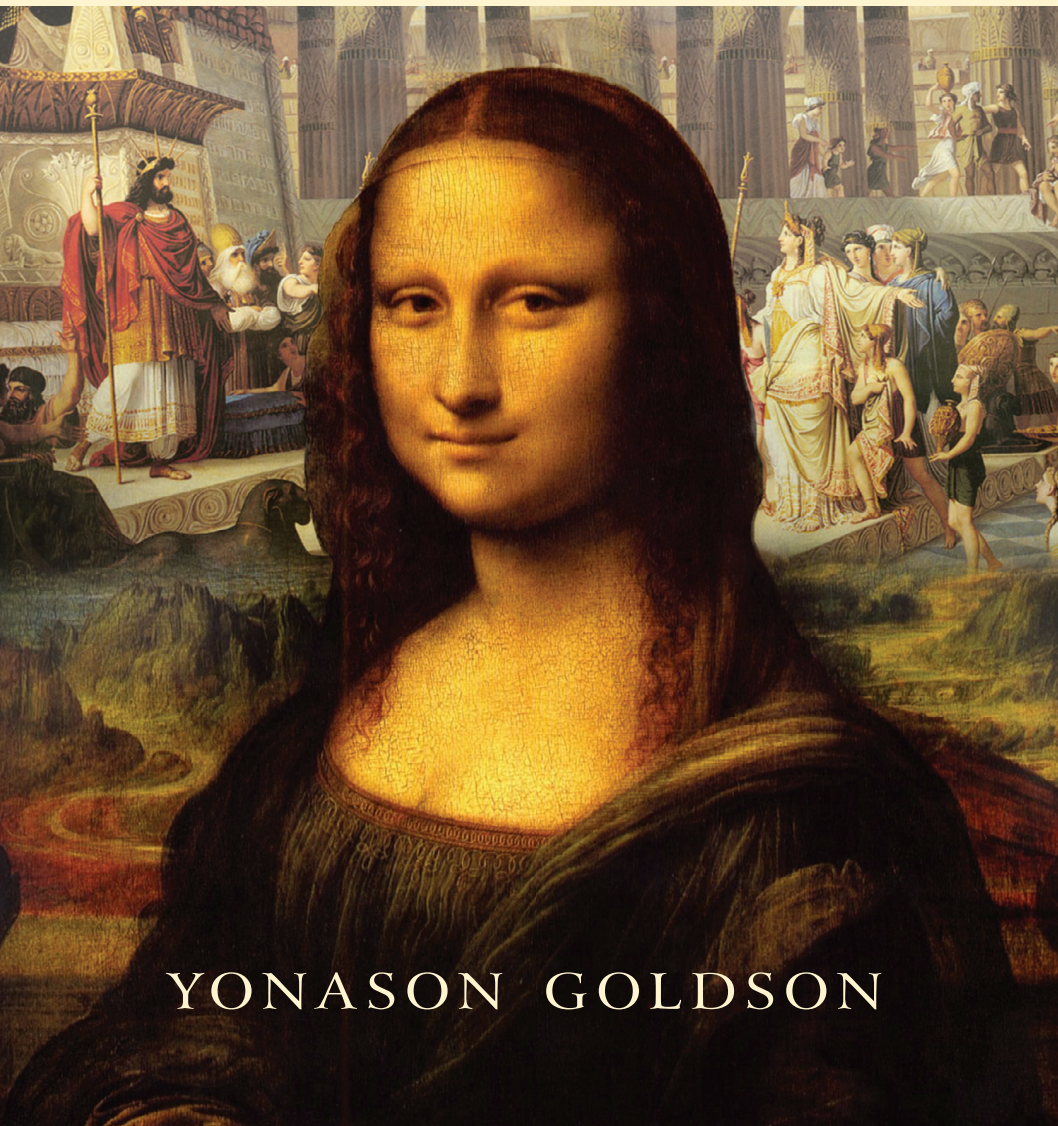
PROVERBIAL BEAUTY

SECRETS FOR SUCCESS AND HAPPINESS
FROM THE WISDOM OF THE AGES



YONASON GOLDSON

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INTRODUCTION

The miracle of allegory

I never thought much of Mona Lisa; but that was before we met.

All those postcards, posters, and text book reproductions – none of them made an impression; none of them explained the world's fascination with an unexceptional woman in an unremarkable pose.

How I ended up in Paris is a chapter from a different book. I was 23 years old and, perhaps more from duty than desire, I waited in line and paid for the privilege of wandering the Louvre's endless halls, trying to absorb the countless works of countless grandmasters before my mind hit saturation point.

I found my way to the Salon Carré and into the presence of the 500 year old woman. A mob of people and a pane of bulletproof glass stood between us, but they vanished together with my preconceptions the moment my eyes met hers.

I don't know how long I stood gazing at her, unable to pull myself away, unable to comprehend her primal attraction. And yet, for all that, it was only many years later that I began to

appreciate how Mona Lisa is more than a woman and more than a masterpiece. She is, in a word, *proverbial*.

Parable, allegory, fable, metaphor… that which we call a proverb by any name would smell as sweet, burn as bright, and ring as true, transmuting language into verbal imagery and capturing our imagination where simple prose leaves us uninspired. A proverb empowers us to transcend mere exposition by harnessing the majesty and mystery of the ocean, the firmament, the mountain peak, the eagle soaring toward heaven. If a picture is worth a thousand words, a proverb is worth a thousand pictures.

Ideas alone are like fireworks: they excite the mind for an instant, then vanish just as quickly into the darkness of habit and complacency. They tantalize our brains but rarely take root inside our hearts. They show us the way, but almost never motivate us to begin the journey.

Not so a proverb, which combines idea and illustration, reason and poetry, logic and inspiration, engaging both heart and mind to give us a more accurate picture of who we are, a clearer vision of where we are going, and a fighting chance of making sense of the world we live in.

As his train pulled into the station, a young man turned to one of his fellow travelers and asked, "Excuse me, do you have the time?"

"Get lost," snarled the stranger, "and don't speak to me again."

"I beg your pardon?" replied the startled young man. "How on earth have I offended you? All I did was ask for the time."

"I can see that you're Jewish," the stranger said.

"Yes, of course. What has that to do with anything?"

"I'll tell you. You asked me a question, so of course I am obliged to answer. This leads us to have a conversation, in which it naturally comes up that we are both Jews. Since you are a stranger

arriving in my hometown, I have no choice but to invite you over to my house for dinner, where you meet my daughter. Being that the two of you are both very attractive and well-mannered, you end up going out with her and falling in love. This, of course, leads to you asking me for permission to marry her.

"But why put ourselves through all of that? Let me tell you right now that I would never, under any circumstances, let my daughter marry a man who doesn't own a watch!"

How frequently does the world around us refuse to conform to our assumptions and preconceptions? And how easily do we jump to conclusions with unfounded certainty? Often, we try to make sense of our surroundings but end up wading deeper into confusion without recognizing how truly lost we've become. On the one hand, the routine of daily life dulls our senses and convinces us that there's nothing more to earthly existence than what meets the eye; on the other hand, we look so hard to uncover hidden meaning that we fail to notice the obvious. We become so set in our ways that we miss priceless opportunities or, by rebelling against conformity, we lose our bearings and end up in places we never wanted to go.

The unwavering convictions we hold one day somehow slip through our fingers the next. Knowledge we take for granted suddenly becomes elusive or unclear. We go to bed feeling securely grounded in our world only to wake up feeling lost and adrift, at the mercy of forces we don't understand. We reach for solid purchase but end up grasping at straws.

Ironically, we can best reorient ourselves by taking a journey of the imagination. After all, that's what allegory is: the depiction of moral truisms through fabricated stories. By some peculiar miracle of the human mind, fiction enables us to ground ourselves securely in reality where the cold light of objectivity leaves us

unable to locate ourselves in time and space. As Ursula K. Le Guin once commented: "Distrust everything I say. I am telling the truth."

A proverb gives the ideas and insights that pass through our minds a firm handhold, anchoring them in the real world. But not every philosopher has the talent to fashion a proverb; few wordsmiths can pen great literature, few songwriters can compose a symphony, and few painters can give form to a masterpiece worthy of the Louvre. Even among the greatest of the greats, only once in many lifetimes will an artist produce a single work so extraordinary that it outshines all others and plants itself eternally at the center of our collective consciousness.

One such work is Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. Another is the *Book of Proverbs*, by King Solomon.

Renowned as the wisest of all men, Solomon possessed a unique ability for communicating concepts through verbal illustration. With his *Book of Proverbs*, he does much more than teach us lessons for success and happiness; he endows us with a template of how to look at the world around us and recognize the instructive value of every experience and interaction.

In 17th century Europe, Jews turned for inspiration to itinerant rabbis who traveled from town to town teaching, advising, and rebuking communities, often through the use of parables and proverbs. Such a rabbi was called a maggid – literally, a storyteller. The most famous of these was Rabbi Jacob, the Maggid of Dubno.

Rabbi Jacob seemed to have a parable for every circumstance, a proverb to perfectly illustrate every observation. When asked how he was able to always come up with precisely the right parable for whatever lesson he wanted to impart, the Maggid replied, predictably, "I'll answer you with a parable.

"A young man was walking through the woods when he came upon a tree that had been used by an archer for target practice.

The traveler could see that this archer was a most accomplished marksman, for his arrow had struck the exact center of the bull's-eye.

"As the traveler continued on his way, he saw another tree, also with an arrow in the precise center of its target. And he came upon one after another, with every shot a perfect bull's-eye.

"Finally, the young man heard the twang of a bow and the thunk of an arrow striking a tree. He came into a clearing just in time to see the archer admiring his marksmanship – another perfect bull's-eye.

"'Tell me,' the young man said, 'how is it possible that you can shoot arrow after arrow and never miss the exact center of your target?'

"'It's quite simple,' replied the archer. 'First I shoot the arrow. Then I paint the target around it.'

"I do the very same thing," explained the Maggid.

"Most people," he continued, "try to think of a parable to fit the lesson they want to teach, and what they come up with is often an imperfect match. But as I go through life, I am always on the lookout for lessons taught by the world around me. By accumulating those lessons, I always have on hand the perfect parable for the lesson I need to teach at any given moment."[1]

This is not a deeply researched book. Just the opposite: it draws from newspaper headlines, magazine articles, radio reports, internet sites, popular quotations, and everyday observations that are available to all of us if we pay attention to the world around us. At the same time, it employs the cultural traditions, histories, and folktales that are the legacy of Solomon's wisdom and experience.

1 Adapted from *The Maggid of Dubno and his Parables* by Benno Heinemann, Feldheim Publishers, Jerusalem, 1967.

Where Shakespeare wrote that *all the world is a stage*, Solomon understood that *all the world is a proverb*. All we have to do is keep our eyes open and our minds receptive to the perennial lessons of life.

As we will see, researchers cannot explain why people, when blindfolded, are unable to travel in a straight line; but what does it tell us about ourselves that our nature inclines us to wander in circles? Former New York City Mayor Bloomberg was unable to push through his plan for "congestion pricing" to relieve Manhattan's traffic problem; but what does the plan itself reveal about the way we make decisions? What makes people in Denmark think they're happier than people anywhere else, and are they correct? What can fig harvesting, migraine headaches, and two Miss America titleholders teach us about the underpinnings of emotional well-being?

The answers lie ahead.

I would like to be able to claim that I have mastered all the lessons in this book myself. Far from it; in the ways of the world, I am a student like anyone else. What I hope to achieve in these pages is to apply the wisdom of Solomon to practical examples and demonstrate their relevance to the modern world, for my own benefit as much as for the benefit others. These are lessons we all need to learn, and then to relearn, again and again and again.

In attempting to bring the contemporary relevance of the *Book of Proverbs* to light, it seemed a natural choice to marry the wisdom of Solomon with the mysterious attraction of the Mona Lisa, perhaps the most iconic image in Western Civilization, thereby bridging the gap between the ancient past and the ever-changing present. Guided by Solomon's words and Mona Lisa's silent smile, we can learn how to acquire the tranquility that comes with wisdom and take the first steps toward resolving the paradoxes of the human heart.

All we have to do is listen, and learn.

CHAPTER 1

The miracle of immaturity

The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, King of Israel; to make known wisdom and moral discipline; to make discernible words of understanding and so acquire wise deliberation, righteousness, justice, and equity; To give subtlety to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young. A wise man will hear, and will increase learning; a man of understanding shall attain wise counsels: To convey proverbs and poetry, the words of the wise, and their enigmatic sayings (PROVERBS 1:1-6).

Whether from Sunday school or confirmation, whether from Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments,* Dreamworks' *A Prince of Egypt*, or Ridley Scott's *Gods and Kings*, every one of us knows the biblical narrative of the Exodus, how the Jewish people emerged triumphant after generations of cruel oppression under Pharaoh's taskmasters to become a nation at the foot of Mount Sinai. Less well known is the era of uncertainty that followed, the four and a half centuries of political instability that preceded the establishment of a secure monarchy during the reign of David, King of Israel. Only then, with the ascension of David's son Solomon, was the Jewish nation finally ready to embark upon its mission to build a moral and spiritual society unequalled in the history of mankind.

Assuming the mantle of kingship as a youth only twelve years old, Solomon began recording his observations and reflections concerning life, leadership, personal integrity, collective responsibility, and spiritual commitment. Year after year, Solomon built upon the lessons instilled in him by his father, refining his insights as he dealt with the trials of governing a people and ruling a nation. He left behind the accumulated wisdom of his career as a national and spiritual leader in the *Book of Proverbs*, a handbook of life lessons that testifies to his reputation as the wisest of all men.

The linear development of *Proverbs* does not imply that the book is without structure. Within Solomon's writing we find the same template according to which Aristotle would later divide the natural world into four categories:

- **Content**
- **Form**
- **Agent**
- **Purpose**

The lessons and insights drawn from a lifetime of monarchal responsibility are the *content* of Solomon's compilation. The *form* is proverb, through which complex and arcane ideas are rendered accessible and intelligible. Solomon himself is the *agent*, having charged himself with the *purpose* we will now attempt to understand.

That purpose, however, must be understood in the context of a deeper understanding of its agent, or author. And so the ultimate book of wisdom begins with this introduction:

The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, King of Israel.

Like so many figures from antiquity, King Solomon poses a figure of irreconcilable contradictions: a man who possessed immeasurable wealth but valued only spiritual ideals; a man who wielded absolute power but defined himself as a servant of the Almighty; a man endowed with unparalleled wisdom whose miscalculations resulted in the division of his kingdom and precipitated the moral decline of his nation; a man who authored teachings of eternal relevance but whose life and times have become inscrutable with the passing of millennia.

