

A Life Wasted Trying to Be Good

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Cecil: Dear James, so I have thought through this email a few times. I would like to keep it short. I got into the idea of enlightenment a while back and now after a few years all I feel is like I missed out on life. I went through some event that changed my perspective a few times, but now in the end I feel like my life was a waste. I see my cousin's daughter growing up and I'm so afraid about how men will treat her, but I probably wouldn't care if I had been like the other guys instead of being religious. I have grown sad because I feel like nothing really matters, like there is no right of wrong, just one's perception, but I can't change my perception. And I can't change my feeling of jealousy towards other people for having done the things that makes it easier to not care what others do, but I feel now like I'm too old to try and do it all. I would go on but it is just too long of a story, my life is.

To put it into perspective, I don't want to keep going on, because I feel like I already missed the best part. I can't go back and redo anything. I really just want this shit to end so I can try again, but there is no "try again." I don't really believe in reincarnation. If we are all sharing the same awareness then when you die that's it and life goes on. Life goes on but Cecil (me) doesn't reincarnate into someone else, just awareness continues. And it makes me sad because I feel like my life was a waste, like it doesn't have anything to be proud of in it. It had potential but in my effort to be a good person I forgot to live. I feel like God doesn't love me, because my life did not have anything I wanted in it, no accomplishment I wanted happened, and other lives are more interesting. I feel like my life will be the example of what not to do. And I want to feel like I matter, like life loves me too. I like myself and I want to feel like my life was worth living, but all the best stuff is, like, over. I cry sometimes because I want to fit into life and I feel like I don't. I just feel like I missed it and I don't know how to change. I don't know how else to say it. I just want to know how to look at life so I can accept it, because right now I can't. I just want to love life again and right now I just want it to end.

James: Hi, Cecil. I don't really know where to begin, because it seems to me that you have convinced yourself that you are no good and that you can't change. But you did indicate at the end of your email that you "just want to know how to look at life" so you can accept it. So at least you realize that the way you are seeing it is faulty. Maybe I can help you with that. As you mention, life is what you perceive it to be. So my question is: Why do you see it this way? What values are causing you to interpret life this way? One of the keys, I think, to your negative state of mind can be found in your statement "no accomplishment that I wanted happened." Why should you get what you want? What you want is up to you, but what you get is up to God. There are tons of things that I wanted and did not get, but it does not bother me. I figured I was stupid for wanting the wrong things. So I took it as a blessing that I didn't get what I wanted. God saved me from what I wanted. Praise the Lord.

So if you did not get what you want, it is probably that what you wanted is not what you actually need spiritually. I should think that you would want to see things differently, since you can change your view – if you really want to. I don't know how far gone you are, but very often people get a perverse pleasure out of feeling worthless. We had an old family friend – a very rich and

religious person – who always felt “rotten,” to use his word. And I eventually realized that he somehow took pleasure in feeling this way. I don’t know why, because I have a completely different nature. I always feel good, even when I should feel bad. Maybe he identified with Christ. His ideal – Jesus – suffered, why shouldn’t he? Maybe he thought it was virtuous to suffer. It is beyond me.

But I don’t know how you can change the way you see things if you believe that you can’t change. It is true you can’t change – nobody can change, because the self is immutable – but you can change the way you view life. When you view it through your desire and fears it will never be acceptable. You need another platform from which to look at things. You need to discover your intrinsic worth – which has nothing to do with whether you are a good person or not. Some very bad people love themselves completely. I found your statement that you wasted your life trying to be good very interesting. In fact I got a bit of a laugh out of it. I agree with you completely. It is a waste trying to be good, actually, because as God made you, you are good. This is something you need to investigate. It think you have drawn the wrong conclusion about who you are. I think for some reason – probably because you did not get what you wanted in life – you have blamed yourself when what you get has nothing to do with you at all. You might blame yourself for wanting the wrong things, but that is a different case. Everyone wants the wrong things at some point. The road to happiness begins when you see that your values are not the right values for you.

