

The Opportunity to Live Well

The Opportunity to Live Well:

*The Wisdom of Nelson Mandela,
Gough Whitlam, Pete Seeger
and Others*

By

Paul James

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



The Opportunity to Live Well:
The Wisdom of Nelson Mandela, Gough Whitlam, Pete Seeger and Others

By Paul James

This book first published 2017

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2017 by Paul James

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-4438-8640-8

ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-8640-6

This work is a testament to “the old technician” John James. While he was more at home with engineering than at cocktail parties, he showed me the precious value of an inquiring mind. His wisdom revealed especially bright and clear truths.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	ix
Introduction.....	xi
Chapter One	1
Wellness	
Chapter Two.....	25
Loss, Grieving and Healing	
Chapter Three.....	49
Maintaining Passion: Kombi Life	
Chapter Four	79
Enlightenment: Pete Seeger	
Chapter Five.....	107
Enlightenment: Luke Kelly	
Chapter Six.....	123
Flourishing over the Lifespan: Gough Whitlam and Nelson Mandela	
Afterword.....	159

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book could not have been completed without the contributions of many people.

I was fortunate to have Jim Coates of Weston Creek High School, and Stirling College as a teacher. He was an extraordinary person whose wisdom showed me how to know and be myself a little better than before. He was one of those remarkable teachers who could help you realise your potential. He had the ability to recognise what one's personal journey could be. He put meaning into the words inspiration and encouragement. If he was not part of my life journey, you would not be reading this book.

Professor Max Charlesworth's leadership and vision in developing the Deakin University Philosophy faculty made learning interesting and enjoyable and fostered my keen interest in Philosophical Inquiry. It was a privilege to participate in the programs that he helped create.

Thanks to my partner in this endeavour Tony Stuart for helping to clean up any wobbly text, and his material on Gough Whitlam. I am grateful Dr. Jacinta Byrne-Doran, Jessica Doran, and members of the Story Tell group for their thoughtful insights, advice, and guidance on the draft chapters. Not only did they improve the book, but they also gave me the confidence to keep going.

A debt is owed to Vera Brittain for artfully demonstrating that a sustained, detailed, and thoughtful testament to human life is possible. Her writing added energy and enthusiasm to my own. Similarly, I honour William James and Dylan Thomas for shining such bright and clear lights of truth in a world which needs their insights as much as ever.

Thanks also to Dr. Stan Doumani for helping me to remain in good health and deal with any medical concerns, and for his conversation well sprinkled with insights and wit.

I am grateful to my friends and family for enriching my world and for their encouragement.

To those who have provided much of the substance of the book a debt of gratitude is owed to John, Don, and Bill, Gough Whitlam, Nelson Mandela, Pete Seeger, Luke Kelly, and Ben and the Kombi Life Team. Their collective wisdom has breathed life into the idea that an informative, interesting, and experiential account could make up the Opportunity to Live Well.

INTRODUCTION

The approach taken in this book to investigating the opportunity of living well can be characterised as a form of Idealistic Personalism. This is where the human being (or person) is the ontological and epistemological starting point for philosophical reflection. It uses phenomenological methods to understand human experiences. The word phenomenology, reformulated in its original Greek form, means to “let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself.” In this way, what is to be discovered becomes unconcealed, and is noticed where it was formerly overlooked.

Rather than relying on detached theory, this book seeks to harness self-understanding that can arise with our experiences. In exploring the terrain of living well, I use a phenomenological approach to probe the lived experiences of people. This book seeks to bring into the foreground what may have been obscured and to gain insights into the nature of the world and ourselves. This inquiry is akin to Alistair Cook’s “Letter from America,”¹ which gave current affairs a reflective canvass mixed with history and questions about what being human consists of. People are conditioned to summarise, to get a “soundbite” of a topic and stop, and think that is all they need to know. As a point of difference, Cooke requires the listener to continue listening, to be patient rather than just get a “thirty-second grab.” Just when you thought Cooke is not getting to his point, it becomes clear. The listener is rewarded with a personal reflection that they can emulate. Cook’s letters remind us of those precious times in our life when we had free-flowing conversations that developed both our knowledge and ourselves.

Like the “Letter from America,” this book seeks to encourage conversation/s with ourselves that can be shared and applied. Such conversations, like actual lives, can be messy. They can meander and may not make immediate sense. Cooke knew that roving might be required to get to the truth. Similarly, this book draws on an emergent knowing that it arises not just from our mental facilities, but also from the body: a reaction that is visceral, emotional, and intuitive.

Rather than devote attention to ourselves in a “self-preening” narcissistic way, the aim is to “seize the day” by being the best captains of

ourselves that we can. We are vulnerable creatures. Our vulnerability encompasses not only damage that has been done in the past and the speculative harms of the distant future, but also the possibility of immediate harm, even death. We are beings who live with the ever-present possibility that our needs and circumstances will change. Having a splendid life rarely follows a straight and clear road. We can live in providence by looking forward with courage in anticipating, initiating, responding to, and being sustained and fortified by challenges. This is being a person who lives with daring, honours life, and cultivates virtue.