No matter how timeless the teachings of Solomon may be, every generation learns in its own way and according to its own style, depending on its own cultural touchstones for reference and context. How tragic for our generation that much of Solomon's wisdom has become drowned out by the noise of popular culture, and that Solomon himself has become a figure so mythologized that his true essence seems lost to the catacombs of history. If we can no longer appreciate Solomon the man, what chance do we have of rediscovering his teachings amidst the rush of pop-wisdom that offers fool's gold in place of authentic moral guidance?

In a culture grown dependent on visualization, and true to

our description of *Proverbs* as a collection of verbal pictures, we need an additional medium, a modern representation of proverbial wisdom, a symbol both timeless and contemporary, so thoroughly established as to be incorruptible, yet so familiar as to capture and hold our attention.

We need the Mona Lisa.

How can a 16th century painting communicate the relevance of a 2800 year old manuscript to 21st century minds? The answer to that question is the basis for this book. It also requires an appreciation of the one of Mona Lisa's most fundamental lessons: *Patience*.

But before we seek to uncover the secrets of the Mona Lisa, we need to begin our investigation into the *purpose* of King Solomon. Precisely what kinds of lessons did he intend to teach? If there is no teacher like experience, what benefit did he see in a book of wisdom that would be heeded only by those already wise enough not to need it? How did he structure his book of universal truths in a way that would resonate with readers who might not appreciate its value, especially thousands of years in the future?

> *A king was traveling through his kingdom when he came upon a shepherd playing the flute while watching over his flock. The king had never heard such a beautiful melody, and he hummed it over and over again so that he would not forget it.*
>
> *By the time he had returned to his palace, however, the king could no longer remember the tune. So he summoned his royal musicians and instructed them to play. After a few bars, he ordered them to stop and choose a different tune, commanding them again and again to begin anew and then ordering them to stop the moment he could tell that the melody was not the one he wanted to hear.*
>
> *Hours went by, until one the musicians plucked up the courage*

to protest. "Your Majesty," he said. "What benefit is there in this? Since you don't know the tune, we might have played it already without you recognizing it at all."

"Impossible," replied the king. "I may not remember how it goes, but it was so beautiful that I will know it as soon as I hear it again."

So it is with wisdom and universal truths. Experience may be the only teacher, but experience can show us the way only if we keep our eyes and ears wide open. Over and over again, self-serving ideologies masquerading as authentic wisdom dazzle us with the promise of happiness and fulfillment, only to disappoint us or, even worse, to seduce us in the ways of moral blindness. Many despair of ever finding true wisdom, while others give up hope that it exists at all. And those who persevere and briefly catch sight of its illumination will likely find themselves engulfed in darkness before they can fully grasp what they have seen.

However, once a lesson is taught in a manner that penetrates the outer layer of the mind, even if we fail to immediately take the lesson to heart its seed will lie dormant in the topsoil of our consciousness; and there it will remain, waiting for the proper combination of forces to prod it into sprouting forth.

This is the purpose of the *Book of Proverbs*. By presenting lessons in the form of metaphors and allegories, King Solomon gives us access to the *beginnings* of wisdom. By providing mental imagery that will implant itself in our minds across the days and years of our lives, Solomon's proverbs prepare us for future experience to bring those lessons sharply into focus and enable them to penetrate to the depths of our souls.

And so Solomon begins by clearly stating his objectives:

To make known wisdom and moral discipline

Authentic wisdom is acquired in two stages: first, by learning the *principles of moral law* and, second, by developing *mastery of action* in accordance with those principles.

Conventional wisdom asserts that moral values evolve with the changing sensitivities of different times and different cultures; it would have us believe further that human qualities are hard-wired, that individuals act with cruelty or compassion, with arrogance or humility, with self-restraint or abandon, each according to his own nature and the influences of his own experience. Many biologists insist that free will is merely an illusion, that genetic and environmental influences over which we have no control dictate all human behavior.

Solomon wastes no time dismissing the fallacy of these preconceptions. If wisdom can be *made known* then it must be *knowable*, it must be absolute, and it must be eternal. If wisdom can be acquired, then we must be able to integrate its principles not only into our minds but into our hearts. The cultivation of moral discipline, therefore, is integral to the acquisition of wisdom. True, the natural tendencies of the heart may incline us to pride and jealousy, to lust and vengeance. But just as the natural slothfulness of the body can be overcome through a disciplined physical regimen, so too can we discipline our minds to resist the self-indulgence of our hearts, and subsequently discipline our hearts to respond with the wisdom we have secured within our minds.

> *Two merchants made the long journey from Kiev to Odessa, where they had learned of a vintner who produced excellent wine and sold it for an unusually cheap price. The men bought a large barrel, then hired a wagon and driver to transport their merchandise home.*

The trip was slow and uneventful, and the sun beat down on their heads. Eventually, one said to the other, "You know, it seems a shame for us to sit here parched under the hot sun when we have all this wonderful wine right beside us. Why don't we have a drink?"

"We mustn't do that," said the other. "This wine is our livelihood. If we drink it, we will have nothing to sell."

The other thought about this for a moment, then replied, "That's true, but what if we pay for our drink, as we would if we stopped in at a tavern? Surely we are as entitled as anyone else to buy our own wine.

"Here are two zlotys," he said, fishing the coins out of his pocket and handing them to his partner. "Now that I have paid, I can have my drink."

"Yes indeed," said the other, his face brightening. "And here is payment for my drink," he said, handing the coins back to his friend.

And so they passed their journey, exchanging the same two coins as they took drink after drink. They returned to Cracow unable to comprehend how it happened that their wine barrel was empty while they had only two zlotys between them.

Rationality is the means through which we think and reason our way to a logical conclusion. *Rationalization* is the process through which we twist our thinking to justify a predetermined conclusion. Abstract wisdom provides little practical benefit unless we apply firm mental discipline to make genuinely wise decisions.

We begin by recognizing that *wisdom derives from a source greater than ourselves*, that wisdom is not subject to the vagaries of time and circumstance but determined by an absolute standard to which we are obligated, and able, to hold ourselves accountable. Since genuine wisdom must be learned, we acquire it only by

seeking out, recognizing, and subjugating our sensitivities to its authentic teachers. So said Edmund Burke, the 18th century political philosopher recognized as both an adherent of classical liberalism and the father of modern conservatism:

> *Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains on their own appetites; in proportion as their love of justice is above their rapacity; in proportion as the soundness and sobriety of understanding is above their vanity and presumptions; in proportion as they are more disposed to listen to the counsels of the wise and good, in preference to the flattery of knaves. Society cannot exist unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without. It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things, that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters.*

Contemporary culture defines freedom as the license to act however we choose. But like the alcoholic, the chain smoker, or the drug addict, if we act solely in response to our impulses and desires then we become nothing more than slaves to our passions. This is not a message that we want to hear; but honest consideration of Edmund Burke's critique of human nature leaves no room for argument.

Like the king listening for the tune, we may not possess wisdom yet, but we can learn how to recognize it when it appears before us.

To make discernible words of understanding

To fathom the complexities of wisdom, we have to better grasp the workings of the human mind. Solomon therefore embarks upon a discourse outlining our varied and various mental faculties.

In addition to *wisdom* (the principles of moral law), the *Book of Proverbs* will direct us in the development of *understanding*, the ability to discriminate between truth and falsehood, to penetrate duplicity and deceit, to recognize how the principles of wisdom apply to specific circumstances, and to derive new insights from past experience.

> *Back in the days of the former Soviet Union, the socialist ideals of Karl Marx did not always translate into the promised vision of a workers' paradise. One morning, so the story goes, a public official walking through the streets of Moscow came upon two laborers working their way along the roadside. Every few yards the first man dug a hole after which the second man filled it in.*
>
> *The official ran up to them and cried out in exasperation, "Comrades, this is madness. What do you think you're doing?"*
>
> *The first man looked up at the official and answered calmly. "See here," he began, "On a normal day there are three of us. I dig a hole, Misha puts a tree in the hole, and Igor fills the hole back up with earth.*
>
> *"But today Misha is sick," he continued. "So what do you suggest? Should Igor and I take the day off from work just because Misha isn't here?"*

The logic is impeccable; the application of logic is absurd. Wisdom without understanding is little better than no wisdom at all.

And so acquire the discipline of insight, righteousness, justice, and equity

What motivates a person to strive toward the acquisition of virtue? For some it may be an expression of the ego: one may

want to be seen as virtuous by others, may seek to validate his self-image as a person of virtue, or may fear the consequences, whether social or legal, of unvirtuous conduct. However his ego manifests itself, such a person sees virtue not as a *value* but only as a tool he can employ for personal advantage.

This is the kind of person that Solomon had in mind when he mentioned the cultivation of *moral discipline*. Since immediate physical gratification and ego fulfillment each prod us in a different direction, self-interest cannot guide us along the moral path unless we are able to dispassionately weigh our options. Only once we have cultivated a clear perception of the *consequences* of right and wrong are we prepared to choose the way of virtue.

But such a path is littered with pitfalls all its own. When our hearts and minds are at odds with one another, doing the right thing may still exact a heavy toll.

> *The marriage of a daughter is always a joyous event. But when Zerakh the miser contemplated the enormous expense of making a wedding he found little cause for elation. Zerakh's neighbors did not help matters with their good-natured teasing.*
>
> *"You are going to have to prepare an unusually large banquet," they told him. "It is well known that when the host begrudges his guests their food it makes them twice as hungry."*
>
> *Zerakh prepared a grand meal at which all the guests had a splendid time. Poor Zerakh, however, took no pleasure in the celebration. He scurried about, wringing his hands and muttering, "I don't begrudge them the food at all. I offer it to them with a whole heart. But it isn't helping; they're still eating too much!"* [2]

2 Adapted from *Generation to Generation* by Abraham J. Twerski, Traditional Press, Brooklyn, 1985.

Ideally, the motivation for living a life of virtue comes in the form of a higher calling, an innate commitment to moral justice, an internal mandate to perfect oneself as an expression of *conscience*, the quality that distinguishes human beings from animals. It is this type of person that Solomon characterizes as possessing the *discipline of insight*.

By recognizing virtue as an existential value, we can begin to develop the intuitive moral reflexes that will define our whole identity as truly virtuous. Eventually, having keenly honed our moral sensitivity, we will no longer need to deliberate and quantify our every action: our natural responses will become inseparable from the principles of wisdom. For such a person, righteousness, justice, and equity are as effortless as drawing breath.

To give subtlety to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young.

Just as there are two types of people who strive to acquire virtuous wisdom, those who resist such wisdom fall into two categories as well. The first kind are the *simple*, those who lack the depth and discrimination necessary to compensate for their natural naiveté and superficiality. Although shrewdness can easily warp into deviousness, and sophistication often leads to cynicism, the one who is quickly satisfied by easy answers will never acquire a full understanding of his world, and the one who is overly credulous will often be misled or manipulated.

The second type indifferent to wisdom are the *youth*, those not necessarily young in years but wanting in intellectual maturity. This kind of person has an advantage over the first, for he does not need to overcome the unfavorable qualities of shallowness and gullibility, but merely requires exposure to the teachings of anyone who has already benefited from the lessons of experience.

Without proper mentoring, however, even sincere seekers of wisdom end up like the blind who are led by the blind.

A policeman happened upon two vagrants loitering in the public square. "What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"Nothing!" insisted the first man.

"And what about you?" asked the policemen of the other.

The second man pointed to his friend and replied, "I'm helping him."

A wise man will hear, and will increase learning; and a man of understanding shall attain wise counsels.

A truly wise man never considers himself sufficiently wise. By always seeing himself as a youth, he is driven to constantly seek greater wisdom and understanding, he avoids the complacency that leads to carelessness, and he develops the humility that allows him to learn from every experience and every person.

Consequently, we are wise if we see ourselves perpetually as works in progress, constantly growing and maturing without expecting to reach the limit of our potential until we have reached the end of our lives. Every experience adds to who we are and reshapes us into new creations so that, over the course of a lifetime, each of us becomes a composite of everything he has done, everywhere has been, and everyone he has met.

This is true not only on an intellectual and philosophical level. It is true on the most fundamental chemical level as well. Writing for *Chemical and Engineering News*, Sarah Everts reports how Wolfram Meier-Augenstein an analytical chemist at James Hutton Institute, in Dundee, Scotland, developed a method for tracking the movements of unidentified murder victims by

measuring isotope ratios of carbon, oxygen, hydrogen, nitrogen, and sulfur found in a victim's hair, teeth, nail, and bone.

> *[Every] person's tissue holds an isotope ratio fingerprint that derives from the isotope ratios of food, water, and air, which in turn vary with geography. Researchers have combined global isotope databases, satellite technology, and sophisticated mapping software to create isotope contours on the world. Using such contours, researchers can pinpoint the origin of a wide variety of things including humans, illegal drugs, trafficked endangered animals, and counterfeit scotch…*
>
> *For example, British police went to Meier-Augenstein with a long lock of hair from a Vietnamese man who had died after being dumped at a hospital emergency room in England. The police knew his identity from a worldwide fingerprint database, but they did not know how the murdered man, an illegal alien, came to the U.K.*
>
> *Meier-Augenstein's team chopped the 14-cm-long hair, which represented about 14 months of growth, into 5-mm increments. From isotope ratios in the different sections of hair, the team proposed that the man had been in the Ukraine a year before his death, had then traveled to Germany, and finally ended up in the U.K.*
>
> *The police later discovered that the man had hired human traffickers to get him illegally into the U.K. through Eastern Europe. Unfortunately, the murdered man had to repay his debt by working in a gang-run marijuana-growing operation, Meier-Augenstein says. When a rival gang stole a large crop harvest from the victim, he was killed by his own gang for failing to protect the valuable product. The isotope-based map was just one of many forensic tools that helped convict two men for the murder, but it was essential for piecing together the murdered man's life trajectory.*

The food we eat, the water we drink, even the air we breathe all become incorporated into our physical essence. In other words, our experiences and associations do more than influence how we act; they form who and what we are.

Naturally, a wise man learns from every experience. But Solomon comes to teach us a far deeper lesson: if we are conscious of the effect that every potential experience will have on us, we will choose the course we travel with caution, limiting our exposure to morally and spiritually toxic people and places.

A true man of wisdom will always seek out encounters that help him refine his wisdom and broaden his knowledge, while avoiding situations that may infect him with self-serving and ultimately self-destructive attitudes and ideas. He will weigh the benefit of all the options and alternatives that present themselves, seeking only "wise counsels" that will teach him how to wisely counsel others.

But he never grows over-confident in his own wisdom. Rather, he constantly challenges himself to revisit both axioms and conclusions, always reexamining long held beliefs in the light of new understanding.

To convey proverbs and poetry, the words of the wise, and their enigmatic sayings.

The use of allegory and allusion can obscure or enhance meaning. The most amusing story might lack any clear message, or it might suggest several different, even contradictory, lessons.

