

work that you care about, devoting yourself to a good cause — and at the same time allowing yourself to be constantly touched, intrigued, challenged, inspired, and surprised by how that choice is manifested and expressed in the hurly-burly and the humdrum of everyday life.

I don't believe that there is such a thing as "the right way" or "the only way," to live. However, I do think there's a whole lot more to give to life than simply trying to get through it. Just as we may breathe, eat, walk, sleep, do sex, watch a movie, go to work and clean the house joylessly, we can learn to do all of those things in ways that enhance and enrich life. Why bother? Because of all the things it's possible to do with life — besides getting through it, you can also explain it, search for the "meaning" of it, avoid it or spend it dreading the moment when it will be over — what makes the most sense to me is to live it, as joyously as you can. Which means giving your all to it, whatever you have, all of the time.

What's the idea?

As human beings we do not merely live. For at least the last 2,500 years, we've been reflecting on our life process as we engage in it; that is, human beings produce ideas out of our material existence — our life activity. It's unlikely that we would have been doing so from the moment human life began, about a million years ago, since our species not only evolves but (unlike any other) develops. Over the millennia, however, what it is to be human has come to be inseparable from our extraordinary gift — which no other species appears (of course, from *our* point of view) to possess — for self-consciousness and the creation of ideas.

The ideas that we derive from life take many, many different forms: representations, theories, judgments, interpreta-

tions, analyses, dreams, categories, models, values. Art, science, religion, philosophy, myth, and law are a few of the names we give to the various kinds of ideas people invent. No society regards every kind of idea as being equivalent in worth to every other; for about the last 300 years in Western culture, ideas that attain the status of "science" are placed higher in the hierarchy of ideas than those labeled "art," or "religion." Moreover, ideas — like other human inventions — have histories; some which started out as "scientific theories" were later reduced to the level of "superstition" or "prejudice," while others that first appeared as "science fiction" (an art form) eventually became "scientific facts."

Humanity's most splendid achievements — everything from the sculpture of Benin, the poetry of Tu Fu and Mozart's sonatas to the printing press, antibiotics, the fuel-driven engine and the legal presumption of innocence — are the results, in part, of our capacity to produce ideas. At the same time the manipulation of that unique human capacity has resulted in some very terrible products — genocide, slavery, war, racism, sexism, exploitation, and oppression among them. No other species can claim to have created anything remotely comparable to the music of Charlie Parker or Ludwig van Beethoven, and no other species need acknowledge enormities such as the burning of "witches" at the stake. Neither the grandeur nor the baseness is more, or less, human than the other; we are capable of, and responsible for, both.

It is our remarkable capacity to create ideas which gives rise to idealism. I am not using the word *idealism*, as it is frequently used, to mean the "naivete" typically associated with people who are called "do-gooders" and "dreamers" (to distinguish them from those who are said to be "cynics"). Nor am I referring simply to the philosophical perspective known as

"Idealism." Rather, I am speaking of idealism as a normal habit of day to day life in our society. Itself an extremely powerful idea in Western culture, reaching into the most remote corners of human experience, idealism is the attitude that attributes to ideas a privileged status; the everyday idealist regards ideas not as human inventions produced from the raw material of the life process, but as Things that are independent of, prior to, and more fundamental (more real, more important, more valuable) — in a word, *larger* — than life.

In other words, idealism is a way of being in the world which mistakenly takes the illusion that appears in the societal mirrors to be all that there is; idealism "forgets" the activity — the performance on the stage of history — that ideas merely reflect in a particular light. In contemporary culture this substitution of the image for the imagining, which is part of the historical practice of life, has come to dominate how we are and how we see ourselves as well as everything else.

The school psychologist tells Mr. and Mrs. D. that their seven-year-old son is hyperactive, suffers from low self-esteem and attention deficit disorder, and has a borderline IQ.

Eric feels humiliated when his wife receives a promotion that comes with a higher salary than he earns.

Margaret wishes she could find a bathing suit that will conceal her fat thighs.

Mrs. F. disapproves of the fact that her son and daughter-in-law take separate vacations.

Jack is disappointed because the woman he hopes to marry doesn't want to have children.

Sharon believes that if her former fiance had really loved her he wouldn't have had an affair with another woman.

Pauline says that at 70 she is too old to travel.

Ron knows that the reason he hits his children when he's had too much to drink is that his father was an alcoholic who was often abusive to his family.

Lorraine, Ron's wife, understands that she tolerates his behavior because she has a dependency problem of her own.