As Vera Brittain showed in her personal journey *Testament of Youth*, you need to be involved in life, not skip over it, in order to live well. Thoughtfully reading over six hundred pages of Vera's book is a demanding yet richly rewarding experience. Similarly, you also need to take a reading journey to become fully immersed in the experiences that are explored and shared here.

Weighed down with "everydayness," by doing what we need to survive and get by, we can lose sight of the stupendous gift that life bestows. Life is a marvel to be cherished. There are the amazing feats of men and women, music that sounds like it has been made by angels, thoughts so wise that they transcend time, love so strong it reaches through generations, animals that are extremely adept and colourful, and such plenty and variety in nature's gifts. So much in life may pass unseen and unnoticed that can be easily seen, heard, and appreciated. The classic *Kung Fu* television series² eloquently demonstrates that how we shape our experiences is fundamental to how we notice, understand, and appreciate life:

Master Po:	Close your eyes. What do you hear?
Young Caine:	I hear the water, I listen to the birds.
Po:	Do you hear your own heartbeat?
Caine:	No.
Po:	Do you hear the grasshopper which is at your feet?
Caine:	Old man, how is it that you hear these things?
Po:	Young man, how is it that you do not?

The essence of our lives is our experiences. Being informed by these experiences profoundly shapes the quality of our lives. Our experiences can be creative acts; they are not just programmatically dedicated by the context of our lives, our physical environment, our biology, culture, and society. All the people explored in this book would say that everyone, in

their way, regardless of their circumstances, can positively take up the opportunity of being human.

Even menial, mundane, and oppressive tasks need not totally stifle personal excellence. A vivid example of this is Nelson Mandela (covered in this book), who showed that breaking rocks and enduring a harsh prison environment did not give him an angry and negative perspective. His experiences were creatively woven into his ethical character, his sense of honour, community, optimism, and desire to thrive in what may have seemed like bleak circumstances. He saw things differently from others, and his life provided a vivid demonstration of that. This is an exciting discovery. Our experiences are not simply closed but are wide open and can be shaped by us and those with whom we interact.

In reaching adulthood, we can perceive the world with report-level objectivity. We can, as Charles Dicken's Thomas Gradgrind did, report a Horse as being:

Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eyeteeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs, too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth.³

This caricature and Dicken's discussion in *Hard Times* show that perception without feeling can be a form of blindness. To live well we need to be attuned to the world with our whole being, that is: our heart/emotions, mind, and body. When our lives are ending, when death is imminent, do we regret not knowing more facts? Alternatively, is it the lack of richer fuller relationships or appreciation of the abundance and beauty of the world in so many small things? Are we too busy to appreciate the sound of rain, the warmth of sunlight on our face, the crunch of toast? Do we truly savour the aroma, taste, and satisfaction of fresh coffee on brisk winter's mornings? Do we gaze at stars in the night, take in the scent of newly blooming flowers, listen to a bird song, or fully appreciate the joyous laughter of a child?

When we were children and first played in the world we had a vibrant imagination, and the world was illuminated in our bright power. Our positive emotions can be reciprocal and as we positively interact we may be moved by the world, and the word is enlarged and becomes significant for us. As children, we can experience the world as an enchanted place. Usually, this primary experience of enchantment is associated with nature. For me, memories of hay fields and the vibrant green of trees in the spring evoke the childhood experience of enchantment. Rambling through fields, peering into creeks, riding a bike through a forest let me "be" in the

moments of the day. Solid satisfactions resonate with the plunk of stones dropped one by one into a steam.

From an increasingly young age, we experience a crowded mental and emotional space. A massive amount of information is pushed at us from a variety of mediums” smartphones, videogames, the internet, social networking, television, and radio. Marketing has become increasingly pervasive and sophisticated; there are numerous things we are told we need to have in order to be happy. People often live in a time- and decision-pressured environment where they need to be information ready. They can become overloaded and distracted from life experiences. Where our mental and emotional space is crowded, it is more difficult for us to reflect on our lives. As this book shows, being able to shift our perspective on something, especially ourselves, can create massive transformations in our lives.

People increasingly take their cues from those around them. While external feedback and guides can be valuable, when we orientate ourselves towards external images and views we may no longer see ourselves. As Brittain identified, a crucial aspect of living well is, “to realise what our own background is, who are we and to create and change ourselves.”⁴

We should not let other people, society, the market economy, and other external factors make our choices for us. Despite years spent studying, both in formal and informal education, many people spend little time considering, shaping, and directing themselves, their perceptions, and their own thoughts, feelings, and character. Many people put way too much store into what others think. However long we have been “swept along by external factors,” this book demonstrates the benefits of courage, adventure, challenge, initiation, and the courage of endurance. Owning our story and loving ourselves through that process is the bravest thing we will ever do. There is, as Luke Kelly shows, a marvelousness in becoming less self-conscious, less concerned with what others think, being “your own lad” in an earthy, unpretentious way. By exercising courage, we may avoid putting ourselves into a straightjacket and restricting who we are and may become and do.