But a well-crafted parable translates ideas into imagery and carves concepts in cognitive stone, preserving lessons that we might otherwise soon forget. Moreover, instruction through proverbs trains the mind to look beyond the surface meaning so that we learn to search for wisdom, not just wait for it to happen

upon us. Authentic wisdom demands that we plumb the words of the wise for every possible layer of meaning, thereby bringing to light insights that would otherwise remain undiscovered.

We must be careful, however, never to confuse wisdom with intellect or erudition; often, one has nothing to do with another. Extraordinary natural wisdom may be found in people of modest mental ability, and people of great intelligence and scholarship may lack even a whit of common sense. Nevertheless, the ways of wisdom are open to all who truly seek them.

In generations past, young men and women did not choose their own mates but relied on the judgment of their parents or, in some cases, professional matchmakers. As a result, brides and grooms entered into marriage with more muted, but more realistic, expectations than they do today. And if they felt that providence had paired them with a less than ideal match, instead of wallowing in disappointment or resentment they found creative ways to compensate for the shortcomings of their spouses.

Freida was a bright young woman who quickly discovered that her husband, Yossel, despite his accomplishments in book learning, possessed little cleverness or practical wisdom. When the young man secured a position as a community rabbi, his new wife foresaw that his career would end in humiliation as soon as his deficiencies became apparent.

The young woman contrived a way to assure that Yossel would succeed without causing him any humiliation herself. From the moment her husband assumed the pulpit, Freida gently urged him to never render a decision on the spur of moment, but to reflect on every question until the following day. Each night over dinner, she would ask what issues had been brought to him, and would listen carefully to every detail.

Night after night, the young rabbi would tell his wife about

the cases that came before him. In one instance, Mr. Leibowitz wanted his son to have an equal share in the business he owned together with Mr. Cooperman; but Cooperman didn't trust the son and refused to accept him into the partnership. Cooperman said that if Leibowitz wanted the boy as a partner so badly then Leibowitz should buy Cooperman out, but Leibowitz didn't have the money to do so.

"What a difficult case," Freida remarked. "So let me see if I can guess what you intend to do. You'll suggest that they agree on a down payment that Leibowitz can afford now, and Cooperman will continue to receive a percentage of the profits that will decline gradually in proportion to his involvement with the company over the next five years. How clever! It's a bit complicated, but it should please everyone."

Over the years, the rabbi earned a reputation for wisdom and fairness. No one – including Yossel himself – ever suspected that he could never have done so on his own.[3]

Yossel's wife may never have received the accolades she deserved, but she found even greater pleasure in quietly building her husband's reputation, in protecting his self-respect, and in the greater good she was able to accomplish from behind the scenes. For Yossel's part, had he not been receptive to his wife's gentle guidance he would have failed miserably at the outset of his career.

A woman of valor, who can find? asks King Solomon. How many men have asked themselves the same question? It is a question that brings us at last to Mona Lisa.

The Mona Lisa is the ultimate woman of mystery. Some theorists suggest that she might have been Queen Isabella of

3 Adapted from *Generation to Generation*.

Aragon, or possibly Pacifica Brandano, the mistress of Florentine ruler Giuliano de' Medici. A recently discovered notation on the painting itself may have resolved the mystery in favor of Lisa Gherardini del Giocondo, wife a textile merchant who commissioned the portrait but never took possession of it.

Even so, many will doubtless remain adherents of more exotic theories. Sigmund Freud believed Mona Lisa to be Caterina, mother of Leonardo da Vinci, who devoted her life to raising the man many consider the greatest creative thinker in human history. And others are convinced that Mona Lisa is in fact a self portrait of Leonardo himself rendered in feminine form.

All that is known for certain is that, perhaps more than any other woman in history, Mona Lisa has captured the imagination of the world by living up to her other name, *La Gioconda* – the joyful woman. And although the precise nature of Mona Lisa's expression still gives rise to debate, her creator seems to have had little doubt in his own mind how he intended to portray her. Consider his comment that

> *I love those who can smile in trouble, who can gather strength from distress, and grow brave by reflection. 'Tis the business of little minds to shrink, but they whose hearts are firm, and whose conscience approves their conduct, they will pursue their principles unto death.*[4]

But can it be the smile alone that accounts for our singular fascination with Mona Lisa? There are many paintings of smiling women, and many of these were painted by grandmasters as

4 This same quote appears without attribution in *The American Crisis*, by Thomas Paine. However, it is widely attributed to Leonardo.

distinguished among the artistic community as Da Vinci. Goya's *Maja* is far more alluring, Fragonard's *Love Letter* evokes more playful intimacy, and Hogarth's *Shrimp Girl* endears us with the contrast between her cheerful demeanor and her humble occupation. Renoir's *Alphonsine Fournaise* sparkles with color and vibrancy while tickling our fancy with the hint of uncertainty that shades her smile. Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring,* if not quite smiling, still seizes our imagination with the intensity of her feelings for the unseen object of her attention.

Yet none of these has achieved the same degree of recognition, notoriety, and mystique among experts or laymen. None has become either as iconic or the subject of so much intrigue and speculation.

And so we have to ask: What is the secret of the Mona Lisa?

Understandably, many critics suggest that the answer lies more in the brilliance of the artist than in the subject herself. They find in Leonardo's work deft and flawless brushstrokes, a unique talent for imbuing his subjects with personality and emotion, and an ability to create a three-dimensional impression that is simultaneously real and eerily unreal. Others propose that Leonardo the scientist engaged in the meticulous study and diagramming of light, enabling Leonardo the painter to produce the seemingly ethereal glow that illuminates the portrait.

All that may be true. But possibly the most striking quality of the Mona Lisa is how, at first glance, the painting appears entirely unremarkable in both subject and style. The explanation for why it generates unparalleled interest and obsession, therefore, must run considerably deeper.

Of course, there is Mona Lisa's sense of mystery. Her smile is not a perfect smile, and the actual expression of the subject has caused such consternation that researchers at the University of Amsterdam employed a computer program to analyze her using

"emotion recognition" software. By collecting a database of young female faces, the program derives an average "neutral" expression against which it compares the faces of individuals – in this case, La Gioconda – by rating such features as curvature of the lips and crinkles around the eyes.

According to *New Scientist* Magazine, the researchers dissected Mona Lisa's smile into component parts of 83% happiness, 9% disgust, 6% fear, and 2% anger. La Gioconda, it seems, was not a simple lady.

In fact, she was not a single woman at all. Art experts are convinced that she is a composite, with the face, torso, and hands each depicting a different model. And the background as well suggests a world that is unsettled, with distant bridges, winding roads, choppy seas, rocky outcroppings, and threatening clouds all swirling around the lady with the enigmatic, sphinxlike countenance.

In his book, *Leonardo da Vinci*, art historian Kenneth Clark writes:

> *Continuous change, which threatened the intellectual foundations of Leonardo's thought, developed one of his deepest instincts: his sense of mystery. The pointing finger and the smile – the one indicating a power outside our field of vision, the other reflecting an inner process which is equally beyond our comprehension – had a symbolic importance to him even in his early work. And as his sense of mystery was intensified and confirmed by his researches, the use of these symbols became more conscious.*
>
> *The 'Mona Lisa' has been irreverently described as 'the cat that's eaten the canary:' which expresses well enough the smile of one who has attained complete possession of what she loved, and is enjoying the process of absorption. And Leonardo has discovered*

> *that this mysterious, continuous process has the same rhythm as that in which rain pours from the clouds, wears away the earth, flows to the sea, and is sucked up into the clouds again.*

The cat that swallowed the canary? Irreverent, indeed, so much so that Professor Clark might have availed himself to find a different metaphor. A self-satisfied, criminal feline is more evocative of sociopathic self-indulgence than the nobler mysteries of the human heart. By presenting an image of eternal serenity, La Gioconda offers access to an inexhaustible wellspring of insight into human wisdom and human nature. She is a living and enduring proverb, a mentor and a teacher, a timeless testimony to poise and inner-peace, a reason to believe in the supremacy of the supernal soul.

How does she do it? Through what miracle of self-mastery and transcendence does she comport herself with reservation, with dignity, with patience, with reticence, with quiet acceptance of the chaos that casts the rest of mankind into desperate confusion, and with measured confidence when all about her abandon hope and reason?

What would Solomon say about her? And what does she say about Solomon?

As we prepare to embark upon our journey through the *Book of Proverbs*, it should be obvious that we cannot expect to understand the wisdom of Solomon without some inquiry into the language of Solomon. And although our mission does not require fluency in biblical Hebrew, a brief primer regarding this most ancient tongue is necessary if we hope to properly appreciate the universal truths that beckon us.

With its unique elasticity, the language of the Bible provides penetrating insights into the architecture of creation through common grammatical roots, revealing connections between

words and concepts that otherwise would go unnoticed. For instance, the Hebrew word for "miracle" is *neiss*, the root of which also means "test" or "trial," not in the sense of an exam or a courtroom but describing a challenge that tests our mettle, tries our character, and passes sentence on how much of our potential we have achieved.

In its most literal translation, the word *neiss* means "banner," a flag or standard that rises above the fray for all to see and rally around.

When used in biblical narrative to mean "miracle," the word *neiss* describes an act of divine intervention that pulls aside the curtain of nature behind which the Almighty hides in order to preserve mankind's free will. When used to mean "trial," the word *neiss* refers to circumstances that challenge us to show integrity, patience, kindness, courage, or any of the sublime qualities that often lie dormant within us, concealed by the mundane routine of our lives. Sometimes we have to face our trials publicly, to inspire others by taking hold of our higher selves. Sometimes we are tested privately, to show ourselves what we are capable of accomplishing. Either way, every single success in overcoming life's difficulties and obstacles raises a banner that proclaims the miraculous capacity of the human being to aspire to moral and spiritual greatness.

The unrivaled fame and mystery that surround Mona Lisa testify that she is herself a truly miraculous woman. Although she is no youth, she remains forever young, forever fresh, forever poised on the brink of a new revelation. Perhaps this is because she has learned the wisdom of Solomon. If so, perhaps she can share some of his wisdom – and some of her miracles – with us.

CHAPTER 2

The miracle of imperfection

Strength and dignity were her garments, and smiling she faced the final day. She opened her mouth with wisdom, and the teachings of kindness were upon her tongue. She kept close watch over the ways of her household, and would never eat the bread of idleness. So now her children have risen to give her contentment; her husband, too, has praised her: "Many women have done valiantly, but you have surpassed them all (31:25-29).

As we have already explained, King Solomon recorded his insights sequentially, as they came to him over the course of his reign. It should not surprise us, therefore, that his observations often skip from one theme to another without apparent continuity. In the final chapter of his treatise, however, Solomon embarks upon a long and deeply textured elegy to a good wife – *the Woman of Valor.*

Given the dramatic change in gender roles over the last half-century, Solomon's allegory does not translate immediately into language of modern relationships. What does resonate with contemporary relevance is the central theme of *partnership.*

A man and his wife lived together in peace and contentment for many years. The man's face was hideously disfigured, but his wife was blind and therefore unaffected by his appearance. The wife was a relentless shrew, but the husband was deaf and therefore indifferent to her scolding.

One day they learned of an extraordinary physician, a miracle worker who could restore sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf. The couple went to see him and eagerly entrusted themselves to his care.

The procedures were successful, and the couple returned home joyful with their newly acquired senses. But in no time at all the wife could not bear to look upon her husband's countenance, and the husband could not endure his wife's endless criticisms. They had regained their lost faculties, but their marriage was ruined beyond repair.

The couple complained to the doctor that he had destroyed their lives. Unable to appease them, they doctor offered to reverse the procedures and return them to their previous state.

But the man and his wife both refused. The recovery of their

sight and hearing proved more precious to them than a loving and peaceful home.[5]

When husbands and wives see themselves as complementary parts of a whole and as partners committed to the same ideals, each becomes oblivious to the imperfections of the other. But if they see marriage as nothing more than a vehicle for their own gratification, then even the most trivial defect in the other can chafe and rankle until it becomes a source of intolerable vexation.

A secure and successful home depends upon division of responsibility, with husband and wife shouldering their respective duties willingly, without resentment, without keeping score of who has done what for whom or who has invested the most time. Responsibilities are divided according to natural talents and abilities, with each partner playing to his or her strengths, assuming jobs that need to be done in the manner that will bring about the greatest measure of efficiency and domestic harmony.

This shouldn't come as a surprise. In 1954, Herman Witkin conducted his now-famous experiment in the psychology of visual perception, demonstrating that men tend to filter out extraneous information where women tend to integrate all data within their field of vision to create a single, holistic mental image. Dr. Witkin concluded that women are "field dependent," requiring peripheral information to provide context and meaning, where men are "field independent," able to process information in isolation.

More recently, some have questioned, legitimately, whether Dr. Witkin's labels have turned a negative into a positive. Perhaps women should be described as "field sensitive," since their superior

5 Adapted from *The Maggid of Dubno and his Parables*.

ability to process information contextually endows them with the potential to reach more meaningful conclusions.

But even this is unlikely to please everybody. The feminism of the last generation and the political correctness of today have created a culture in which too many of us refuse to accept the seemingly self-evident fact that different types of people are different.

On January 14th, 2005, Harvard President Lawrence Summers ignited the firestorm that eventually cost him his job when he said that "research in behavioral genetics is showing that things people attributed to socialization" might in fact have a biological basis. In other words, the reason why women are underrepresented in university math and science departments could be because the top men have more innate aptitude than the top women.

One week later, after Dr. Summers had been verbally flayed from every quarter, William Saletan offered a cooler assessment for *Slate* Magazine, citing a government study that concluded, "There is general agreement that few women typically *apply for* academic positions in science and engineering departments at research universities."

Mr. Saletan went on to evaluate the subject with logic rather than emotion:

- Academically, there is a quantifiable gap in test scores between men and women.
- Biologically, men and women – unlike males or females of difference races – have different physical organs and designs.
- Genetically, the difference in genomes between races of about 0.01% appears insignificant in contrast to the difference between sexes – 1 percent to 2 percent, which is comparable to the difference between a human being and a chimpanzee.

Indeed, according to MIT biologist David Page, "[T]he reality is that the genetic difference between males and females absolutely dwarfs all other differences in the human genome."

