often conveyed symbolically. In dreaming, meaning is rarely found in the images themselves.

Whatever energy animates us, moves us, and allows us to think at all, that same energy is active here, working with the being to form dreams. The mode of dreaming is more or less the same for all animals who dream.

#3: Awake, with various personal/social thoughts

This is a mode of being awake, often called imagination, daydreaming, or fantasizing. I also include here the movements of the human mind creating shared cultural “reality” (such as money, time, the names of places, cultural norms, etc).

The images and mental constructions of this mode shape much of how we know “who we are.” They are about how we identify ourselves to ourselves. The energy fueling these images is the same energy creating our dreams at night and indeed our entire lives. Like dreaming, this mode doesn’t require current sensory input to function. And just as in dreaming, the mind draws on past experience to form its content.

This mode spans a wide spectrum. At one end, there is complete immersion. An example would be someone so “spaced out” you have to call their name or interrupt them to bring their attention back to the shared reality. Moving along the spectrum, attention to this mode mixes with the sensory perception of Mode #4. A student may fantasize in class but still track the room enough to appear to the teacher as if they’re paying attention. There are countless variations of this blend, as the images of mode #3 mix with the perceptions of mode #4.

At the subtler end of the spectrum, the images may be mostly unconscious. Examples include mental pictures of “how important I am” or “how kind I am,” even as attention appears to focus outward on the present.

Mode #3 is marked by its idiosyncrasy and personalized nature. Each of us carries a unique store of experiences and fantasies; our self-centeredness shows up in many colors, flavors and dimensions. Some meanings are complex and symbolic, perhaps uncovered in therapy. Most fantasies have a simple essence: they are attempts by the mind to imagine the individual as a center of the universe.

This mode is unique to humans.

#4: Awake, with sensory experience

This is the mode where attention rests simply on current reality. Here, the mind is informed by and even “run” by present perceptions. This is the mode to cultivate by practicing with these Crutches.

Being exclusively in this mode is rare. Most humans exist with mode #3 running, even when they believe they’re completely present. You can see this in the thought: “Hey, I’m really being present right now.”

Still, as you bring yourself more fully into the present, you can live in mode #4 more often, with a bit less of mode #3 swirling around.

In this mode, the images of perceived reality are completely literal, created by a non-personal aspect of the mind. The images perceived in mode #4 are created by the same energy that created whatever is being perceived.

This is the mode humans share with all forms of life.

#5: Awake with abstract thought

In this mode, our animating energy creates, thinks, and recognizes abstract thoughts. Abstract thoughts are marked by being non-personal outside the usual realm of present or non-present.

For example, thinking about the number 4 requires abstraction. The number 4 is distinct from any things there might be four of: four donuts, four carrots, four squirrels. But the number 4 exists apart from donuts, carrots, or squirrels. It exists in an impersonal way, the same for all beings aware of it. We can think about the number 4 and use it, but no one can grasp it as their own.

Other examples of abstraction include naming the different modes of thought or using ideas metaphorically as crutches. The images behind abstractions appear to carry meaning on their own and *seem* not to be symbolic at all.

I see humans as sharing this mode with other forms of intelligent life, including whales, dolphins, crows, and large insect colonies.

Having sensory experience (mode #4) is the only way to be “in” the present. Even then, the mind will still add all kinds of things: memories from the past, worries about the future, and your particular flavor of self-centeredness.

The modes are listed here to offer a clear model of how the mind moves. And by recognizing how the mind moves, you can begin to support the practice of becoming more present.

EXERCISE:

- 1) Pick an amount of time to sit quietly and set a timer.
- 2) Simply sit. Keep the spine upright but relaxed. Let the eyes be half-open. Rest your hands comfortably and keep them still.
- 3) Notice the mind as it moves.
- 4) Bring attention to the natural rhythm of breathing in and out, which continues beneath the movements of the mind. There’s no need to breathe in any special way. Just notice the breath as it happens.
- 5) Recognize: by tracking “where your mind is,” you’ve entered either mode #3 or mode #5.
- 6) Keep sitting and breathing, allowing mode #4 to become as active as possible.
- 7) Recognize: evaluating yourself, such as
 - “Wow, I’m really able to pay attention.” or
 - “My attention is very poor.” or
 - “I don’t like this.” or
 - “I like this a lot.”

Creates a new mix of mode #3 and mode #4. Positive and negative statements in this case are essentially the same.

Return, again and again, to simply sitting and simply breathing.

- 8) Notice, for example, a “sound” arriving in mode #4. Even labeling it a sound is using mode #3. The mind so easily moves from there. It will label sounds as “bird song” or “car door shutting.” From there, it can move to “must be the robin I saw this afternoon” or “Why does Fred always slam the car door?” Any of these movements brings modes #3 and #5 into the present.
- 9) Return, again and again, to simply sitting and simply breathing.

Notice how the coming and going of modes #3 and #5 are rhythmic, like the beating of your heart, or the breathing of your lungs. The rhythms can also range from quite wild, like a terrible storm, to small waves lapping on the shore to the quiet trickle of a stream under a sheet of ice.

Try it daily for a month. Set a small enough time to make it work within your life. Discover how being in the present and existing are synonymous.

Epilogue

Thanks for being “here” with “me.”

It’s a funny thing to say, which is why I use the quotes. Because really, who knows where I’ll be when you read this? Most likely, I won’t be anywhere nearby.

But still, I’m grateful you’ve read this book. I put my whole heart into it and I hope you read it in that spirit. And if you’ve read this far, I do feel you are here with me. That’s the truth. These words have created a web of thought you share with me, and with others.

I gathered these ideas from many places. My goal was to organize them well enough to be of use to you. The task was simply to repack the conglomeration in my own personal style.

If you actually got something out of it, that’s amazing!

That’s exactly what the book is for.

Bonus

Crutch 11:

Everything you like and

Everything you dislike and

Everything you ignore has something important in common:

It is you who creates likes, dislikes, and indifferences, not the thing you perceive.

EXERCISE:

Develop your own exercise to use Crutch 11.

Share it with me at tencrutches.link

Acknowledgments

Of course, there's a whole universe involved when a book is written. So let me first express much appreciation to everything that exists.

More specifically, I wish to thank my gorgeous (in so many ways) partner Rosario, my dear friends Eric and Julie and Richard, and my delightful child Abraham for all their love and support.

Note From The Author

After this book was written, I was scouting around for my next project. I decided to start a podcast.

I would make 100 episodes and riff on many of the ideas and themes presented here. It's up and running! I would love for you to hear it. Find it at any place you listen to podcasts. It's called [The Ten Crutches Podcast.](#)

The link above takes you to the podcast website. There you will find an archive with show notes for every show. You will also find a way to leave me a voicemail or send an email if you wish to contact me. I would really love to hear from you.

Thanks once again for reading all the way to the end!

If you know anyone who you think might benefit from this book, please pass along a copy.