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Be Humble

Be humble. Ponder your moment—your location in time. There are things that abide forever; and there are things that last for a limited period. The things that abide forever we call *essence*; the things that last for a limited period we call *existence*.

We human beings are in the second category. We exist: we think that because we exist—because we are aware that we exist—we are the heart, the center, the purpose of all things. But we tend to forget that existence isn't all there is. We are missing something: something important, something vital. Existence is not the same as essence. Existence is subject to change and decay—and death. Essence isn't. Yes, we do indeed exist, and that is precious, and remarkable, and the basis of all the joys of life. But we are not essences: we are not eternal, ineradicable, perma-

ment. We are not essential. We are simply existential. There is, without us. Take us away and there still is. We are contingent—our being depends on the existence of others. We crave independence, but it is an illusion, a fantasy: we never could be, never shall be, independent, and there would be no joy in being so. The longing for independence is the aspiration to be an essence: the secret of happiness is to learn instead to exist.

Once we relax, and cease trying to be an essence—*the* essence—and only then, can we begin to enjoy the fact that we exist. It's said there are three answers to every question: "yes," "no," and "it depends"—and the answer is nearly always "it depends," because you can arrive at the clarity and simplicity of "yes" or "no" only by excluding all additional information. But that additional information is what makes up the stuff of life—relationship, context, history, possibility, likelihood, surprise, accident. To exist is to depend—to be contingent—to be part of that additional information. We're never in the clear. We're always subject to unforeseen circumstances, liable to unexpected alterations, inclined to unpredictable out-

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comes. The question is not, “How can we not depend?” The real question is, “How can we depend on the right things?” In existence, there’s no such thing as certainty. The opposite of chance isn’t certainty: it’s trust. Life isn’t about excluding chance and establishing certainty: it’s about identifying what, whom, and how to trust.

Why are we here? Not because we chose to be. How did our existence come about? Not because it was essential. We exist—everything exists—because the essence of things, of all things, in the depths of its mysteries, brought into being something that was not essential, something that was not like itself, but something . . . else. It need not have been so. There is no inevitable explanation why it was, and is, so. But so it is. We are part of that “else.” We are not the original “something.” We don’t know if we’re the center of that “else,” or the purpose of that “else,” but on the scientific and historical evidence, it seems unlikely. We don’t know whether that “else” might be viable or even better off without us, but it seems more than probable. So we’re not just inessential to essence—we’re not even existential to existence. Existing is not about establishing and conforming to what must be

so—it's about enjoying the precarious discovery that nothing must be so.

Existence very capably regenerates and reproduces itself. But existence as a *whole* cannot generate itself. If there is indeed existence, of which we are a part, though not an inevitable part (and there must be existence, otherwise how could this interaction of writing and reading be taking place?), then there must be essence—unchanging, without decay, not subject to death—above and beyond that existence, bringing it about, sustaining it, replenishing it, and abiding after it is gone. But we have no direct, unmistakable, and incontrovertible access from our realm of existence to that sphere of essence. Which is why identifying the nature of that essence (and even asserting the very foundational quality of that essence) will always be controversial and disputed; and which is also why there will always be a temptation to elevate some or all characteristics of existence to the level of essence. Sometimes we get exasperated and seek at least some firm ground given that essence is so impenetrable. Sometimes we proudly assume that the highest glories of existence need not (or could not) be surpassed. But this

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is to deny the character of existence: for it is part of the nature of existence never to be able to be certain about essence.

There could have been no existence. There could have been nothing. Perhaps there was, for an almost infinite period—a period that can't be measured in time, because time is a characteristic of existence. To say there could have been—may even yet be—nothing is not to deny that there is an essence. We assume there must be an essence because something must have brought about and must sustain and replenish and will surely abide beyond existence. But there could have been nothing beyond essence. That, in fact, would seem more likely. This is where humility begins: with the recognition that it would have been simpler, more plausible, less troublesome, tidier for there to have been no existence; in practice, nothing. Yet despite that more sanguine eventuality, here we are. A twinkle in the imagination of essence maybe, but existing nonetheless. Humility is founded on the realization that it would have been much more probable that we would not have existed: and it is only some balance between chance and love that has made it otherwise. Establishing the degree of that

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balance between chance and love is the process of discovering truth.