Mr. Saletan offered these conclusions:

> *You'd expect some of these differences to show up in the brain, and they do. A study of mice published a year ago in* Molecular Brain Research *found that just 10 days after conception, at least 50 genes were more active in the developing brain of one sex than in the other. Comparing the findings to research on humans, the Los Angeles Times observed that "the corpus callosum, which carries communications between the two brain hemispheres, is generally larger in women's brains [than in men's]. Female brains also tend to be more symmetrical. … Men and women, on average, also possess documented differences in certain thinking tasks and in behaviors such as aggression."*
>
> *Let's be clear about what this isn't. It isn't a claim about overall intelligence. Nor is it a justification for tolerating discrimination between two people of equal ability or accomplishment. Nor is it a concession that genetic handicaps can't be overcome. Nor is it a statement that girls are inferior at math and science: It doesn't dictate the limits of any individual, and it doesn't entail that men are on average better than women at math or science. It's a claim that the distribution of male scores is more spread out than the distribution of female scores – a greater percentage at both the bottom and the top. Nobody bats an eye at the overrepresentation of men in prison. But suggest that the excess might go both ways, and you're a pig.*

Whether or not universities should attempt to correct the disparity between men and women in math and science departments is not our discussion. But it is worth noting that,

since the beginning of recorded history, human society has taken for granted that men are better suited than women for certain jobs and women are better suited than men for others. The inability of modern society to concede that men and women can be *equal* without being *identical* may well account for the explosion of psychological and sexual dysfunction among both men and women.

Could Solomon have titled this section of his book *The Man of Valor* and written about the husband? Of course, he could have. However, until two generations ago, husbands were almost always the providers and wives tended the home. This was only logical, since most livelihoods depended upon physical labor for which men are generally better designed, and since successful child-raising (not to mention child *bearing*) generally comes more readily to women given their natural predisposition for multitasking and nurturing.

Solomon appreciated as well that the traditional woman's role was undeniably the more difficult. A man's work was usually straightforward and clearly defined; he did not often have to switch gears or change hats, he saw the fruits of his labors in the area of land he plowed, the amount of produce he harvested, and the compensation he received. In contrast, a woman had to respond intuitively, quickly, ably, patiently, firmly, and pleasantly to the needs of her children – of which she may have had many of all different ages and temperaments. At the same time, she had to tend the needs of the household, cooking, cleaning, laundering, sewing, supervising the children in their education and those of them old enough to have chores. She received no pay for the work she did, and may even have been required to find time to supplement her husband's meager income.

Solomon has no intention of describing an idealized image of the perfect woman. Rather, he presents a portrait of a devoted

partner, engaged in the constant struggle for survival in an imperfect world.

Strength and dignity were her garments, and smiling she faced the final day

Solomon's parable evokes from us the same question as the Mona Lisa: why is this woman smiling? What is this "final day" she faces with such peace of mind? And what does Solomon mean when he calls strength and dignity her "garments," describing internal qualities as outer trappings?

As human beings, we possess a natural inclination to conflate quantity and quality. We are conditioned to think bigger is better, to measure success with the yardstick of wealth and fame, to ascribe power to the one who has his hands most visibly on the controls, or to the one of more impressive stature. It is hardly coincidental that the shortest U. S. president in the last half century (with the single exception of Jimmy Carter) stood within half an inch of six feet tall. No one really believes that height is a reliable determinant of ability. But reason has little sway over our perceptions.

The mighty oak tree may withstand decades of winds, floodwaters, and even earthquakes, until termites eat away at from the inside and bring it crashing down for no apparent reason. Movie stars and sports heroes appear to lead charmed lives, until financial irresponsibility, uncontrolled ego gratification, or drug abuse expose them as broken people. Lottery sales were $240 billion in 2009, even though about half of multimillion-dollar lottery winners eventually admit that sudden wealth proved more a curse than a blessing. And we alternately laud and castigate those who occupy positions of authority, even though history's most powerful figures have often been the wives or advisors of

kings, presidents, and CEOs. In short, the outward appearance of greatness frequently belies inner weakness, while real power is wielded discreetly from behind the throne.

"Wisdom is greater than war craft," says Solomon in *Ecclesiastes*, describing how adept psychological or political maneuvering can achieve more enduring results than brute force, precisely because the mechanisms of wisdom often go undetected and therefore give rise to neither alarm nor opposition.

A man woke up one Sunday morning convinced that it was Monday. No one could tell him otherwise, and all the evidence his family and coworkers rallied made no impression upon him whatsoever. On Monday he asserted it was Tuesday, and on Wednesday he insisted it was Thursday. He refused to entertain the notion that he might be wrong and that everyone else might be right.

On Thursday afternoon, the man's wife made a frantic visit to her rabbi. During the week, her husband's delusions were benign, if somewhat irksome. But what would happen that evening when her husband insisted that the Sabbath arrived at sundown? And, even worse, how could she prevent her husband from desecrating the Sabbath the following day, when he would be convinced the holy day was over?

The rabbi pondered the question for a time, then leaned forward and told the woman what she should do.

The woman returned home to find her husband issuing orders in preparation for the onset of the Sabbath. To the surprise of her family, she echoed her husband's instructions and began preparing the Sabbath meal.

That evening, the husband returned home from synagogue – apparently unimpressed that the rest of the community had not observed the traditional Friday night Sabbath services. There he

found his entire family dressed in their finery and waiting for him in their respective places at the dining table. Pleased to discover that they had finally come around to seeing things his way, he raised his cup to recite kiddush, the ritual prayer for welcoming the Sabbath day.

However, the husband did not notice that his wife had filled his cup with schnapps in place of the usual light kiddush wine. When he finished reciting the blessing, he swallowed the entire cup in his usual fashion and, overtaken by the potency of the drink, collapsed face down upon the table and passed out.

For the next 24 hours, the family tiptoed around the house so not to wake the man. When Friday evening arrived, they returned to their places. The wife then gently shook her husband and, as he roused himself from his slumber, she said, "You must have been exhausted; you fell asleep before you had a chance to make kiddush! But the children are hungry, and you can sleep later. Come now, it's time for us to begin the meal."

The husband looked around the table and, after a moment's confusion, picked up his cup (which now was filled with wine) and recited the inaugural Sabbath blessing. From that day forward, he often recounted how the entire community had miscalculated the day of the week and bragged about how everyone had eventually accepted that he was right.

Certainly, the wife could have continued to battle her husband, achieving nothing except a spiraling level of frustration and acrimony in the home. Her ability to "let him win" benefited the entire family, herself included. And although she might have resented his smugness at believing that he had convinced the others that he was right, as a true woman of valor she would have taken pleasure in restoring peace to her home without the need to receive credit for "being right."

Perhaps this offers some insight into the smile of the Mona Lisa. We have already mentioned the computer study identifying her expression as 83% happiness, 9% disgust, 6% fear, and 2% anger. But how can all these emotions exist within a one heart? And how can they all appear simultaneously upon a single face?

The answer, really, is not difficult at all.

Was the wife who let her husband think he had "won" the argument about the day of the week 100% happy? Was she not a little disgusted at her husband's stubbornness, a little fearful that the episode might repeat itself, and a little angry that she had to appear to give in when she was in the right?

Almost certainly she was. But in the end, she had acted not according to her feelings but according to what was best for the family and, as a result, all those other emotions became diluted in the overwhelming sense of happiness produced by her successful resolution of the conflict.

In a way, therefore, Mona Lisa *does* represent an idealized image of the perfect woman; but at the same time she presents a compelling depiction of the internal struggle that defines the human condition. For what is a human being, if not a repository for the coexistence of opposing impulses? Is our happiness not always tainted with melancholy, is our disgust not seasoned with fascination, is our disappointment not tempered by hope? A human being is a creature in constant flux, emotionally, psychologically, and intellectually.

A painting offers a frozen moment, an instant suspended between past and future in which we can focus on a single image with time to contemplate its composition and significance. But it is not reality, and therefore it is limited in its ability to draw us inside it. Great works of art create a sense of mystery through context and omission. Who is the girl with the pearl earring

looking at? When will the recipient of the love letter meet her correspondent? What has made the humble shrimp girl so full of joy? Why is Mona Lisa smiling?

But it is the smile itself, brilliantly fashioned to communicate such variety of emotion, that makes it so compelling, drawing us into the complexity of human experience so that we don't want to look away.

A gifted sculptor set out to craft a statue of palomino stallion. He found the perfect yellow-tinted marble and chipped away lovingly until he had rendered an astonishing likeness. The artist was so pleased with his work that he arranged to have it placed in the town square for all to see.

Imagine his dismay, therefore, when no one reacted to the appearance of his masterpiece in the middle of the public arena. Crowds of people went about their business as usual, streaming past the marble statue without seeming to notice it at all.

When the sculptor complained to a fellow artist that no one appreciated what he had accomplished, his colleague pondered for a moment and then explained:

"The problem is that your statue is too perfect," he said. "People walk by it and mistake it for a real horse, which is of no interest to them whatsoever."

"So my sculpture is too lifelike to be recognized as art?" exclaimed the sculptor. "Then what am I to do?"

"There is a simple solution," replied his friend. "Go put a crack in the horse's side. Then everyone will know it is not real."

The sculptor understood that he had no choice. Bitterly, he went to the town square with his hammer and chisel and cut a deep crack in the side of his masterpiece. From that moment on, people stopped to stare in awe at the brilliance of his work.

"Such a lifelike sculpture," they would say. "What a shame that there's a crack in its side."[6]

The smile of the Mona Lisa engages us because it is *not* a smile of perfect joy or contentment, but one that hints at the inevitable tension that characterizes real life, with all its paradoxes and contradictions. Like Solomon's woman of valor, Mona Lisa is clothed in garments of inner strength and determination, of dignified self-mastery, of beauty in her acceptance of life's imperfections, of transcendence and radiance that project true happiness. In short, her outer persona is an authentic representation of her inner self. And so she smiles in anticipation of her "final day," the end of life which she does not fear because she knows that she will meet it with no regrets.

She opened her mouth with wisdom, and the teachings of kindness were upon her tongue.

Conventional wisdom has observed, correctly, that many "talk the talk," but few "walk the walk." Anyone can claim wisdom and virtue, and masters of sophistry can wax eloquent on the subject of human virtue. But it is conduct – not words – that testifies to a person's true character.

In biblical Hebrew, the common word for "language" is *loshon*, literally "tongue." But the word *safah* also means "language," although it translates literally as "lip." Since there are no true synonyms in Hebrew, an appreciation for subtle distinctions in meaning is critical to proper understanding.

Too often, we communicate through *safah*, which means an

6 Adapted from *Generation to Generation*.

"outer language," symbolized by the lips, which form the outer part of the mouth. To speak with "outer language" means to speak superficially, insincerely, or deceptively. It means talking the talk without walking the walk.

A sudden snowstorm on the eve of Yom Kippur closed the airport and left a businessman stranded far from home, compelling him to spend the holy day as a guest in the local synagogue. At the conclusion of the evening service, he was surprised to see the rabbi throw open the doors of the holy ark, cast himself prostrate on the floor, and cry out in a mournful voice, "Master of the Universe, I am but dust and ashes, I am no one, I am nothing. Please forgive me for my sins!"

When the rabbi finished, the president of the congregation did likewise, casting himself down on the floor and crying out, "Master of the Universe, I am no one, I am nothing. Please forgive me!"

Never having seen anything of this kind, the visitor was deeply moved and, assuming that this must be the custom of this synagogue, stepped forward and prostrated himself on the floor as the others had done. "Master of the Universe," he cried out. Please forgive me! I am no one, I am nothing!"

The president leaned over to rabbi and sneered, "Look who thinks he's nothing."

In contrast, *loshon* refers to an "inner language:" just as the tongue resides inside the mouth, sincere speech provides a genuine expression of who we are beneath the surface. The person who walks the walk speaks with honesty and with integrity, without flattery, manipulation, or hypocrisy.

The woman of valor understands instinctively that to imbue children with kindness (or any other virtue) mere instruction is not enough. She knows that children are adept at spotting

counterfeits, and they will acquire good character only from authentic models of selflessness, for whom kindness is not just a code of conduct but an attitude of genuine concern for others. If parents want their children to acquire the qualities of virtue, they have to first cultivate those qualities within themselves.

She kept close watch over the ways of her household, and would never eat the bread of idleness. So now her children have risen to give her contentment; her husband, too, has praised her

As children grow up, the ideas and attitudes that predominate in the surrounding culture exert an increasingly powerful attraction. The woman of valor recognizes that her children's emotional, moral, and spiritual welfare depend upon the establishment of the home as a fortress against the storms of hedonism and nihilism that threaten to uproot the values that support and sustain her family. She understands that a moment's inattention is enough to leave her children vulnerable to forces they are too young to resist.

She knows as well that she will have time enough to rest when the children have grown, although by then the discipline of a lifetime will have become so much a part of her nature that she will eagerly devote her energies toward her own moral and spiritual development, and to her community at large.

On a purely allegorical level, Solomon also refers here to the human soul – always referred to in the feminine – that "keeps watch" over its own "household" in a never-ending struggle against selfishness and self-indulgence. By striving to achieve self-perfection, one might never receive public recognition or honor. Even so, the rewards of living such a life will be great, for "her children," the virtuous deeds and moral discipline prompted by the urgings of the soul, together with "her husband," the

intellectual honesty and clarity that come through devotion to higher ideals, will bring the spiritual self praise and adulation beyond all imagining when it passes the "final day."

What more does she need to make her smile?

A young scholar traveled half way across Europe to learn from a rabbi of great renown. Hearing of the young man's arrival, the rabbi came out to meet him and asked, "Why have you come all this way?"

"To learn from you," the youth asked.

"And what is it that you hope to learn?" the rabbi persisted.

"I wish to find God."

"Then you have wasted a trip," the rabbi replied. "God is everywhere." He turned his back upon the boy and began to walk away.

The young man, momentarily discomfited, gathered himself quickly. "Rabbi," he called out. "Please tell me why I should have come."

The rabbi turned back and smiled. "To find yourself, my son. To find yourself."[7]

"Many women have done valiantly, but you have surpassed them all"

There are many reasons why people strive for self-perfection. Even among those motivated by moral and spiritual ideals there are different levels, and sometimes spiritual conduct is simply a more refined form of selfishness. We have already described how a person may want to impress others in his community, may find

7 Adapted from *Generation to Generation*.

ego-gratification in living a life of virtue, or may believe that a life lived well is its own reward.

To be sure, moral conduct rooted in any of these motives is preferable to wallowing in the self-indulgence of moral anarchy or outright wickedness. Further still, even if a person begins the journey of self-perfection motivated by base selfishness, he may over time come to be guided by loftier ideals.

However, the woman of valor described by Solomon has spent her life laboring solely for the benefit of others – for her children, her husband, and her community. In doing so, she has benefitted herself far more than if self-development had been her primary objective. By devoting her life to those around her, she has come to enjoy the appreciation of her family and her neighbors, and she has made herself immortal by instilling in her children the values and attitudes that will shape future generations.

"Where, oh where, is that ultimate child?" lamented the rabbi of Peshischa. "Where is the child that is driving the whole world insane?"

The rabbi went on to explain how, in his youth, he saw men working their lives away, leaving no time for themselves, no time for the families, no time for the cultivation of their souls. "Why do you work so hard," he asked one of these men, "if you already have all you need to live comfortably?"