Gough Whitlam, Nelson Mandela, Pete Seeger, Luke Kelly, and Ben and the crew of Kombi Life had hearts full of passion and fierce desires. Each reveals the importance of our emotional and imaginative lives. They show how passions are essential to a good life as they open our world. People can accept many blights, insults, injuries, or spirit-crushing conditions with a stupefying stoicism. The worst blight to living well is indifference, to have a life of merely making do, of accepting second best or third rate. Going beyond what currently is, not taking the safe path, not

succumbing to mediocrity always contains the risk of being criticised, of being found wanting, of falling short in one's aims, yet this is a risk that is worth taking, as Theodore Roosevelt wisely says:

It's not the critic who counts. Not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the person who's actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at worst, if fails, at least fails while daring greatly.⁵

It can be demanding and isolating to believe in and try to enact "what could be" rather than not "just what is," to have difficult conversations and no longer have the advantage of merely reflecting conventionally accepted ideas. People can have a whole range of limitations and difficulties: physical, emotional, intellectual, and ethical, as well as environmental and contextual constraints, yet there is still an opportunity to "seize the day." Instead of taking the level path and acquiescing to mediocrity, the characters of this volume show the importance of nobly venturing and putting more of themselves, all their heart and strength, into pursuits that they value. In listening for and answering the call of their own self, they truly lived and were filled with the grandeur of life.

To experience the fullness of life is to become vulnerable; it is to dare greatly and to pursue things of value. Managing to live well is being able to recognise and deal with the ever-present risk of self-indulgence and narcissism. Those people explored in this book can be accused of being elitist yet they didn't spare themselves from their own critical eye. Their imperfections speak of their humanity. Living well does not mean the absence of "feet of clay," of human foibles, faults, and ticks. There is also the challenge of keeping your sense of worth in bleak times. An important aspect of living well is to be able to connect with and grasp the meanings of life's discomforts and its disagreeable aspects, not just its elations. Achieving this, as Nelson Mandela shows, requires imagination and considerable discipline. Living well does not happen by wishful thinking or by pure luck.

Defining moments reveal and test us. At the right time, they can provide the opportunity to "bundle up all your hopes, dreams" and then take a "massive swing" at life. There is an ambiguity in life; it is not always so easy to know what the "right thing" is. Yet in defining moments we commit to irreversible courses of action that shape our personal and professional identities. Brittain, in taking on the challenge of writing the *Testament of Youth*, answers the question "Who am I?" An ongoing effort

is required to understand which values and commitments mean the most to us. Indeed, in an often-messy reality, we can face multiple views and underlying values that conflict with each other. There can be great tension and inner turmoil when opposing values are vividly in focus. Hewn from heady introspection, applying deeply held values also requires great tenacity, persuasiveness, shrewdness, self-confidence, and imagination.

In earnestly striving to live well, idealism and pragmatism can sometimes mix and conflict with each other. I vividly remember my time working for a cancer ward and the difficulty faced by nurses in avoiding putting on a protective suit of armour and becoming more detached and cold from their patients.

While it is clear that with love comes heartache, it is a sad prospect to ponder on how many people have never really loved or have forgotten what they felt like when they were in love.

It is quite understandable that, in trying to live well, people are sometimes conflicted; they are torn between what they want to do and what they can do. Yet, the conflict demonstrates care, a crucial aspect of living well. Nelson Mandela, Gough Whitlam, Pete Seeger, Luke Kelly, Dylan Thomas, Vera Brittain, and Ben of Kombi Life⁶ dared to care. This marks lives of difference, not of perfection, not free from suffering, but lives that matter, that have spirit, vivaciousness, élan, and colour.

Insights can come from surprising places, and the movie *Rocky Balboa* wisely highlights a great challenge to living well in the contemporary world:

The world ain't all sunshine and rainbows. It's a very mean and nasty place ... and I don't care how tough you are, it will beat you to your knees and keep you there permanently, if you let it. You, me or nobody, is gonna hit as hard as life. But it ain't about how hard you hit ... It's about how hard you can get hit, and keep moving forward ... how much you can take, and keep moving forward. That's how winning is done.⁷

Everyone has vulnerabilities. Even those who seem to be made of concrete have fragilities. There are things that can trouble, unsettle, and even torment them.

There is plenty of material for the cynic to use; there are plenty of examples of incompetence, corruption, and plain failure to remedy problems affecting people that require social, community, and government actions. Hope is needed in order to not give in to cynicism and succumb to resignation and despair. Developing inner strength isn't easy, it begins by developing our awareness, what we intend to do, and the engagement of our whole self: our heart, head, and hands. Fortunately, in every era there

are some “bell-weather souls” with a congenial outlook who give us insights, who light up themselves and the world with glorious humanity. They are not gods—they have the same flesh and blood as us; they live boldly and imperfectly, yet they show so resoundingly how much a single person matters. They take on the mantle of sterner stuff and take a full swing at the curve balls in the arena of life when the odds seem well and truly stacked against them.