I think the basic problem is that you trust bad feelings, that you identify with them. You take them seriously. There is a reason they are there, but they are not actually statements that you are a failure in life. They are just symptoms of your lack of self-appreciation. You say, “I like myself,” and in the next breath you say, “I want to feel like my life was worth living,” so there is some kind of inner conflict going on for sure. When you see that you are good by nature, that as you are created you are just fine – without having to do one darn thing – then there is no room for bad feelings. The source of these feelings needs to be uncovered. To repeat, I say they are not there because you did not get what you want in life – which seems to be recognition from the world for some kind of accomplishment – but that they are there because you have made a mistake about your true nature. You mention that you are a religious person, and I assume you mean a Christian, but your name seems to suggest that maybe you are Jew, but it really doesn’t matter, because both Jews and Christians bought into that “sin” business from the get-go. You were told that you were bad and that to make things right you had to be good. And no matter how much good you did, it did not get rid of the feeling that you are bad. Do-gooders, seekers of virtue, always feel bad underneath, even the ones with happy faces. They are trying to correct this bad feeling. But it doesn’t work, because every good action just reinforces the belief that motivated the good action in the first place. As I mentioned above, you cannot “be” good, because you are not bad. So what the sages say is that you need to see if it is true that there is something wrong with you. You need to really investigate yourself.

You should reject the dumb things that your parents and religion and society says about who you are and have a good look at who you really are. You will not find a bad person. You should not trust this feeling. This letter is just one big bad feeling. It is an existential depression, what they call the “dark night of the soul.” It is all ridiculous, actually. Look around you. See how beautifully constructed life is. See yourself as part of it, no more or less important than a tree or a lovely child. The glass is not half empty, Cecil. It is half full. In fact is it full to the brim – and so are you. So stop feeling sorry for yourself and take a fresh look at yourself. You will find something to like for sure.

Aside from trusting bad feelings, there is one more problem you have. You compare your self to others. This is wrong. Who you are has nothing to do with anyone else. You should compare yourself to yourself. But you should not use religion's or society's values to make the comparison. You should use the results of a serious self-investigation to make your determination. The scriptures of Vedanta say that you are whole and complete, pure and perfect. They say that you are not a doer, that you do not have to do one damn thing to be good. They say goodness is the nature of all beings. Even if you can't see it, it is something that it behooves you to accept rather than the negative, self-defeating view of human nature that Western religions propagate.

And finally, if it is true that you are a miserable worm, look on the bright side. As you say, your life can be a great inspiration to others – how not to live. I will mention it again because I really liked your statement that you forgot to live because you were too busy trying to be good. If you wrote a book showing how you came to that conclusion, you would be rich and famous. Most of the so-called virtue out there is the self-serving, shallow virtue of people who are afraid to be bad. I am not suggesting that you should set out to contravene universal values – not at all – only that a person is bad because he or she does had not discovered his or her innate goodness. Probably in your case you lived a moral life, but you still feel bad about yourself. So it is simply a matter of an incorrect self-evaluation.

Anyway, I hope I was not too strong with you, Cecil, but I think you need a good knock upside the head. Call it tough love. I hate to hear people talk like this about themselves because I never met a “failed person.” As Christ said, “Hate the sin, not the sinner.” Why? Because the so-called sinner is actually God in disguise, God dressed up like a fool. So strip away these bad feelings – they are just feelings, nothing more – and undress yourself. See your own beauty.

Cecil: Hello again, James. You know, it's funny. After reading your email I thought about my life as an example of how not to live. I suddenly became really defensive of my life and my choices. I have really done a lot in life and I was probably better off not doing those things I didn't do during my religious years, considering my upbringing. I actually had a good life until I started comparing myself to others. Things were pretty good, but then nothing much happened and I felt like I was missing out on something, and so I got negative.