The man replied: "I am not working for myself; I am working for my son, so that he will never have to worry about having enough."

Years went by, and the son became an adult who worked hard every moment of his life. "I am not working for myself," the man explained. "I am working for my son."

"And so it goes, from one generation to the next," the rabbi said, sadly. "But where is that ultimate child, for whom the whole

world has been working all these countless generations? When will this child finally arrive to enjoy the fruit of so much labor?"[8]

How many parents have tried to give their children a better life by lifting responsibility from their shoulders? And how many people today, children and adults, give up before they really have a chance to succeed in academia, in sports, in music, in careers, and in personal relationships, choosing effortless failure over determined success because they were never forced to develop the discipline necessary to realize their goals?

Children who grow up to appreciate how their parents placed values above comfort and convenience, who recognize that their parents did not resent the sacrifices they had to make but rejoiced that they were able to provide education, opportunity, guidance, and moral clarity, who come to realize that their parents had no higher priority than their children's spiritual and psychological welfare – *those* are the children all but guaranteed to remain true to the same values as they travel their own road to success and fulfillment.

When asked how much money he intended to leave his children, billionaire Warren Buffett reportedly answered that he would provide them with enough to do anything but not enough to do nothing. The goal of parents should not be to free their children from having to work for a living, but to give children the resources and the outlook that will make for a productive and happy life. Any parent who does so successfully has indeed "surpassed them all."

And so, if the smile of the Mona Lisa seems tinted by a shadow of ambivalence, this in no way reflects upon the authenticity of

8 Adapted from *Generation to Generation*.

her happiness. The uniquely human cocktail of pain and pleasure, frustration and fulfillment, anxiety and contentment, bitterness and joy – this genuine elixir of life is the potion of truth that casts a spell upon us through the magic of Mona Lisa's smile.

Objective analysis supports this interpretation. Dina Q. Goldin, a professor of computer science at Brown University, applied her researching skills to achieve a better understanding of La Gioconda. She concluded that the artist's advanced world view shaped his approach to both his science and his art, resulting in a synthesis that produced the world's most tantalizing portrait:

> *Leonardo's three life-long interests have been in art, anatomy, and motion. His accomplishments in each of these areas – arts, sciences, and engineering – earned him the reputation of a Renaissance man. Nowhere is this triumvirate of da Vinci's passions clearer than in his study of the human body in motion.*
>
> *Unlike other artists of his time, who focused on external appearances, and anatomists, who focused on internal structures, da Vinci strove to do both. Da Vinci's biographers agree that his ability to unify his talents from the three different areas is unsurpassed to this day. Beneath the skin of da Vinci's subjects are muscles and bones depicted with astonishing accuracy, even when in motion. The man was a genius, uniquely qualified to capture the mesmerizing effect of Mona Lisa's smile.*

Professor Goldin goes on to suggest that, although La Gioconda is unquestionably smiling, her other emotions reveal themselves just enough to make us wonder whether her happiness is waxing or waning. Is her joy winning out despite her trials and frustrations, or are the tribulations of her life darkening her joy? Because the lady offers no evidence other than her smile,

our answer is likely to be determined by our own mood at the moment we observe her.

Mona Lisa's complexity, therefore, becomes a model of our own. Just as we project ourselves upon our view of her, similarly do we project ourselves upon the world in which we live. The imperfections of our lives and our world can produce either the bleak despair that erases all joy or the elation we feel when we prevail over adversity.

Understood this way, La Gioconda becomes a reflection of the inner self that each of us spends a lifetime trying to discover and comprehend. In the words of R. A. Scotti, who chronicled the 1911 theft of Mona Lisa from the Louvre in her book *Vanished Smile*:

> *Mona Lisa only has eyes for me. There is no other. No one more interesting, more intelligent, more compelling. And what is extraordinary, if a dozen others crowd into this room, each one will feel the same. Each person who looks at her becomes the only person in her world. It is flattering and, at the same time, maddening, because she gives away nothing of herself.*

Perhaps what is so enthralling and so maddening about Mona Lisa is not that she gives away nothing of herself but rather, by so doing, she compels us to come face to face with our true selves, to recognize that our longing for a perfect world is itself an imperfect dream, and to confront life's imperfections as the essence of the human condition. Whether her smile is one of joy or resignation, whether it represents the fleeting vision of ultimate victory or the melancholy weariness brought on by life's ceaseless challenges, Mona Lisa forces us to acknowledge the wisdom of Solomon: without life's peaks and valleys, without the imperfections in the world around us and in ourselves, our lives would be infinitely poorer, less rewarding, and less filled with joy.

CHAPTER 3

The miracle of dissatisfaction

Open rebuke out of hidden love is true good. Faithful are the wounds from one's beloved, but kisses from an enemy are compelling. The satiated disdain even honeycomb; but to the hungry, even the bitter tastes sweet (27:7).

In a single, ringing phrase, Thomas Jefferson captured the essence of the American dream when he declared that all men have the right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." And yet, despite Mr. Jefferson's noble sentiments and laudable achievements, the enduring lyricism of his words spawned an epidemic of confusion and despondency that continues to spread like pestilence through western society.

How precisely does one pursue happiness? We may pursue wealth, pursue fame, pursue gratification of one form or another. But the fiction of pursuing happiness has become a collective obsession that consumes our lives, either by goading us into chasing impossible dreams or by tarnishing the quality of our existence with unwarranted regrets.

Before we set off in pursuit of anything, we ought to know what it is and how to get it. Like many other words and expressions, we toss about the word "happiness" without really knowing what we mean. The definition seems obvious, but the inconvenient truth is that we really have no idea what we're talking about.

Nowhere is our confusion about happiness more poignantly reflected than in this famous poem by Edward Arlington Robinson:

Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
We people on the pavement looked at him:
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
Clean-favored and imperially slim.

And he was always quietly arrayed,
And he was always human when he talked;
But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
"Good Morning!" and he glittered when he walked.

And he was rich, yes, richer than a king,
And admirably schooled in every grace:
In fine – we thought that he was everything
To make us wish that we were in his place.

So on we worked and waited for the light,
And went without the meat and cursed the bread,
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet in his head.

Poor Richard Cory had everything, but not enough to make him happy. In fact, his failure to attain happiness by attaining everything that *should* make one happy may have been the cause of his fatal depression. He may be only a literary character, but his story has plenty of real-world parallels.

So we return to our question? What is happiness, and how does one get it?

Every year, the World Values Survey (WVS) issues a report ranking the nations of the world according to their level of happiness. Repeatedly, the people of Denmark have taken first place. Other Scandinavian countries score consistently high as well, with Puerto Rico and Colombia recently coming in second and third.

How does the WVS determine people's happiness? It asks them. As reported in the journal *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, "Researchers measured happiness by simply asking people how happy they were, and how satisfied they were with their lives as a whole."

As we will see, the equation of happiness and satisfaction may have been the researchers' first mistake. Their failure to define happiness may have been their second. Their conclusions about the source of happiness were almost undeniably their third.

And what were those conclusions? That happiness derives from increased personal freedom, prosperity, and social tolerance. To have money and the opportunity to use it as one wants without being judged by others is the source of true happiness – at least, that is what the WSV would have us believe.

Anton Kaiser read the results for 2008 and wondered if something was not rotten in the state of Denmark. The retired career army officer did some research of his own and reported his findings in the *Dakota Voice*: "Denmark, Puerto Rico, and Colombia are highly literate democracies (98%, 94%, and 93% literacy, respectively), whose people speak primarily one language (Danish, Spanish, and Spanish), and who are overwhelmingly Christian (Lutheran 90%, Catholic 85%, and Catholic 85%)."

Mr. Kaiser wondered why these statistics had not led researchers to conclude that education, common culture, and religious commitment might be the relevant criteria for producing happiness. Granted, one could reasonably expect people who live in a society (like Denmark's) that includes legalized prostitution and drug use to describe themselves as "happy." Considering that the WVS Association has its headquarters in neighboring Sweden – which has similarly "relaxed" social mores – one suspects that a certain cultural bias may have guided their conclusions.

A young man who had grown up suffering the abuse and embarrassment of a drunkard for a father was constantly on the lookout for ways to reform his old man.

On one occasion when his father was sober, the young man spotted a drunk wallowing in his own filth by the roadside. The sot was in such a stupor that he seemed oblivious to his own indignation.

Seizing upon the opportunity, the young man grabbed his father by the arm and pointed at the pitiful derelict. "Look!" he

cried. "Do you see that drunk in the road?"

His father looked where his son was pointing and, when he beheld the man covered in mud and muck, he appeared thunderstruck. Slowly, he advanced toward the drunken man, then leaned down until their faces were only a few inches apart.

As the young man watched his father whisper a few words to the drunk he felt a surge of success and relief. Surely, this time he had gotten through; never had he seen anything make such an impression on his father before.

When his father finally came back with a glazed expression on his face, the son asked eagerly, "What did you say to him, Pop?"

The father turned to his son and said, "I asked him what he was drinking and where I could find some."

Without a common language, whether literal or figurative, individuals feel cut off from one another and therefore see communal standards only as impediments to their own desires and aspirations. Conversely, in a community of people with shared values and cultural reference points, everyone feels increasingly connected to everyone else. In such a society, people are less inclined to feel that they are working at cross purposes, that the force of social inertia is against them, that they are condemned to struggle in vain in pursuit of goals that others are continually trying to sabotage.

When people feel they are part of a national movement, they begin to see themselves as players on the same team, working together to reach the same goalposts. That sense of unified purpose lies at the heart of genuine happiness.

Open rebuke out of hidden love is true good.

Wouldn't it be nice if all we ever heard were compliments?

You are so smart! You are so talented! That makes you look gorgeous! You have such good taste! I wish I were you!

Little children need praise to develop their sense of self-worth and the motivation to achieve. But even our praise of children needs to be connected to concrete action. *You sat so nicely at the table. It was so kind of you to share with you sister. You cleaned up after yourself so responsibly.*

Adults need praise as well, but once we reach the age of maturity constructive criticism is likely to serve us much better. Interestingly, the biblical Hebrew root *yokhakh,* meaning "rebuke," also means "validation." We may not enjoy it when others correct us, but criticism is actually an acknowledgement of our true potential together with guidance how to turn that potential into reality.

No coach ever won ball games by telling his players how wonderful they are. His job is not to stroke their egos but to identify how they can improve their game, individually and as a team. Certainly the coach wants to have a winning season. But a good coach understands that the way to win is to coax the best performance out of his players by helping them work toward perfection. Smart players know that every criticism from a coach represents an opportunity to become a better player.

It was with this in mind that the sages of the Talmud taught us to "love rebuke," since rebuke properly given is itself an expression of love. Because we are human, few of us appreciate rebuke, and we are more likely to interpret criticism as contempt or disdain. This is why effective rebuke is exceedingly hard to give: it only produces positive results when it is accepted, and it is only accepted when it is recognized as being given for the benefit of the recipient.

A true master of rebuke may not have to speak even a single word. A raised eyebrow, a tilt of the head, a twitch of the lips –

any of these can convey volumes from one skilled in the art of nonverbal communication.

> *The revered Rabbi Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev once devised an ingenious plan to deal with a wealthy Jew who refused to give a penny in charity. One day, the rabbi knocked on the miser's door, accepted his invitation in, then sat in silence while smiling at his bewildered host. After a long, uncomfortable interlude, the man could take no more. "Rabbi," he cried. "Why do you just sit there smiling?"*
>
> *"The Torah commands us to give rebuke," the rabbi replied at last, "Over the years, I have fulfilled this commandment many times, for the people in this town have been eager to listen to what I tell them and follow my instructions. But in the case of one who will not listen, the Torah commands us* ***not*** *to offer rebuke, since doing so merely increases the recalcitrance of the transgressor. So I am smiling with the pleasure of being able to fulfill* ***this*** *commandment for* ***the very first time!****"*

Unfortunately, most of us are not so skilled, and frequently we use rebuke as an outlet for venting our own frustrations and disappointments – which, needless to say, renders our rebuke largely ineffective.

Again we return to the Mona Lisa. Is she disgusted by our foolishness, our selfishness, and our laziness? Somewhat. Is she frightened that we may never find our way back onto the path that leads to success and fulfillment? A bit. Is she angry that, despite all the failures we have brought upon ourselves, all the frustration we have caused ourselves, and all the bitterness we have inflicted upon ourselves, we persist in repeating our mistakes over and over again? Just a little.

But mostly she is happy, happy because she recognizes the

potential that resides within us. She is hopeful as well that, ultimately, we will not let our potential go entirely to waste. So she smiles at us, rebuking us through the look that lets us know that she knows the margin by which we have fallen short, but which also validates the capacity we have to learn from our mistakes and, eventually, get it right.

Faithful are the wounds from one's beloved, but kisses from an enemy are enticing.

In biblical Hebrew, the word for "friend," *rey'eh*, shares its phonetic structure with the word for "evil," *ra'ah*. How is it possible for two such antithetical concepts should derive from the same linguistic source?

Friend is among the most overused words in the English language. (*Love* is another, as we shall see presently.) Anyone with whom we spend a few minutes a day chatting by the water cooler or trading social networking messages we call a "friend." Indeed, the infectious popularity of Facebook has degraded the meaning of *friend* to junk bond status.

Once upon a time, a friend was more than a colleague, more than an acquaintance, more than a utilitarian vessel for passing the time or exchanging pleasantries. In reality, true friendship is a bond deeper than blood and more profound than family. If a person can claim two or three close friends at any one time in his life, he is truly blessed.

So what makes a true friend?

The Hebrew word for "love," *ahavah*, derives from the root *hav*, meaning "give." Loving comes through giving, through the investment of time and energy, of thought and attention, in a way and to a degree that is unique to a committed relationship. The more we give, the more we love. The more we love, the more we

can love. This is why parents with large families have no more trouble meeting the emotional demands of their children than parents of an only child.

This is also the reason why parents invariably love their children more than children love their parents; since parents are the givers in the relationship and children are the takers, it is inevitable that the parents will feel a stronger love. And although children sometimes give back when their parents advance into old age, more commonly they don't give back but give forward when they have children of their own.

The notion of "falling in love" may make for stirring romance novels and movies, but it is not the stuff of reality. Infatuation and lust frequently masquerade as love, but they are fleeting and are sure to vanish once the novelty of the relationship begins to wane. One may fall off the roof or into the mud, but not into love.