The nature and ethos of those discussed in this book reflect their pursuing causes and ideals for the sake of humanity, not for mere self-interest. There is evident power and passion in every fibre of their being. Their accomplishments do not just spring from warm and easy surroundings but also from those that are harsh, bitter, and cold. They speak for the melancholic and downtrodden, as they do those revelling in joy. As well as highlighting good things, they have taken torment, confusion, stress, and pain and transformed them into something eternally beautiful. Their majestic spirits, love, wisdom, creativity, and inspired ideas, through the twists and turns of their lives, provide answers to the questions: “How can we recover or renew our vision? How might we live well?” What a delight to alight and be a free spirit, even in our own smallest way, and to share our humanity.

I remember in my youth vigorously singing along with the song “Free Nelson Mandela.” I got my wish, and Mandela, after 27 years in jail breaking rocks, strolled out into the glorious sunlight to meet the surge and swell of life with positive passion. Quests, discoveries, and deeds are now beckoning. Turn the page, and explore the journey of living well.



Paul James

<https://theopportunitytolivewell.wordpress.com/>

Notes

¹ Alistair Cooke, Letter Archive, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00f6hbphttp://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/2rJqRDQsMjPNn8tg2hZVDV/letter-from-america-by-theme>

² Herbie J. Pilato. “Kung Fu, Kung Fu Book of Caine: The Complete Guide to TV s First Mystical Eastern Western” Tuttle Pub. (January 2, 2000)

³ Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (n.d.),
http://www.pagebypagebooks.com/Charles_Dickens/Hard_Times/Book_The_First_Sowing_Chapter_II_Murdering_The_Innocents_p2.html.

⁴ Vera Brittain *Testament of Youth* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2005), 472

⁵ Theodore Roosevelt. "The Man In The Arena," Sorbon, <http://www.theodore-roosevelt.com/images/research/speeches/maninthearena.pdf>.

⁶ Ben's Kombi Life Journey is explored in chapter three.

⁷ Stephen Holden, Dec 20 2006, Movie Review Rocky Balboa, "Return of that Fighter with a Soft Heart inside a Hard Body,"
<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/20/movies/20rock.html> .

CHAPTER ONE

WELLNESS

Variation and choice

Wellness can be defined as a way of life oriented towards optimal health and wellbeing. Achieving this involves the integration of body, mind, and spirit. Ideally, wellness is the optimum state of health and wellbeing that each person is capable of achieving.¹ There are many evidenced-based theories about human health and wellbeing. The basic determinants of wellness include sound nutrition, adequate physical rest, sleep, mental stimulation, and exercise. Due to the variation in biological and psychological capabilities between people, there is no simple formula that universally determines wellbeing. What is a manageable level of stress for one person may overload another.

Living well involves more than applying the recommended practices of nutrition, exercise, and healthcare. How we choose to regulate our lives, habits, dispositions, passions, and pleasures affects our wellbeing and quality of life. A simple example of this is a person who uses drugs² to alleviate stress, anxiety, discomfort, depression, and pain. Drug addiction is not fully resolved by drug substitution or by going “cold turkey.” What is required is the individual understanding themselves, and what is driving their wants, needs, and behaviour.

People can use maladaptive strategies and habits to cope with stress, strains, and challenges of life. Maladaptive behaviours can sometimes have a high price, as was evident with the premature deaths of Michael Jackson and Prince. Everyone is affected by their own dispositions and habits. Awareness of potential harms and risks such as drug taking, lack of exercise, and bad diets will not necessarily prompt a person to change how they live. Everyone needs to be comfortable with their life rather than ill at ease, distressed, or in pain.

We may ask what it is that allows us to continue with well-established dispositions regardless of their impact. It is possible to be wilfully blind to ourselves. Even when the consequences of our behaviour may be apparent,

we may put them out of our mind, or at least make them partly hidden. The challenge of adapting well to life appears to involve investing in ourselves, gaining an awareness and appreciation of our own nature. For it is our own dispositions and personal character that lie behind and drive what we find stressful, calming, inspiring, and pleasurable.

The Freedom to Choose Wisely and to Choose Poorly

Our behavioural repertoire is often automatic, rather than being deliberate or conscious. Nor is our repertoire something that we may consider in a thoroughgoing way, as Salinger did in his famous novel *Catcher in the Rye*. We can be busy doing things, rather than connecting with ourselves in that process. Busyness serves as a kind of existential reassurance, a hedge against emptiness; obviously, one's life cannot possibly be silly or trivial or meaningless if one is busy every hour of the day.

Our freedom in choosing our behavioural repertoire is the freedom to choose wisely or poorly. However, what a less wise repertoire is may not be immediately obvious, particularly for a person who does not have much life experience. Salinger's *The Catcher and the Rye* provides a colourful, insightful, and vivid account of the impact and meaning of our behavioural repertoire on our lives. (If you have not done so previously, it would be a worthwhile investment in living well to read *The Catcher in the Rye* for yourself.) It is a tour de force story revealing the behavioural repertoire of a troubled teenager Holden Caulfield. The story is focused on Holden's behaviour: its effects, his position and his view about it, and his attempts to understand himself and the world.