Also, I had an experience that catapulted me back to a time when I was younger and I realized I never really got over that loss. Anyway, I hate it that I was not being appreciative of my life before your letter woke me up, because it has actually been blessed. I got off track because I was comparing myself to others and I had a fear of failing. And now I want to go back to the way I was before I felt this way. Actually, I really did get a lot of what I wanted and maybe that spoiled me. Or maybe what made me negative was the realization that there are some things I will never get. Anyway, I have been going backwards spiritually the last year or so.

I remember well the feeling when I was 18 that Christianity lacked the whole truth, so I let go of the parts of it that didn't work for me. I was standing on the corner and I felt like I loved everyone. I felt like I actually loved God and wasn't just saying it. And I also wasn't afraid to go to hell, because how could God send this feeling of love that made me change my whole belief system to hell? So I started partying my ass off... sex, drugs and rock and roll... but I couldn't bring myself to do people dirty just to get sex or money. I lived pretty hard and I was having fun. I felt like I could do anything. For years it was like that. In the last few years I have been trying to be like everyone else, but I can see that isn't right. I used to help people be themselves. I don't know

exactly when “I” got lost.

I’m thankful for your email. It helped square me away. I forgot about what I wanted and I started listening to people tell me what I can’t do. I guess people think that because they feel old I should also feel old. Actually, I’m 30 years old and I look 24, so life isn’t over yet. I just need to make sure I keep doing what is in my heart and not what people tell me I should be. Thank you for listening and caring.

I want your opinion. When I was 25 a friend of mine gave me *The Book of Secrets* by Osho. I remember being amazed because here is this guy expressing what I am I’m thinking about life. But I also felt like it was a waste to get caught up reading it because it was where I was at ten years before. But I didn’t stop chasing things. I didn’t want to miss out on anything. From my study of Eastern religions I could see that there really isn’t anything to get here. But I am left with the feeling that if I feel that I can do anything, that is enough, right? Anyway, I feel like should abandon the whole meditation thing because it isn’t doing anything for me. Or maybe I’m doing something wrong now.

I was out for a drive and I realized my self, you might say. I realized that it is not really what you do. It is who you are. If you like who you are, you will like what you do. And if you don’t like yourself, you won’t like your life. You will always be worried about things you should not worry about. I was trying to change myself to fit in and compete and I do not like what I was becoming. So I had to kill that new guy because he was cramping my style. And may he burn in hell because he sucked and made my whole life miserable.

Thanks again for listening. I don’t have a lot of people to talk to about this sort of thing. I would have to disguise anything spiritual that is going on, and luckily in the world of Christianity that’s pretty easy.

James: Hi, Cecil. I’m glad my email had a positive effect. Spiritual life is ninety-five percent attitude. If you want to count yourself among the righteous people, you have to look on the bright side, not always on the negative: what you lost, what can go wrong, what you may not get. It is amazing how people who actually have no problems, in fact who have great lives, can ignore the blessings God has showered on them and just look at the negative. I think you will come out of this negative period. If you have that feeling that you can do anything, that is enough. That is the truth. I’m an old geezer and I meet people my age every day who have “done the right thing.” They are good people and worked hard and they have everything – health, financial security, friends, etc. – and yet they consistently worry about the dumbest things. Many of these people have been abroad to third-world countries and know what real suffering actually looks like and instead of counting their blessings, they are all caught up in useless worries – when they know better. They often think they are loving, caring people, but in fact they are just vain – all caught up in their bad feelings. They may care about the world and their friends but they don’t care about their own minds. They go to church or do some spiritual things but nothing works. It is almost impossible for these people to change because they have thought so many bad thoughts for so long all their spiritual power has been used up. You are still young, so you can avoid this trap. I agree that you should give up meditation and being spiritual or religious or whatever it is. I think you should just examine your mind all the time and see that it is going down the right path. Look around you and see how beautiful this world is and what a great gift life is. And when you mind tells you otherwise, tell it to shut up. Let me know from time to time how you are getting on.

~ Love, James