These are among the myriad commonplace forms that idealism takes. In such situations and countless others, most of us allow ourselves to be ruled by culturally/historically produced but now disembodied ideas: labels; judgments about what is right, beautiful, good, normal, and true; assumptions; explanations; knowledge. It is not merely that we believe, devoutly and as a matter of course, in this or that idea. Idealizing — labeling, judging, assuming, explaining, knowing — becomes how we organize our relationship to life; we distance ourselves from the process, the creative activity, of performing in history, devoting our energy instead to having ideas (judgments, assumptions, knowledge) about it; we forget where these ideas come from. This systematic misuse of our marvelous capacity for self-consciousness is the source of much emotional pain in our culture.

It's as if a great artist were to abandon the love of his life because he has become infatuated with the beautiful portrait he himself painted of her. A tragedy? An absurdity? An act of madness? Yes, all of those...and yet not altogether uncommon, incomprehensible, or even surprising. For our gift of self-consciousness — the human capacity to create ideas from life and in doing so to go "beyond" ourselves — carries with it the potential for deadly and deadening idealism.

As very young children, human beings learn all kinds of things. In doing so we learn, also, that we are learners and that

we are learning. And we learn that there are things to be learned. In learning our ABC's, for example, we also learn that we are learning the letters of the alphabet and that there is such a thing as the alphabet to be learned.

That we come to perceive the processes we're involved in is, I believe, what makes human speech possible. Remember the very young child, just learning to speak, making noises to which older children and adults respond? The baby babbles, other people talk back to and with the little one — and in this social activity, this *relational* form of life, a moment arrives when it dawns on the child that he or she is making noises, something which turns out to be...speaking! That is, the child's noises emerge into speech simultaneously with the emergence of self-consciousness, through the process of participating with other human beings in the social activity that is speaking.

In this environment, as very young children we discover ourselves in the moment that we see ourselves to be doing a quite wonderful thing; we learn, "in retrospect," that we've been asking for a cookie, saying bye-bye, announcing that it's time to go to the potty, telling other people who we are and where we live and that we're sorry.

What we "naturally" infer, in our essentially dualistic culture, is that if we learned something then there must be (or must have been) something that we learned — that is, some *thing* "out there" to which the piece of learning corresponds. And, "naturally," we conclude from this that language must be about something, must refer to something, must denote something. This is no mere philosophical blunder; it's not surprising that we should allow meaning — the significance we give to the ideas constructed from our experience of speaking — to overtake and ultimately obliterate language-making and meaning-making as *activity*. Yet while the inclination to do so

is completely understandable and appears to be perfectly natural, it's also entirely mistaken. Moreover, the mistake of idealism is very, very costly.

Our capacity to create ideas from our experience — our ability to go beyond ourselves — makes not only the acquisition of language but all other development possible. Yet our tendency to substitute the ideas thus generated for life activity itself prevents us from having new kinds of experiences by overdetermining and constraining our ongoing involvement in life processes. If we define subsequent experiences in terms of the categories, assumptions, judgments, and understandings that we already possess in the form of ideas derived from what has gone before, then we're doomed to discover only instantiations of what we already know. What irony! The same gift of self-consciousness that has so enhanced human life impoverishes and diminishes us when it is used, as it frequently is in our culture, to stifle our continued development.

"High" tragedy, "low" comedy...it's simply life

Some years ago, the 13-year-old son of my next-door neighbors was killed in a car accident. On the evening of the day that Timmy was buried I sat with Tim, his father, in their living room. Friends and relatives had brought over food, and after a while Tim began eating a sandwich. In a low, shamed voice he murmured to me: "You know, Fred, people are nothing but animals. If anyone had ever told me that something like this could happen to one of my kids and I would still be hungry, I wouldn't have believed it. But look at me — my son is dead and I'm sitting here eating."

Tim was disgusted with himself for having the ordinary urge to eat that evening, believing that such a tragic moment ought to have driven out every need, every desire, while grief

took over his body and his soul. Many people, like Tim, are governed by the idea that Tragedy (like Art, or Sex) is debased when everyday life is allowed to touch it; they assume that in order to experience grief, to appreciate beauty, to feel passion, in ways that are appropriate to these “higher” emotions they must have them in a pure form, on another plane, out of this world. Yet it seems to me that it is their allegiance to idealism which, ironically, prevents them from giving full expression to their emotionality. My friend Tim allowed the idea of Tragedy to impose upon and substitute itself for the tragic experience of Timmy’s death; the father’s grief was distorted by his shame at not grieving in the right way — as the idea of Tragedy dictates that we do it.

Certainly there are distinctions between things: subtle, barely perceptible differences of nuance as well as differences of considerable magnitude. Yes, there is tragedy. There is art. There is sex. But it isn’t necessary to enter an exalted state of being, a higher plane, to “have” them. They are moments not truly separated (nor separable) from the most prosaic and utterly mundane moments with which, intertwined, they make up the rich totality of life. Notwithstanding the ideas we have about life, in life itself the ordinary and the extra-ordinary, the ridiculous and the sublime, the most banal and the most profound, are continuously at play with one another; they are like the colors on an artist’s palette which have run together so that it is impossible to say precisely where that shade of blue-green, or that brownish-red, begins and ends.