If we are confused in our understanding of love, we have no one to blame but ourselves. Our overuse of the word *love* is integrally connected to our overuse of *friend*. If I love ice cream, and I love my car, and I love my wife, and I love that little doggie in the window then, by equating all of these, I have clearly lost my emotional bearings. When words like *commitment* and *devotion* and *sacrifice* are no longer part of the lexicon of human relationships, then the foundations of true love have already crumbled to dust. As Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz, leader of the distinguished Mir Yeshiva, was accustomed to remark:

> *Anyone who says "I love chicken" really means "I love myself." If he loved the chicken, he wouldn't eat it.*

The word *ahavah* is also related to the word *lahava*, which means "flame." A flame is one of two things in the world it is

possible to give away without losing anything, since a single flame can light a thousand candles and remain unchanged. Love is the other.

A flame also symbolizes love because of its shape. It is wide at the base then tapers to a point. Similarly, two people may be very different in their likes and dislikes, in their personalities and their styles. But if they are committed to common values and common goals, if they share a common sense of purpose, then a foundation of love already exists between them.

True friendship is a relationship of love. And without the ability to love one cannot feel true happiness.

Which brings us back to the common root that connects *friend* and *evil*. By definition, a relationship requires closeness, and we only become close by lowering the emotional defenses we construct to protect ourselves from hurt and harm. Since the very reason for these defenses is self-preservation, we are only willing to lower them for those we trust.

In biblical Hebrew, the word for "knowing" is *yoda*. (It's possible that George Lucas had this in mind when he so named the sagacious Jedi master in his *Star Wars* series.) The same word also means "intimacy," as in the verse "And Adam knew his wife."

Without knowledge, there can be no intimacy. Without closeness, there can be no knowledge. Without trust, there can be no closeness.

And, paradoxically, without intimacy there can be no trust. Human relationships, therefore, develop along a spiraling course of interactions through which experience establishes trust, which brings closeness, which provides knowledge, which creates intimacy, which produces deeper trust.

This is the process that lays the foundations of love. It is also the process by which we make ourselves vulnerable. Consequently,

it is only when we allow others close enough to hurt us that we learn to trust and to love; and there is no greater form of evil than the betrayal of someone who has let us come close enough to love.

A man came across a little boy in the park who was sobbing uncontrollably. "What's the matter?" asked the man. "Did you hurt yourself?"

"No," said the boy between sobs, "My friends and I were playing hide-and-seek."

"Ahh," replied the man. "And you couldn't find your friends?"

"No," wailed the boy. "It was my turn to hide, and they didn't try to find me."

Nothing is more painful than supposed "friends" who prove themselves false or exploit us for having made ourselves vulnerable to them. But Solomon warns us not to confuse the "wounds" inflicted by true friends for betrayal. Words of rebuke from a loved one sting, not only because they prick our egos, but also because they make us feel that we have disappointed those whose respect we most desire. But how foolish we are not to accept their gentle admonition as a sign of true love; how childish to resent them for not allowing us to carry on unaware. What greater loyalty could we hope for than friends willing to stand in our way when they see us wandering off the reservation?

Of course, understanding the benefits of rebuke doesn't make it easier to hear. If we are insecure in our own sense of self, it is far less painful to be left to our own folly than to face the need for changing course.

Similarly, people who have been repeatedly hurt by neglectful or abusive parents, or have in the past been too quick to give their trust, may develop a reflex against intimacy. Having been burned before, they refuse to take the chance again. People of this kind

are likely to interpret even the most constructive criticism as a personal attack.

But most of us yearn for intimacy. As human beings, we are essentially spiritual creatures; we are drawn to the spiritual essence of others so that *we want to find the good in them* as the first step toward connecting with them. Tragically, that way is equally fraught with danger, since the people from whom we have the most to fear are often the most adept at flying false colors. This is why trust must be cultivated slowly and cautiously, for the dangers of naïve confidence in the good intentions of others leads us once again into harm's way.

The consequences of flattering words luring us into misplaced trust have been famously depicted by Mary Howitt:

Will you walk into my parlor?" said the Spider to the Fly,
'Tis the prettiest little parlor that ever you did spy;
The way into my parlor is up a winding stair,
And I've a many curious things to show when you are there."
Oh no, no," said the little Fly, "to ask me is in vain,
For who goes up your winding stair can ne'er come down again."

"I'm sure you must be weary, dear, with soaring up so high;
Will you rest upon my little bed?" said the Spider to the Fly.
"There are pretty curtains drawn around; the sheets are fine and thin,
And if you like to rest awhile, I'll snugly tuck you in!"
Oh no, no," said the little Fly, "for I've often heard it said,
They never, never wake again, who sleep upon your bed!"

Said the cunning Spider to the Fly, "Dear friend what can I do,
To prove the warm affection I've always felt for you?
I have within my pantry, good store of all that's nice;

I'm sure you're very welcome – will you please to take a slice?"
"Oh no, no," said the little Fly, "kind Sir, that cannot be,
I've heard what's in your pantry, and I do not wish to see!"

"Sweet creature!" said the Spider, "you're witty and you're wise,
How handsome are your gauzy wings, how brilliant are your eyes!
I've a little looking-glass upon my parlor shelf,
If you'll step in one moment, dear, you shall behold yourself."
"I thank you, gentle sir," she said, "for what you're pleased to say,
And bidding you good morning now, I'll call another day."

The Spider turned him round about, and went into his den,
For well he knew the silly Fly would soon come back again:
So he wove a subtle web, in a little corner sly,
And set his table ready, to dine upon the Fly.
Then he came out to his door again, and merrily did sing,
"Come hither, hither, pretty Fly, with the pearl and silver wing;
Your robes are green and purple – there's a crest upon your head;
Your eyes are like the diamond bright, but mine are dull as lead!"

Alas, alas! how very soon this silly little Fly,
Hearing his wily, flattering words, came slowly flitting by;
With buzzing wings she hung aloft, then near and nearer drew,
Thinking only of her brilliant eyes, and green and purple hue –
Thinking only of her crested head – poor foolish thing! At last,
Up jumped the cunning Spider, and fiercely held her fast.
He dragged her up his winding stair, into his dismal den,
Within his little parlor – but she ne'er came out again!

A true friend is one who gives rebuke by finding a way to make it palatable, so that it can be received with a minimum of discomfort and embarrassment. And the most effective way we

can give rebuke to others is by making ourselves models of proper conduct.

If I see that my wife remains a paradigm of composure as I start to have a temper tantrum, I am far more likely to get a grip on my anger than if she also goes ballistic. If I feel my friend wrap his arm warmly around my shoulder as I am about to answer an insult with a nasty retort, I'm more likely to shrug off the comment. If my children see me calmly waiting my turn while we stand in line, they will learn patience far better if they than if I am squirming as impatiently as they are.

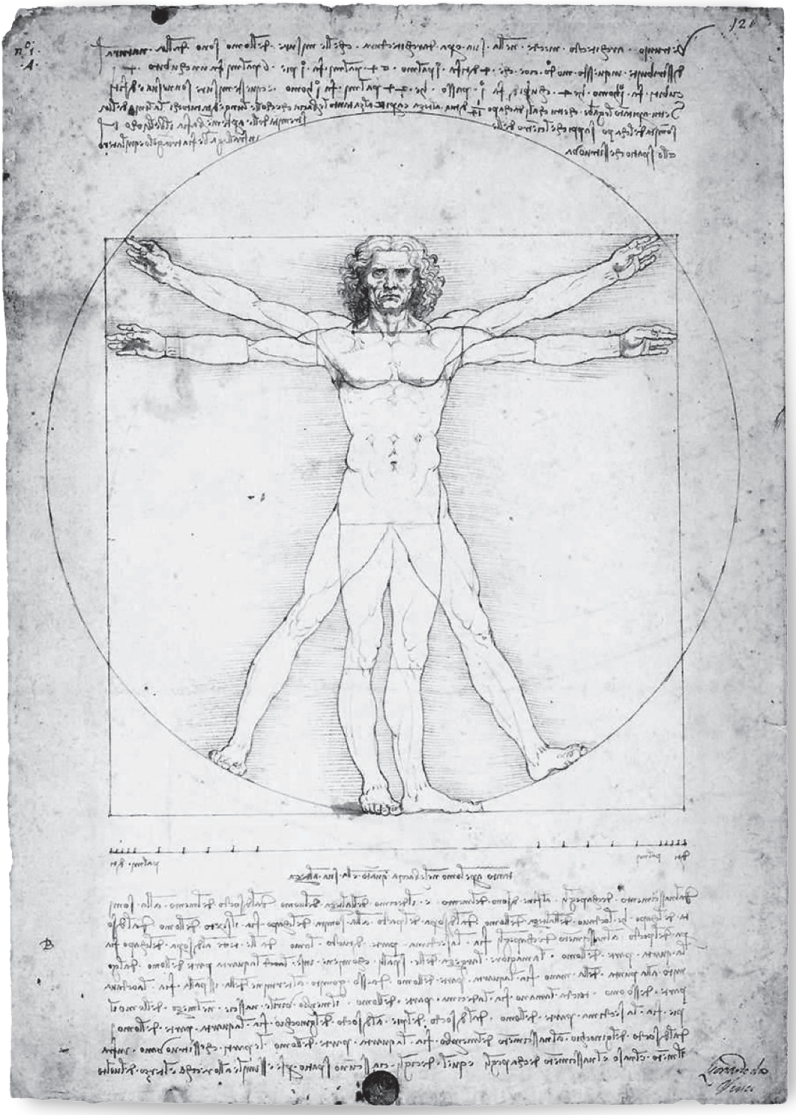
And so Mona Lisa sits serenely at the center of a chaotic world and, unperturbed by the frenzied machinations of others, she offers her smiling rebuke to those who would eagerly let themselves get caught up in the maelstrom of temporal pursuits.

The satiated disdain even honeycomb; but to the hungry, even the bitter tastes sweet.

There is nothing more dangerous than satisfaction.

Human beings are not meant to be static. Our natural state is one of motion, as Leonardo himself demonstrated in a rendering nearly as famous as Mona Lisa herself, the *Vitruvian Man*, who stands erect inside a square superimposed upon his own splayed image inside a circle. Like a bicycle rider, man achieves stability only when he is moving forward.

Satisfaction is dead weight. It saps our will, crushes our ambition, and weakens our resolve, leeching all the sweetness from life by encouraging us to indulge the most insidious of all human emotions – complacency. True, we can make our lives bitter by dwelling on our unrealized dreams; but we can just as easily fail to achieve the greatness that lies within us if our past accomplishments convince us to settle for future mediocrity.



Vitruvian Man

In its distinctly pithy style, the Talmud communicates both ideas at once in one of its most widely quoted aphorisms:

> *Who is rich?*
> *The one who is happy with his portion.*

What the sages did not say is every bit as important as what they did say. They did *not* teach us that one is rich if he is *satisfied* with what he has. This distinction provides the final clue to understanding the secret of true happiness.

Solomon's parable contrasts the mixed blessing of satiety with the dubious curse of hunger. When we feel no sense of want, we find little cause for pleasure. Just as the person who is bloated from a sumptuous meal has no appetite for even the sweetest honey, similarly a person who has overindulged in the pleasures of the material world loses interest in further acquisitions or conquests. Eventually, he finds nothing worth the effort of attainment. Life becomes tedious, for it lacks both direction and purpose.

On the other hand, one who is hungry knows exactly what he wants, and he will devise one scheme after another to slake his hunger, remaining fully focused until he gets what he needs.

Do you remember the last time you were involved in a project that consumed all your time and attention? Maybe it was an unwelcome imposition at your job or an unavoidable obligation as a parent. Maybe it demanded more from you than you wanted to give. Even so, if it had to be done, if you knew how to tackle it, if it challenged you to do your best, then the hours spent working on it probably sped past like minutes and you felt a growing excitement as you saw your plan taking shape and recognized that your efforts would be rewarded with success.

What's more, when you completed the job, you probably felt

a momentary elation – whether for a few days or a few minutes – followed by a wave of disappointment.

Whether you realized it or not, what you felt while you toiled was genuine happiness. What you felt after you finished was the melancholy of satiety. Paradoxically, *it is our lack of satisfaction that makes it possible for us to be happy*.

The fallacy of the "pursuit of happiness," therefore, derives from the mistaken assumption that happiness is itself a goal. Happiness is a byproduct, the natural emotional response that arises when we have a sense of purpose and the awareness that we are working toward the fulfillment of that purpose to the best of our ability. When we believe a goal is attainable, and all the more so when others around us are working cooperatively in pursuit of the same goal, our feeling of happiness increases exponentially.

Indeed, as Christopher Plummer's character says to his student Hector, "We should concern ourselves not so much with the *pursuit* of *happiness* but rather with the *happiness of pursuit*."

> *Back in the middle 1990s, the Atlanta Constitution printed a story about a middle-aged man who had won a $4 million dollar lottery – an exceptional amount for the time. The winner had been working a double shift as a garbage collector.*
>
> *When asked what he intended to do after winning so much money, the man replied, "I'm going to quit one of my shifts."*
>
> *"Only one?" asked the incredulous reporter.*
>
> *"A man has to have work," replied the new millionaire.*

So are people in Denmark really happy? No doubt many of them are. Those who feel themselves an integral part of their society, connected to their neighbors and countrymen through a common culture and religion, a high level of education, and the resources available from a high standard of living – they most

likely lead lives that give them a sense of purpose and meaning, which are the underpinnings of authentic happiness.

Of those who spend their days immersed in the sensual pleasures of an open society, it is hardly surprising that they describe themselves as happy; in truth, they are merely *distracted* from having to contemplate the pointlessness of their existence.

Ironically, it's all too common that people spend their lives pursuing an ideal that brings them only disappointment when they ultimately realize their dream. How many people go to pieces upon reaching the retirement they have looked forward to for decades? How many couples find their marriages strained to the breaking point once the children leave home and they find themselves with nothing in common? How many people who experience unexpected financial windfalls see their lives unravel when the need to earn a living no longer gives structure to their days?

Conversely, how many people living modestly still find joy in every day, taking pleasure in their work, their families, and their community? Chances are you don't have to look far to find a friend or neighbor with neither fame nor fortune who is genuinely happy with his portion and, consequently, is rich beyond measure.

Rabbi Israel, known in Jewish history as the Ba'al Shem Tov, was the founder of the Chassidic movement in 17th century Europe. On one occasion he was expounding upon the Talmud's definition of happiness, when he glanced out the study hall window and saw Schmeril, the town water carrier, shuffling along with a wooden yoke across his shoulders and a pail of water suspended from each end.

"Schmeril," called Rabbi Israel, "Please come here for a moment."

He waited for the simple laborer to make his way over, then asked, "So Schmeril, how are things going for you?"

Schmeril's eyes widened in surprise. Here was a chance to unburden his soul to the rabbi; he didn't need to be asked a second time.

"Oy, rabbi," he began, "Just look at me. My beard is streaked with gray, and I still have to schlep these heavy buckets all over town. Sometimes I even have to haul them up to the second story. And rabbi, my children won't give me the time of day. I have to send for them when I need them, but otherwise they want nothing to do with me. And rabbi, when I go to synagogue I see all these people involved in all kinds of business, but no one pays any attention to me, and I have nothing to do but sit in the back and recite Psalms." Schmeril let out a long sigh. "Oy, rabbi, what a life I have."