To begin to wonder is to settle on what it could possibly have been that induced essence to conceive, trigger, initiate, or imagine existence. Wonder is the capacity to appreciate that it might not have been so, that it might yet have been very different, that it might not be so for much longer or ever again—but it still, nonetheless, is. Awe is the inclination to perceive the depth, texture, dimensions, and extent of the attention, care, wisdom, and delight—yet also the grief, loss, longing, and disappointment—that underpin the inception of existence, the transition from eternity to time, from boundlessness to circumscription, from the elusive and immortal to the tangible and fragile. Gratitude is apprehension that this balance of chance and love has brought about every ingredient of the circumstances that brought me into existence, that there is nothing whatsoever for which I can claim the credit, that it is all entirely gift, that I shall never be able to discharge my consequent debt, and that I must therefore remain suspended in dumbfounded astonishment and delirious reverence. Humility is that hallowed clearing in the forest

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of existence where wonder, awe, and gratitude meet, dance, play, and exult.

For essence to issue in existence requires a constellation of instigation and withdrawal, of sustained intention that yet refrains from control, of meticulous direction and yet relaxed permission. Most of all, it requires risk—risk that things may unravel, sour, hurt, distort, and need sacrificial attention and utter devotion to be drawn back toward glory. Ponder this: what is the name we give to this constellation, to this foundational yet reckless risk without which there is nothing? The name we give is love. Love isn't the afterthought, a sentimental alternative to the harshness of time and chance, conflict and death; love is the beginning, the cause, the formula for what makes essence issue in existence, the imagination that translates “maybe” into “be.” Love is the pivot around which the circle of life rotates. Love is not simply a gallant protest against the ravages of loss, poison, decay, violence, isolation; it is the assertion, reassertion, primal surfacing of the original cause and ultimate purpose of existence.

Love and chance aren't opposites. It's not that existence is caused by either random explosion or

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purposive creation; the process by which essence issues in existence, the constellation of determining yet allowing, directing yet involving—the process of love—is one in which chance is incorporated into reason. Love is not about control; it is precisely the willingness, the urge, the resolve to wait in attentive patience with that other that tantalizingly fails to fulfill desires and expectations or excruciatingly intends to subvert kindness and benevolence. The creativity and improvisation of the coming-into-being of existence thus assumes chance within the panoply of love. Evolution tells us that existence is perpetuated through the impulse to survive and the haphazard pattern of mutation; but love is always a constant process of improvisation to incorporate and of adaptation to accommodate the unexpected, uncharacteristic, and sometimes unwelcome. Sooner or later any kind of love faces the fact that it must renounce control.

More profitable than to sift the ocean of chance for sparkling glints of love is to contemplate the myriad moments when the chain of being could have snapped such that your life would never have been. In perhaps every generation a life could have gone

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a different direction, been prematurely foreshortened perhaps; the two lives from which each of your ancestors were conceived might never have crossed paths, been drawn together, been fertile in conceiving those whose birth eventually led to the moment you began. Reaching back to the mists of origin, before humans took shape, the stepladder of your prehistory might at any moment have come loose and in so doing snatched away the possibility of your existence. And so for us all. Reflect on how many of your ancestors clung to life to the point where they could conceive the one whose birth eventually led to yours. Realize by how fragile a thread their existence hung, and behold how the miracle of your birth is made up of a concatenation of other such miracles. Your existence is a thing most wonderful: almost too wonderful to be.

Your parents crystallize the marvel of your existence. You did not choose to exist; you did not even consent. You did not select your parents; you cannot begin to imagine the infinitesimal improbability of their union, and of that union conceiving you. You may discern their uniqueness; you are doubtless familiar with their ordinariness. You are perhaps best

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placed to perceive their fallibility. You may owe as much to their nourishing and saving you in your upbringing as you do to the careful or clumsy way they engendered you. Regardless of their perfections or fragilities, simply accept that you would not exist without them. They may be to blame for much; but without them you would not be alive to apportion such blame. To honor your parents is to recall daily that your existence was not of your making and its purpose is never simply of your determining.

Be humble. Because you depend. You depend on whatever it was that made essence issue in existence. You are part of that “else” that means there is more than simply something. You are part of that existence that is less plausible than there simply being nothing—that has no necessity. You hang by a fragile thread that traces back through countless generations, each one of which is, in its way, precarious and unlikely and remarkable and miraculous. You remain in unquenchable debt to a balance of love and chance that are not opposites but deeply involve each other. Each of these contingencies is focused in the mystery, mundanity, and miracle of your parents. And to nav-

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igate this life you need not the knowledge of necessity, the conviction of certainty, or the assumption of entitlement, but the establishment, cultivation, and restoration of trust.