Holden is an alienated, hard-drinking, chain-smoking teenager who speaks aggressively. He swears frequently, neglects his studies, and is "kicked out" of three preparatory schools. He is smart enough to complete his assigned work but does not bother to put in any effort because he is not interested in school. Holden reveals many valuable things about a person's behavioural repertoire. *The Catcher in the Rye* shows that we should not underestimate the importance of the repertoire that we each follow. In Holden's case his repertoire takes him into a downward spiral that he is partly aware of yet powerless to prevent, and leads to a nervous breakdown.

The Difference between Validity and Value

The Catcher in the Rye squarely faces a major problem—the difference between validity and value. What is valid may not necessarily help a person to live well. Reality can be ugly; there is no getting around that. Holden has developed a perspective that makes people's flaws hyper-visible and magnifies them. Holden focuses on the disingenuousness of others. His revelations are disturbing because of their truth. He zeros in with laser-like precision on the pettiness, vulgarity, banality, and vanity of people. The ugly reality is that the world is full of flawed people. What galls Holden the most is the injustice that he sees. He is angry at hypocrisy and injustice. Holden condemns almost everyone. He describes the headmaster of the school as a “phoney slob.” He also notices the hypocritical way in which the school is run, despite claiming to “mold” students into valuable citizens. The head teacher, Mr Haas, spends more time talking to the wealthier parents. Holden realizes that former pupil, Mr Ossenburger, was invited to speak to pupils at Pencey prep school because he had made a lot of money. Holden describes his roommate Stradlater as “phoney kind of friendly,” a poser, “a secret slob”: good-looking and charming, but with off-putting personal habits and poor hygiene.³ He uses Holden to borrow his things and get his homework done.

Holden sees through People

Holden feels that to survive we kill ourselves inside. It is true that at times people are selfish, vain, and greedy and will tell lies and cheat. For some, it is a constant habit and for others an exception. People can be phoney; false standards abound, and a person who appears to be a “perfect success” may be a complete fraud.

In a world of posh schools and get-ahead ideals, Holden sees through people; he sees the emptiness of their lives. He realizes that they are phoney. As a result, Holden cannot identify himself with them—he would much rather be himself, without pretence, yet he is unable to do this as he is a terrible liar. He is constantly lying and deceiving people. Holden lies all the time. Even during the most ordinary conversations, he lies about either his age or something about his family or even when he is trying to please people around him. As Holden himself says, it is something that seems to be part of himself; he simply does it: “I am the most terrific liar you ever saw in your life.”⁴ When he is on a train, he starts talking to an older woman and pretends to be another person. He tells her that he is

sick: "I have to have this operation ... It is not very serious. I have this tiny little tumor on the brain."⁵

Holden's Repertoire of Confrontation and Rebelliousness

Holden's repertoire of confrontation and rebelliousness does not equip him well. He does not know what to do, where to go, or who to talk to. He has no perspectives, and the hypocrisy of this world only makes him feel down. He is bewildered, lonely, ludicrous, and pitiful: he does not know where he fits in the world, and he does not belong. By maintaining a negative attitude, he excuses himself, in his own mind, from doing anything potentially disappointing—it is all futile and pointless anyway.

Holden's former teacher, Mr Antolini, gives Holden an alternative perspective on his behaviour. Mr Antolini identifies what is wrong with Holden's simplistic black-and-white, hate-the-phoniest attitude. He has a feeling that Holden is "riding for some kind of a terrible, terrible fall." Instead of allowing his frustrations to dictate his life, Mr Antolini suggests that Holden should learn more about others who have experienced similar frustrations. He quotes from Wilhelm Stekel: the mark of the immature man is that he wants to die nobly for a cause, while the mark of the mature man is that he wants to live humbly for one. Antolini provides good advice, but Holden is not receptive to it. He needs to stop thinking that he is better than everyone. He is self-righteous and highly judgmental. He believes that he knows what is best for the world and himself. He is unable to trust others' opinions; he is often confused about his own ideas, and has difficulty liking anything. Even his sister Phoebe criticizes him by saying, "you do not like anything that's happening," frustrated at his inability to understand or develop any solid commitment to anyone, anything, and any place.

People are Worthwhile

Holden is impotent. He is living in a dysfunctional way; his life is monotonous and melancholy. He suffers from extreme apathy. He reacts with indifference about everything, including himself. Holden shows that engaging in the world is brutal, yet it is worthwhile. It is better to be part of a world that is less than hoped for and to accept people as they are, remaining hopeful nonetheless. To see the darkness in the world and to call it out and then travel forward is the ultimate hope.

Living like Holden in an apathetic and hostile way can lead to illness and strip the joy and colour from life. In contrast, the following chapters

provide examples of people living in a positively purposeful way. There are some costs involved in living this way. Both Gough Whitlam and Nelson Mandela, political leaders whose lives and achievements are examined later in this book, had a naïve trust in others. While politics can be a ruthless endeavour, Whitlam could never have imagined that his own appointee, the governor-general, would not have spoken to him before taking the extreme step of removing him from office. Having a strong focus on the goodness of others—indeed, faith in them, despite some evidence to the contrary—led to Whitlam and Mandela being let down. They both had a succession of scandalous ministers. Expecting and focusing on the good in people can extract an unavoidable price. However, despite the disappointments and failures, it is a price worth paying.