Rabbi Israel gave Schmeril a blessing for happiness and sent him on his way. He then turned back to his students and continued his lesson without comment.

The following day, Rabbi Israel again saw Schmeril through the window and called him over. "So Schmeril," he said, "How are things today?"

"Oh, rabbi," Schmeril said, "Just look at me. My beard is streaked with gray, yet I still have strength to schlep these heavy buckets all over town. I can even haul them up to the second story when I have to. And rabbi, I see other people whose children pester them night and day. My children come when I need them and otherwise get by on their own. And rabbi, when I go to synagogue I see all these people involved in all kinds of nonsense, while I can sit in the back and recite Psalms without anyone disturbing me at all. Oh, rabbi, what a life I have!"

Rabbi Israel gave Schmeril another blessing and sent him on his way.

What changed? Nothing changed; and yet everything changed.

It's easy to resent the commitments imposed by a spouse, by children, by a job that enables us to support our families and serve the community; we condition ourselves to see all of these as impediments to personal freedom and as hindrances to individual ambition. It's just as easy to see them as opportunities to be part of a loving relationship, to raise the next generation of responsible adults, and to contribute to a civil society. If we consider the empty promise of temptations and the bitterness they bring to our lives when we pursue them, it's easy to appreciate that the rewards of raising a family and building lifelong relationships are far sweeter than the romantic fantasies and adventures of our imaginations.

Being happy with what we have does not mean that we can't aspire for more. Wealth is a resource that can free us from mundane obligations to pursue loftier goals. A promotion that carries greater responsibility may provide more intellectual and emotional fulfillment. A ditch-digger who appreciates that his labor enables him to support his wife and children is a happy ditch-digger, even while he is taking night classes and earning a vocational degree in hope of raising his station.

Of course, not everybody gets to be an executive, and not everybody wants to be one. Part of being happy with one's portion is having an objective sense of one's own potential and living with realistic expectations.

Rabbi Shostakovich worked in a slaughterhouse to ensure that all meat was processed in conformance to Jewish dietary law. One of the men on site, Marcus, worked every day disemboweling the slaughtered livestock. He wore rubber waders that came up to his waist and, by the end of each day, was splattered with blood and excrement.

Despite his job, Marcus was always pleasant, always greeted the rabbi with a smile and a "good morning," always worked diligently through each eight-hour shift.

One day, Rabbi Shostakovich had an inspiration. He approached Marcus and said, "You know, I have a certain amount of pull with the management here. If you like, I could speak to someone about having you transferred to a different job here in the plant."

The rabbi was astonished to see the other Marcus's expression darken violently. "Don't you do nothing," he said. "Don't you say nothing to no one. I've been doing this job my whole life. I know how to do it just right. It suits me, and I suit it. You take this job away from me and you'll ruin my life."

Rabbi Shostakovich later said that until that moment he never really understood what the sages meant when they said a rich man is the one who is happy with his portion.

But Mona Lisa understands. She sits in perfect repose, not because she is satisfied but because she is happy. Her eyes are full of purpose, yet she accepts that there is a time for action and a time for patience. She recognizes the confusion of the world around her but refuses to be swept up in it. She is focused on those she loves, offering rebuke and validation, not demanding perfection but inspiring the pursuit of perfection as the recipe for a happy life.

CHAPTER 4

The miracle of misdirection

There is one who thinks himself rich, yet has nothing; there is one who thinks himself poor, yet has great wealth. The ransom of a man's life are his riches, but only if the poor hears no reproof. The light of the righteous remains joyful, but the lamp of the wicked will flicker out (13:7-9).

Having already examined the sages' observation that only one who is happy with his lot is truly rich, this proverb at first appears to add nothing new. Clearly, a happy man with little money is wealthier than an unhappy man with silver and gold.

But here Solomon offers a different lesson. It may be true that man finds joy in his portion only by defining his life with a sense of purpose; but it is also necessary for his life's purpose to be one of intrinsic value. A research science may feel fulfilled by devoting his career to the discovery of a perpetual motion machine, but his pursuit of an impossible dream renders any sense of fulfillment as illusory as if it were the product of an opium daze. So too, the *Guinness Book of World Records* is filled with the names of people who invested unthinkable amounts of time and energy becoming best at the most trivial of pursuits.

In the same way that satiety can be more dangerous than deprivation, superficiality may be the most deceptive form of blindness. For just as satisfaction leads to complacency and indolence, similarly does two-dimensional perception convince us that there is nothing more to our world than what meets the eye, persuading us to accept a shallow view of reality as complete when the true nature of our universe lies hidden beneath the surface. On the other hand, just as hunger sparks the survival instinct that sharpens our awareness and focuses our efforts, so too does impaired physical vision compel us to take extra caution and seek out sure guidance.

A king once sent his son on a diplomatic mission to another country. As he finished preparing his son on the topics of negotiation, the king said, "There is one more matter of the utmost importance. While you are on this trip, under no circumstances are you to enter into any kind of bet or wager."

Since the prince rarely gambled, his father's warning seemed odd to him. However, he had no reason to argue and readily agreed.

The next day, as he boarded the ship that would carry him abroad, his father bid him safe journey and again cautioned him, "Remember, no matter what you must not accept a bet."

Perplexed by the king's insistence, but not overly concerned, the prince repeated his assurance.

The prince's mission went smoothly and negotiations with the foreign minister were successfully concluded. As the two of them enjoyed a final meal together, the foreign minister remarked, "You are a very skillful negotiator," he said, "which is all the more impressive because of your handicap."

"What handicap is that?" asked the prince, taken aback.

"Why, that you are a hunchback," replied the minister.

The prince looked astonished. "I have no idea what you are talking about," he exclaimed.

"Oh, you conceal it very well," said the minister, "and I apologize for bringing it up, as I'm sure it is a source of embarrassment."

"There is no embarrassment involved," replied the prince, "since I am not a hunchback."

"Between the two of us there is no need to deny it," insisted the minister. "I am quite adept at noticing details. By the way you walk and the way you carry yourself I can see clearly that you are."

"I'm afraid you are mistaken," replied the prince, beginning to grow angry.

"See here," said the minister, appearing somewhat heated himself. "I pride myself on my ability to notice what others do not. Not only do I say you are a hunchback, but I will bet you a hundred thousand rubles that I am right."

Immediately, the prince remembered his father's warning. But certainly his father could not have anticipated a circumstance like this one. This was not gambling. This was a sure thing.

"I accept," said the prince, and promptly removed his shirt, revealing that he was undeniably not a hunchback.

"Now I am the one who is embarrassed," said the minister as he counted out a large number of bills and handed them over. "I can't understand how I could have been so mistaken. Please accept my apologies with your winnings."

The prince returned home and, upon greeting his father, eagerly recounted the way he had profited a hundred thousand rubles.

Instead of pleasure, the king turned red with anger. "Did I not tell you to refuse any wager?" he demanded. "Let me tell you now that I bet the foreign minister half a million rubles that he could not get you to take a bet!"

Professional magicians depend upon misplaced certitude for the success of their illusions. Through subtle manipulations, they redirect our attention so that we fail to notice their slight-of-hand. Since we are watching carefully, we have trouble believing that we could be fooled. But by guiding our focus away from where they don't want us to look, they achieve the illusion of real magic.

Anyone who has learned the tricks of misdirection easily spots how the magician performs his "magic." Of course, by destroying the illusion, he no longer finds the magician's act the least bit entertaining.

The applications of misdirection extend far beyond stage magic, as Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons discovered when they conducted their now-famous psychology experiment at Harvard University. You may have seen their video, in which three people in white shirts and three people in black shirts are passing basketballs back and forth; viewers are instructed to count how many times the white-shirted players pass the basketball. When the video ends, a caption on the screen reads: *The correct answer is 15 passes. But did you see the gorilla?*

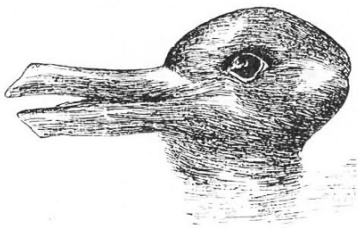
I was one of the 50 percent who failed to see the man in the gorilla suit that walked in between the players, faced the camera, thumped his chest, then wandered out of view. On their website, the authors of *The Invisible Gorilla* explain:

> *This experiment reveals two things: that we are missing a lot of what goes on around us, and that we have no idea that we are missing so much. To our surprise, it has become one of the best-known experiments in psychology. It is described in most introductory textbooks and is featured in more than a dozen science museums. It has been used by everyone from preachers and teachers to corporate trainers and terrorist hunters, not to mention characters on the TV show C.S.I., to help explain what we see and what we don't see. And it got us thinking that many other intuitive beliefs that we have about our own minds might be just as wrong.*

The more certain we are of what we are seeing, the less attention we pay to what is in front of us. Twilight is a particularly dangerous time to drive, since we can still see but don't process that our perception is impaired by the failing light. Once night has fallen we compensate automatically for the full darkness with greater attention and caution. It is when we mistakenly believe that we can see clearly that we are most likely to err.

Conversely, the less clear something is the more we have to concentrate to recognize and interpret it. Optical illusions work through ambiguous imagery, like the famous picture that appears now as an old woman and a moment later as a young woman, or the single figure that oscillates between a duck and a rabbit. The popular Magic Eye posters use computers to generate pictures that we have to learn how to look at through a long process of trial and error. (It took me months to master the technique, during

which time I suspected that the whole thing was a colossal hoax and that there was really no image hidden amidst the confusion of lines and colors.) Even after we figure out how to see the hidden image, it vanishes in a single moment of inattention and the picture before us returns to randomness.



The attraction of optical illusions, however, comes from the thrill of discovering order within chaos, which almost always requires using our perceptive ability in an unconventional way.

In this we identify another aspect of the Mona Lisa's smile. The Italians have a word for it: *sfumato*, meaning that which is blurred, ambiguous, and left to the imagination. It describes the way La Gioconda's smile seems to come and go, taking form as we look at her and then vanishing if we look too long.

Harvard neuroscientist Margaret Livingstone suggests that the mystery may be explained by understanding the design of the human eye. We perceive brightness and color through the cones that are concentrated in the fovea, the central part of the eye. Fainter objects are more easily detected by the rods, which occupy the outer regions of the eye and perceive dim, monochromatic light.

First alluded to by Aristotle, the phenomenon called *averted vision* allows us to process information by looking away from an object of interest, just as a filter makes it possible to study the nuances of the sun's surface by eliminating the intense light that makes direct observation impossible. Since the cones that make up the fovea register brighter light, we have to rely on the peripheral rods to capture subtleties of shading. But that only works when we look away.

When we gaze at any painting, we tend to focus on the eyes the same way we do when we look at another person. Dr. Livingstone explains that, by focusing on Mona Lisa's eyes we enable our peripheral vision to process the other details of her face. The peripheral rods, however, are attuned to shading and not detail, so they pick up the shadows below the cheekbones, which hint at the curvature of Mona Lisa's smile.

When we look directly at the smile, however, the shadows are lost by the fovea's cones. "You'll never be able to catch her smile by looking at her mouth," Dr. Livingstone says. But look away again, and the smile returns.

We have all experienced instances of looking directly at an object and failing to see it, either because it is so familiar or unremarkable that our minds filter it out as irrelevant, or because it is so incongruous that our subconscious refuses to accept its presence – like the invisible gorilla. In such cases, we may notice an object only when we are looking elsewhere and our peripheral vision, unencumbered by the censorship of our expectations, draws our attention back to what had previously hidden in plain sight.

Dr. Livingstone admits that it is not clear why later artists have not adopted Leonardo's technique, and wonders whether doing so would require painting the mouth by looking away from it. If so, then Mona Lisa herself could not have been created without using that same process.

There is one who thinks himself rich, yet has nothing; there is one who thinks himself poor, yet has great wealth.

Seeing is believing.

Most of us have learned to accept this axiom of human experience with almost theological conviction, so much so that we invest anything appearing before our eyes with the imprimatur of absolute truth. Ironically, our own experience tells us that it just isn't so.

Modern science has discovered that all matter is composed of molecules, which are composed of atoms, which are composed of protons, neutrons, and electrons (which may someday be discovered to contain even tinier particles). How easy should it be for us, therefore, to appreciate that the complexities of our world are not always revealed to the naked eye, and that much of our universe is not at all how it appears?

Solomon teaches that emotional and spiritual maturity involve relearning how to look at the world we live in. Our knowledge of the world's deceptive nature compels us to look deeper if we hope to gain any insight into the underlying reality of creation. When confronted by the contradictions of our universe, we can either retreat into the self-deception of superficiality or we can grapple with uncertainty by delving deeper. That very process, whether or not it yields the answers we hope to find, is itself a source of immeasurable wealth.

A wealthy man became obsessed by the suspicion that criminals were plotting to steal his fortune. He began hiding his gold and silver in secret places to protect it.

Then the man died unexpectedly, leaving no record of where he had hidden his money. His son, who knew that his father had possessed great riches, found only a small bag of silver coins among

his father's estate. Having believed that he stood to inherit a fortune, the son was devastated.

As the son held the meager cache of silver in his hand, one of the coins slipped through his fingers, rolled across the floor, and disappeared between the floorboards. With so small an inheritance, he could not afford to lose even a single coin, so he was forced to pull up the floorboard to recover it. There he found a large bag of gold hidden by his father.

Having discovered one hiding place, the son began searching for more, occasionally uncovering new stores of treasure. He never did find the single lost coin, but he became wealthier by far than that one coin would have made him.[9]

Satisfied with his riches, a wealthy man may end up pursuing no goals other than his own gratification; by depriving himself of the sense of purpose that brings happiness, in the end his riches will leave him impoverished. Conversely, a poor man who struggles to support his family may discover, amidst his toil, an appreciation for the unexpected opportunities that come his way and a deeper love for those whose sustenance necessitates his labor.

In the language of Solomon, the term for gratitude is *hakores hatov*, literally "recognition of the good." When we take good fortune for granted, we fail to recognize it as a blessing; and when we fail to appreciate what we have, we have truly nothing. But if we see our difficulties as opportunities and recognize the potential they offer us as a blessing of good, we enrich our lives beyond the value of gold and silver.

9 Adapted from *The Maggid of Dubno and his Parables*.

The ransom of a man's life are his riches, but only if the poor hears no reproof.

The Hebrew word for "charity" is *tzeddaka*, derived from the root *tzedek*, meaning "justice." Since charity is an act of kindness and mercy, how do we understand its connection with justice, which implies something earned and deserved?