To force the various moments of life apart, as idealism does in glorifying the categorizing, labeling, and judging of them — regardless of whether it’s done in the name of Science, Ideology, Religion, Therapy, or any other ideal authority — is profoundly non-developmental and unjoyous.

It is a denial and a violation of the human spirit to divide ourselves from ourselves, as if we were no different from objects made up of parts that can be detached from the whole. For it is the irreducible paradox of human life, it seems to me, that our humanity lies precisely in our capacity to be profoundly self-conscious of our utter banality.

Interestingly, the individuated self — among the most powerful ideas ever generated by Western culture, one which is associated with some very valuable contributions to human development as well as with very terrible atrocities — is not required for self-consciousness. Quite the contrary: transfixed by the illusory image (the idea) of the self in the societal mirrors, we absent ourselves — our social selves — from the stage of history where life is performed. Rather than living history in the recognition that it will, perhaps, judge us, we attribute to ourselves the right to pass judgment on it (just as certain religious authorities presume to know what God “thinks” and “wants”).

Indeed, it is in our capacity for *self-consciousness* that I believe human spirituality resides — and not in the ultimately *self-serving* promotion of idealizations such as the self that, however fascinating, beautiful, and moving they may be, are after all merely (albeit magnificently) the products of our own creativity, our own imagination, our own invention.

It’s what you do that counts

The trouble with idealism — or perhaps more accurately, if less idiomatically, idea-ism — in everyday life is that it gets in the way of living joyously. It is a cultural cancer afflicting virtually everyone. Lost in their ideas and judgments about life — the illusory images which appear in the societal mirrors — practicing idealists rarely find themselves in that joyful place

where society and history come, at times very abruptly and conflictedly, together.

When Elaine looks at her 70-year-old mother, for example, all she sees is a self-centered, selfish woman who can never be forgiven for failing to live up to the idea Elaine once had of her. "To me she was the nicest, prettiest, best mother in the world," Elaine recalled one evening in therapy. "I used to walk around thinking how lucky I was to be her little girl."

Elaine remembers Betty, then in her twenties, as an adoring Mommy who was lavish with hugs and kisses, smiles, and surprises; a Mommy who never came back from a shopping trip downtown without bringing a present for her "sweetheart," took Elaine and her cousins to the movies most Saturday afternoons, was always ready to play a game or tell a story, and — having taught Elaine to read before she was four — delighted in showing off her bright, adorable child to visiting relatives.

But by the time Elaine was 14 or 15 years old and three younger children had come along, that Mommy had disappeared; in her place Elaine recalls a moody, aloof, inexplicably angry Mother who often ridiculed and sometimes beat her oldest daughter for being "lazy," "dirty," and "spoiled rotten."

To this day, Elaine still relates to Betty as if they were both characters in a fairy tale with an unhappy ending. The story that a highly imaginative, rather lonely child made up about her life has become the grown-up Elaine's memory (which is neither "true" nor "false," but an idealized recollection) of their life together. For memories — no less than photographs, dreams, novels, operas, and animated cartoons — are only impressions taken from life; they may be more or less creative, more or less interesting, but they aren't identical with the historical performance of life itself.

Elaine's insistence on identifying Betty, and herself, with the idealized characters (and corresponding judgments) in the story of her childhood makes it very difficult for them to create something new together as the actual (historical) human beings that they now are. As flat, two-dimensional, ahistorical characters, they're unable to give one another very much; they exchange the tokens of familial affection and politeness which have societal value and significance — holiday visits, birthday presents, phone calls at regular intervals — but there's little intimacy, still less joy, in their relationship.

Elaine is like someone who goes to a dance only to spend all her time in the ladies' room seated in front of the mirror, criticizing the reflections of herself and anyone else who comes in, then going home without even having heard the music. Perhaps she gets some satisfaction from thinking that at least she knows who had the nicest dress, the weirdest hairdo, the most expensive perfume, the worst figure. But joy only comes from getting your body — with all of its limitations, and however awkward or tired or stiff you may feel — out there onto the dance floor with everyone else while the band's playing and the crowd's swaying: trying out the latest steps, doing what you do with flair, gettin' down, swinging your partner or dancing cheek to cheek — and catching a historical glimpse of yourself going beyond yourself in the mirrors on the wall as you dance by.

Don't I know you?

Refusing to be with Betty in history, Elaine encounters her mother only as the illusion which appears in the societal mirror that is The Family: Elaine is the Hurt, Resentful Daughter; Betty the Hurt, Guilty Mother. Constrained by those societally determined roles, they're finished products who by