How a person relates to others is shaped by their personal character. As Holden shows, if you lie all the time and live in a hostile manner all your relationships will be affected by this behaviour. If you are a helper more than a user, opportunists might use you. Relationships are one of the biggest challenges to living well; it is where those considered to be greats of human history stumble and reveal their personal flaws. Mandela knew all too well his weaknesses as a father and a husband.

The Importance of Habits

Habits are important. Much of the apparent stability of the lives we lead—stability that allows us to dwell within a familiar and reliable world—comes from the habitual nature of our dwelling. Habit is fundamental to how we are constituted and how we produce the structures that give shape to our world. Habits are acquired; they have histories and require repetition to take root, and can undergo constant refinement and change. The sedimentation, the layering of our habits, provides a “world of thoughts” in which our mental operations are distilled and which allows us to count on our acquired concepts and judgments. Yet our acquisition of this world is not absolute; it is always under revision over time, as each experience can lead to a new habit that becomes the foundation for the next. Perceptual, habitual actions can degenerate into rigid automatism. As we mature, we can progressively narrow the scope and variety of our lives. Of all the interests we might pursue, we settle on a few. Of all the people with whom we might associate, we select a small number. We can become caught in a web of fixed relationships. We develop set ways of doing things.

The habits and patterns one enacts in such engagements are the primary ways that individuals carry themselves and encounter things in the

world, and it is thus by those habits that such decisions are made and have effects. Changing habits is certainly possible and often very beneficial, yet it can be quite difficult. When decisions are made to change parts of one's life, these changes do not occur automatically because one has "willed" them; rather, they are willed into being insofar as they are made into new habits. Because habits interact with one another, they build up and develop a network of sorts, and when paired with the fact that they are continuous over time it means that, collectively, their interaction forms certain dispositions—what one might think of as attitudes, outlooks, approaches, or inclinations.

Every habit creates an unconscious expectation. It forms a certain outlook. In developing particular outlooks and expectations, it helps us direct energy into these already-grooved channels by giving stimuli an avenue into which we can make sense of them and through which we can direct our actions according to their needs. If we were to approach new situations without such avenues of perception and understanding, making sense of any new experiences would be a taxing challenge, with so many new variables to account for. In developing these dispositions, we get used to watching out for certain things; for example, given a walk in the woods, a painter might notice more nuances of colour and texture in the landscape, while a chef might associate the taste of certain mushrooms given their aroma. The habits governing these individuals' lives operate differently with similar stimuli, but the sensitivities they have developed also emerge as a matter of habit. What this signals is the fact that the more habits we develop in harmonious interaction with each other, and the more flexibly they can interact with each other and new circumstances, the more likely we are to approach situations with a sense of clarity and purpose.

Habits have the potential to shift and change, to become more flexible and fluid, and it is in this capacity that habits are also a powerful means of self-direction, will, and agency. It is because our selves are constituted by habits that they can change and transform, and since experience is continuous over time, the changes we make have the potential for changing the selves we become in the future. Care of the self is needed to correct the bad habits and false opinions learned from others, and to "unlearn" such habits is an important task of self-cultivation.

A person's habits and character are interrelated. If someone tends to be stingy with money, this will have an impact on how they intellectually and emotionally respond to reality. If a person is stingy, they may wrongly perceive a generous action as excessive or wasteful. A person's character has an effect not only on how they perceive such things, but, when they

seek to become more generous, it will at least initially also feel as if they are wasteful. The flaw in their character skews their perceptions.

Friends of good character can help us overcome self-deception and enable us to see that our character flaws are clouding our judgment. There is the need to avoid sloth, avarice, narcissism, and unchecked hedonism. A good, trustworthy friend can come alongside us and help us realise that the generous action is, in fact, generous and not wasteful as we might feel or think. A friend can help us see both the strengths and weaknesses of our own character. Of course, we can and should be a good friend and also help others in their quest for self-knowledge, virtue, and true happiness. Having good friends gives us a better chance at acquiring self-knowledge and being truly happy. Robust friendships are precious. They involve an exchange of mutual concern and generosity, support, mirth, and shared efforts in understanding meanings of ourselves and aspects of the world.

Good character is cultivated through habit. The relation between choices and the resulting character can become gradually less obvious to the person concerned. Consider, for example, Walter White, the lead actor in the *Breaking Bad* television series. He is a high-school chemistry teacher who begins to cook methamphetamine when he is diagnosed with an aggressive and terminal cancer. A considerate father, he makes this change so he can ensure his family is provided for in the face of his imminent death. During the show, Walter changes from a self-sacrificing husband and father into an anti-hero.

Even after his cancer proves beatable, Walter finds himself unable to return to his former life; he is smitten by the power and excitement of being a meth kingpin. He deceives his loved ones and engages in repugnant acts characteristic of the meth trade. His choice to become a drug dealer reforms his character. Manipulative and reckless behaviours that were once unthinkable become his *modus operandi*. His previous virtuous motivations are eventually overtaken by the new priorities of a drug dealer, primarily those of getting and retaining power. He did not enter the drug trade to become a murderer and a liar, and the progress toward these outcomes was not obvious as they were occurring. Each decision he made seemed reasonable to him at the time he made it, but over time, they each contributed to a re-sedimentation of the habitual structures of his character until he was a vastly different person from the mild-mannered middle-class father. He fails to anticipate the impact that his cumulative choices have on his overall character. This kind of moral decline is something that takes place when a person does not adequately anticipate the mechanisms of sedimentation of ethical subjectivity that result from action. Individual choices to him seem

isolated and freely chosen, and yet they work to narrow his field of vision and the scope of his action. They alter the “lay of the land” of the person’s ethical life. Walter is a person who fails to anticipate the toll that a series of individual choices have on his character.

Our perceptual habits similarly demonstrate our ability to make our world ours by stylizing it to correspond to our projects. Our habits shape the meanings that define our world and our style of dwelling within it. Looking at habit is like seeing the sedimentation of our world. Our perceptual habits make the world what it is for us. Habit brings us the world that acts upon us by offering us a field of values, feasibilities, and limitations when we act upon it. The world that habit gives us is not absolute, and its pliability is something that we can exploit in the interest of our own ethical formation. Ethically toxic habits can be expunged. The ways we habitually relate to the world influence our character. Therefore, it is important that we examine how our habitual ways of thinking and doing might be leading us towards or away from our ethical ideals. This is exactly what Nelson Mandela did, and this is explored in chapter six. There is a clear connection between habits, character, and virtue for flourishing as a human being; we cannot live well if we lack good character, and for good character we must have good habits.

Most people do not adhere to a moral maxim or rational calculations in how they live. Their behaviour is more the result of habits, so the particular habits they cultivate are important. If we want a good life we must do good things, repeatedly, becoming habituated to those kinds of behaviours, as is shown in the following account of the experiences of Bill, John, and Don. Habituation is not simply a matter of repetitively actualizing an action to the point of automaticity—this is not just “following orders” out of fear of retribution but the development of affinities, of affective vectors that pull us towards the right things. In this endeavour, there is something to be said for seeking out the good in people—not just for their good company but also for their watchful nature, to check and draw forth the good in ourselves. Since our self is not always transparent to ourselves, friends can show us and help us to better see it. Friends come to know us so well that sometimes they can see our real intentions or reasons better than we can.

To Thine Own Self Be True

Each person faces the challenge of finding how to relate to the world and achieving integrity. The phrase “to thine own self be true”⁶ identifies the importance of knowing ourselves and making wholehearted efforts to

make our lives our own. There can be costs involved in not going along with the herd and merely following other people. When we look at the longer term we can see, as the chapter about Gough Whitlam and Nelson Mandela demonstrates, that having the courage to follow one's heart and intuition can lead to a life that is well lived. Indeed, human creativity, passion, and inspiration can provide a way to navigate through the bleakest, darkest, and most difficult conditions. As Robert Frost writes:⁷

There is our wildest mount—a headless horse
 However, though it runs unbridled off its course,
 Moreover, all our blandishments would seem defied,
 We have ideas, yet we have not tried.

As the film *The Field of Dreams* ably shows, there is great courage in the idea “If you build it, he will come.” In other words, what you believe and enact can become a reality if we pursue them with purpose and vigour, as in Tennyson's *Ulysses*:

I am a part of all that I have met;
 ...
 Tho' much is taken, much abides; ...
 ... that which we are, we are—
 ...
 One equal temper of heroic hearts
 ...
 ... strong in will
 To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.⁸

Find Something You Love

The aim of life is to live and to live means to be aware, joyously, drunkenly, serenely, divinely aware.⁹

It is not always easy to see the full importance and value of what you pursue at the time. When looking backwards the meaning and contribution of your pursuits can be seen much more clearly, as in the following account of three friends. Their shared passions, skills, and friendship shaped their life philosophies and played an important role in their living well.

Bill, John, and Don attended the same school. Their childhood education occurred against the backdrop of the Second World War. They

spent time together in John's shed repairing and maintaining their bicycles and anything else that was mechanical or electrical. As they began riding motorbikes, the focus shifted to repairing them at Bill's father's garage. This was a time for cooperation and collaboration.

The three young men gained an appreciation of tools and a love of the means by which they could achieve their ends. Here in their practice of craft they recognized that the work process could be beautiful, like a dance. An excellent craftsman at work on a pot or a cabinet engages in a beautiful process that eventuates in a beautiful and useful object. It is a pleasure to watch them work. Looking appreciatively one can see the way the wood curls and the way metal bends.

Some assume that working with one's hands implies a lack of ability in using one's mind. Bill, John, and Don found joy in harnessing the power of their hands, for the hands can sense, reveal, and allow us to feel, hold, weigh, and judge things. The hands can be educative. The fingertips can access other truths. People can touch objects in order to understand them better. Proactive, probing touch without conscious intent, as when the fingers search for some particular spot on an object, stimulates the brain to start thinking. Working with the hands can make us more present in ourselves and the world around us. Hand tools can involve us intimately in what we are doing; they connect us to the world.

Becoming mechanically minded is not just about being able to use tools with dexterity but also being able to perceive and assess what matters. Bill, John, and Don's hands-on approach developed a sympathy with their bikes, allowing them to become attuned to the squeaks, rattles, clunks, and discordances in their operations. Not only were manual skills required but so was the exercise of intelligence.

Bill, John, and Don came to recognize that the most important aspect of maintenance is caring about what one is doing. Indeed, caring about what one is doing can drive an increased understanding of one's actions. This leads to the artisan virtue (or excellence) where the mastery of technique is virtually indistinguishable from the person commanding it.

A True North, a Compass

To carefully disassemble parts and lay them out in order, sip on beer, and banter among themselves was bliss for Bill, John, and Don. For this was to be involved in "the pursuit of excellence" rather than the drudgery of mechanical maintenance. They were doing work, sometimes challenging and dirty, just as if they were working for an employer. This was an excellent time as it involved loving what one is doing and could serve as a

true north, a compass to guide them. Days of “keen endeavour” (as John said) would never be mundane and melancholy. Rather, garage days were industrious, effective, and joyous.

Rather like advocating Aristotle’s “golden mean,” John may speak for the three in seeking to avoid delusions of grandeur, yet not back away from doing things in a way that speaks authentically about themselves. This is beautifully encapsulated in the phrase “what you do, what you create.” It is a portrait of oneself.

Being tasked to complete the backbreaking scrubbing of floors or, as seen in the film *Karate Kid*, endless painting, is not just about developing competence but endeavouring to foster a particular kind of attitude, in particular to exercise humility in whatever we do. It is easy for false pride, egocentrism, and narcissism to get in the way of genuine learning and development. The disposition required is the focusing on excellence rather than self-promotion. Wary of cutting corners, the artisan has the patience to produce things the right way.

Bill, John, and Don’s experiences show that we can shape our attitude to what we do. This attitude can be positive, passionate, and steadfast. One of John’s sayings is: “Everyone should have a ball.” This was not advocating a lazy, slothful, hedonistic life, but recognizing that life could be hard, but what we bring to it—our attitude, interest, energy, and passion—can realize joy. The idea that John refers to as “keen endeavour” is not just doing some work to get something done, whether paid or not, but, as the word “keen” resonates, it is about the attitude one has. When we think about a master, say a master artisan who is passing on their craft to another, it is not just about technique but also fostering a conducive attitude. The poet Kahlil Gibran explains this eloquently when he writes about working with love:

to weave the cloth with threads drawn from your heart, even as if your beloved were to wear that cloth. It is to build a house with affection, even as if your beloved were to dwell in that house. It is to sow seeds with tenderness and reap the harvest with joy, even as if your beloved were to eat the fruit. It is to charge all things you fashion with a breath of your own spirit.¹⁰

As Kahlil identifies, if you bake bread with indifference, you bake bitter bread that feeds half a person’s hunger. This also applies to making music. All the techniques, skills, and practice in the world produce the same result as making music with joy. Beniamino Gigli’s love of singing was expressed in a hauntingly beautiful tenor voice, and emotions were

rendered so substantially that they seemed to etch the air. He touched the soul as well as the heart. You do not need to be a musical expert to recognize the sincerity and sublime joy in his singing. As Nigel Douglas writes, every phrase Gigli sang was delivered as if it was of gigantic importance to him.¹¹ Memories of a concert he gave long ago where recalled:

Throughout the afternoon and evening they came winding down from the hills, hundreds and then thousands of people from the surrounding countryside, and when Gigli had at last finished singing to them they stood outside his hotel calling for him “as if he were a king.” He went out onto the balcony. It was a sight none of us will ever forget. The people stood so close together that you could only see their raised faces—thousands of them—white in the moonlight. Then he flung out his arms to them and began to sing again, his voice as beautiful, perfect, and seemingly as untired as ever.¹²

A Slice of Magic in Bringing Old Equipment Back to Life

Since they had a lot of still-usable equipment, particularly electronic equipment dumped at the close of the war, Bill, John, and Don developed an interest in bringing it back to life, sometimes in novel ways. It can be a slice of magic to do this. Imagine hearing an engine that that has not made a sound in decades roar into life. There can be a kind of wholesomeness in returning equipment to service. Instead of seeing just fault or weakness, the three friends’ positive perspective fostered and identified enhancements or improvements. This is developing an eye as to how we can make something better. This is an invaluable life philosophy and one that can be of great benefit in completing work during our lives. With an engineer’s outlook, Bill, John, and Don sought, where they could, to make life better with engineering solutions.

The Need for Wonder

Bill, John, and Don shared an inquiring mind and a willingness to experiment, to create things for themselves. Now, in 2017, with such considerable advances in technology, electronics has become ubiquitous rather than special, and we need to take ourselves back to a different place, time, and experience to appreciate what Bill, John, and Don achieved in the pioneering days of electronics. Few nowadays will have the mind that will allow them to experience the wonder of a crystal set. Wonder comes from the heart, not just the head; it is the recognition and appreciation that