Legislators may pass laws and judges may issue sentences, but a justice system depends upon enforcement officers and bailiffs to implement and uphold the rule of law. Similarly, members of a community have a responsibility to themselves and those around them to judge between right and wrong, between good and evil; in this way, human beings build a society based upon justice.

In terms of criminal justice, every human society has established a formal system to protect its citizens and deal with those who pose a threat to others. In terms of human justice, it is the individual who must decide on how best he can correct the inequities of circumstance. If he has more than he needs, it is only just that he shares his good fortune with others. If he does so to the best of his means and ability, he is considered a *tzaddik*, a just and righteous individual.

For most of us, however, the influence of selfishness and self-indulgence is at least as insistent as whatever natural saintliness we may possess. Consequently, we need to employ clear thinking to prod us toward acting justly.

Let us consider: What is money?

A man heard of a distant country where diamonds and precious stones of all kinds covered the ground like sand. Thinking to become rich, he sold all his possessions to move there with his family.

Upon arriving, the new immigrants discovered that the stories were true: diamonds, rubies, and sapphires littered the earth. The

man and his family fell to the ground and began scooping up huge handfuls with great excitement.

All around them, people stopped to stare and laugh. "What is wrong with these people?" they asked one another. "Why do they waste their time picking up worthless rocks with such enthusiasm?"

The man and his family soon discovered that their move had left them worse off than before. They had no money to travel back to their homeland, and the jewels for which they had come had no value at all where they were.

Long ago, money did have intrinsic value, when coins were made out of gold, silver, or copper. But even then, those materials were only considered valuable because they were rare. If everyone had decided that scarcity was not sufficient reason to value them, those "precious" metals would have become worthless overnight.

Today, money is symbolic, represented by paper currency or, even more mysteriously, stored as electronic data on hard drives or in "the cloud." Most of us would rather not think about the paradox of trillions of dollars changing hands daily without ever actually changing hands. People buy and sell by punching numbers into computers, often without seeing either the commodities they buy and sell or the currency that powers their transactions.

So what is money, *really*?

Money is a resource. Money is potential. For most of us, money represents the ability to buy what we need. Wealth represents the ability to buy what we want.

Having already explained the fallacy of attempting to satisfy ourselves with comfort, power, or acquisitions, we have to clarify what money *should* mean to us. The simplest answer is that money represents opportunity.

We all know that no one can buy happiness. What we can buy, at least in part, is the opportunity to define our own purpose.

To use wealth for the benefit of others, to recognize that every resource we have beyond what is necessary for our own needs represents another opportunity to help those who cannot help themselves – this is the outlook that turns riches into wealth; this is the way we can indeed buy happiness.

To pursue happiness for myself will lead me nowhere. To validate my existence by helping others is the recipe for true joy. This is what Solomon meant when he said that *the ransom of a man's life is riches.* Only by seeing money as a means to a greater end can a man justify his wealth and thereby redeem himself from a life squandered in pursuit of insubstantial goals.

But giving alone is not enough. There is a proper way to give, one that preserves the honor and dignity of the receiver. By giving graciously, by giving with a smile, by giving with a kind word for success, the giver preserves the dignity of the receiver and transforms his giving from an act of pity into an act of love. In the tradition of Solomon, the highest form of charity is to help a poor person find a livelihood, so that he is no longer dependent upon the gifts of others. As we have all learned, *teach a man to fish, and he has fish for a lifetime.*

Conversely, by giving in a way that demeans the poor or robs them of what little self-respect they may have left, the giver nullifies all the good he has done, for he reveals his contempt for the needy as well as his true motive of seeking to buy honor in the eyes of his fellow men.

The head of a prestigious rabbinic seminary came to a wealthy business magnate for a donation. The businessman received the rabbi reverently, but had scarcely led him into his parlor when there was another knock at the door.

The businessman opened the door to find a ragged beggar on his front porch. "I'm busy," snapped the businessman. He hastily

pulled a bill from his pocket, stuffed it into the beggar's hands, and slammed the door in the poor man's face.

Turning eagerly back to his distinguished guest, the wealthy man was taken aback to see the rabbi stand up and head for the doorway.

"If that is how you treat the poor," the rabbi said, "then you don't have the merit to support our institution."

This is what Solomon meant when he said that riches are the ransom of a man's life, *but only if the poor hears no reproof.*

Ideally, charity should be given anonymously, using an intermediary to conceal the identities of both the giver and the recipient. This accomplishes two things. First, it protects the needy from unnecessary embarrassment. Second, it protects the giver from the ego gratification that can accompany excessive expressions of gratitude and praise.

In the European town of Annipoli lived an extraordinary individual named Rabbi Zusia. Like many of the early Chassidic masters, Rabbi Zusia wandered anonymously from town to town in an attempt to sever his dependence upon physical comforts and material security.

On one occasion, Rabbi Zusia came upon a great commotion the moment he arrived in a new town. A woman had thrown herself upon the ground in the town square, nearly hysterical over the loss 200 rubles.

At the outset of his travels, Rabbi Zusia had received 200 rubles by his rabbi to support him for the next year. But when he learned of the woman's loss, Rabbi Zusia stepped forward and said, "Excuse me, but I have recently found 200 rubles. Can you tell me the denominations of the bills you lost?"

Suddenly hopeful, the woman gave the exact denominations,

which Rabbi Zusia wrote down on a scrap of paper. He then continued his questioning: "Were the bills new or old? Were they in a billfold or a wallet? Were they arranged in order of denomination or random?"

The woman answered all his questions, after which Rabbi Zusia said he would go check the money he had found and then return.

Rabbi Zusia left to find a money changer, from whom he converted his own 200 rubles into bills resembling those described by the unfortunate woman. He then returned to the town square.

"The money is yours," said Rabbi Zusia, handing the ecstatic woman the wad of bills. "However," he continued, "since I returned your money, I would like a finder's fee."

The expression of the woman and the townspeople suddenly changed. "You have done a wonderful deed," said one townsman. "But that does not entitle you to a reward. If you are poor, we will happily give you alms, but do not ask for more."

"The woman would have nothing if not for me," insisted Rabbi Zusia, "so I deserve ten percent of the total."

This remark drove the townspeople into a furor. They began heaping epithets upon Rabbi Zusia. When he continued to insist that he was entitled to a reward, the people literally drove him to the outskirts of their town and warned him never to return.

Some months later, Rabbi Zusia returned to visit his rabbi. "I heard about the incident between you and the woman who lost her money," said the rabbi. "I understood that you converted the funds I gave you so it would appear that you were returning her lost money; but I could not understand why you then demanded a reward."

Rabbi Zusia gave a modest smile. "As I was returning from the money changer, I started telling myself, 'Zusia, this is the greatest thing you have ever done. You are truly righteous.' When I heard

myself thinking this way, and when I anticipated the woman's thanks and the praises that would be showered upon me, I had to invent some means of preventing my ego from sweeping me away. By demanding a reward, I knew that I would become the subject of contempt rather than adulation."[10]

The assertions that wealth is poverty, that satiety is starvation, and that charity is justice begin to sound disturbingly Orwellian. However, in all likelihood George Orwell would have had little quarrel with the wisdom of Solomon, since this outlook does not represent a political ideology imposed by the state, but rather a moral philosophy for every individual to use in the refinement of his own personal conduct. Only after we recognize how the temptations of the material world conspire to deceive us can we hope to chart a course through life that will lead us to genuine happiness.

Although the biblical tithe sets a standard of ten percent to be set aside for charity, common sense dictates that some can afford less and others can afford more. In a morally sensitive society, there is no need for government to impose on its citizens more than the most elemental contribution to the general welfare. When individual citizens recognize that they are integral parts of their community and are therefore obligated to take an active role in communal affairs, that is what enables a morally healthy society to thrive.

In contrast, the outcome of a socialist system that takes from the rich and gives to the poor is that individuals forfeit the opportunity to transform themselves into charitable people. The

10 Adapted from *Courtrooms of the Mind* by Hanoch Teller, New York City Publishing Company, 1987.

inevitable result is that the wealthy come to resent the poor for taking that which they have earned, while the poor resent the wealthy upon whom they have become dependent.

But when individuals accept personal responsibility for those who *cannot* support themselves, then the needs of the poor benefit the wealthy even more than the generosity of the wealthy helps the poor. When we respond with kindness and mercy to those in need, we impress upon ourselves the value of justice and thereby create a just society that serves the needs of all. Every act transforms us, and the sum of our actions defines us. Over the course of a lifetime, we can continuously re-create ourselves for the better. Over the course of many lifetimes, a society can re-create the world.

Or, in the words of novelist Chuck Palahniuk:

> *Leonardo's Mona Lisa is just a thousand thousand smears of paint. Michelangelo's David is just a million hits with a hammer. We're all of us a million bits put together the right way."*

The light of the righteous remains joyful, but the lamp of the wicked will flicker out.

Solomon understands that we live in a world of darkness. Not the darkness of sightlessness but the murky twilight of moral uncertainty, where every good contains a bit of evil and evil perpetually masquerades as good. We rationalize that the promptings of our heart are wrong, and we grapple with the anticipated fallout from our actions even when we are determined to do what is right.

Fools and charlatans march boldly forward, unconcerned what damage their actions may cause themselves or others. Yet we envy them their certitude, since those of us who try to walk the

paths of virtue often find ourselves plagued by doubts that leave us either paralyzed with indecision or filled with recriminations. Lacking confidence in our own judgment and mistrustful of the counsel of others, we may wander irresolutely, guided by good intentions but still unable to find our way.

From where does the light of clarity come? It comes from wisdom. And it comes from the righteous.

We have already heard Solomon explain how the principles of moral law are acquired not through our own sensibilities but through our connection with teachers of wisdom, and that moral discipline demands both sincerity and commitment to virtue. But many claim to be virtuous who are not, and many gain a reputation for wisdom by pandering to the self-interest of those already lost in moral confusion, telling eager audiences whatever they want to hear.

Like the king listening for the tune, we have to listen closely if we hope to hear the voice of true wisdom.

The Hebrew word *shema*, which means "listen," also means "gather." Through the faculty of vision, we can take in an entire picture at one time, absorbing the totality of its parts as a unified whole. The process of hearing, however, requires us to gather information piece by piece, word by word, and sound by sound. Only when the aural message is complete are we able to fully process any part of it; a single word or inflection at the end of a phrase or sentence can altogether change the meaning of everything that came before it.

Listening is therefore symbolic of wisdom, the slow process of gathering and arranging information in pursuit of understanding. The sages of the Talmud alluded to this when they taught:

> *Who is wise?*
> *The one who learns from every person.*

The world contains an endless amount of information, so much so that everything and everyone in it has a lesson to teach. To be successful, a student of the world has to find the lessons of value, both positive and negative, wherever they appear. Every piece of data must be arranged in its proper place if the objective is to reach a logical conclusion. And even though that conclusion may challenge the student's biases and preconceptions, the sincere student will not shy away from conclusions that force him to reconsider everything he has learned before.

The path to wisdom is frequently unpleasant to travel; it is a dark path, often leading us through places we don't want to go. Nevertheless, wisdom leads to purpose, and purpose leads to happiness; wisdom is the light that dispels uncertainty and imbues us with the confidence to carry on. Indeed, this is what the revered Rabbi Moses Isserles meant when he said:

True happiness comes only from the resolution of doubt.

Having already concluded that happiness blossoms from a sense of purpose, it becomes clear that only when we have confidence in our sense of purpose can we be truly happy.

This sheds light on Solomon's teaching that *the light of the righteous remains joyful*. By seeking wisdom with diligence, by gathering and interpreting the lessons of the world with sincerity, by applying the principles of moral law with discipline, we earn the right to be counted among the righteous, we eliminate uncertainty in the correctness of our path, and we radiate the joy of true moral and spiritual purpose.

Upon reaching this point we become a light for those around us, enduring and steadfast, guiding other seekers of true wisdom and enabling them to find their way.

Guests attending the 2005 wedding of Charles, Prince of Wales, and Camilla Parker Bowles might have noticed that each of the central columns in the front of the Guildhall building – where the service was held – is an inch too short. If they attributed this to architectural error, they would have been very wrong.

When the brilliant English architect Christopher Wren submitted his plan for the building in 1689, his design allowed for only two structural pillars, one at each of the front corners. Fearing that the building's weight would cause the underside of the structure to sag without additional support, the city councilors of the town of Windsor insisted that Wren add a series of central columns.

Wren ordered the columns and charged the city for the cost. But he made each pillar one inch too short. Over three hundred years later, the gap between the underside of the building and the superfluous columns is still visible.

Like a master architect, engineer, or craftsman, a man of authentic moral wisdom attains such clarity in his field of expertise that he knows where certainty ends and doubt begins. Whenever he trusts himself, those who aspire to wisdom know they can trust him as well. His wisdom proves itself genuine by enduring the test of time.

In contrast, although the wicked may claim wisdom, the astute aspirant to righteousness is not taken in by temporal victories and the mere appearance of success. Unlike the righteous man of wisdom, a wicked man is described by Solomon has the holder of a "lamp" rather than a "light." The light of the righteous radiates from within, because his wisdom provides him with an unfailing sense of joyful purpose; but whatever illumination

the wicked may cast is external, a superficial source of light that flickers inconstantly, adding shadow upon shadow to the twilight of moral confusion.

Every summer, Fred and Bill hired a private plane to drop them off in the Yukon wilderness where they would spend one week camping out and hunting moose. It was on one such trip that each of them had bagged a large bull moose when the pilot returned to pick them up.

When they asked the pilot to help them load the carcasses onto the plane, the pilot protested. "My plane can't handle a load like that," he said. "We can take one, but not both of them."

The two hunters beseeched the pilot to reconsider. This was the big event of their year, and the moose were the prizes of their adventure. So persistent were they in their supplications that the pilot, against his better judgment, relented and helped them load both moose onto his plane.

The plane took off without incident, and for a while it seemed that all would be well. The pilot was just beginning to relax when the engine started to make grinding noises. Moments later, billows of black smoke surrounded the cockpit and the plane went into a nosedive.

Fighting the controls, the pilot skillfully brought the plane down in a clearing, but nothing he could do could prevent the inevitable. Lacking a proper runway, the plane crashed into the earth.

Miraculously, nobody was hurt. As they climbed out of the wreckage and took stock of their situation, Fred said to Bill, "Any idea where we are?"

Bill looked around for a moment and said, "I think we're about a mile from where we crashed last year."

As much as the wicked may try to feign wisdom, or even acquire true wisdom in pursuit of their own designs, eventually self-interest twists their judgment and reveals them as frauds and manipulators. Their inability to learn from experience makes their wisdom, at best, a flickering lamp that will inevitably go out.

Of the ancient wonders of the world, only the Egyptian pyramids remain, and even they are but a shadow of their former selves, stripped of almost all the casing stones that once provided a beautiful, smooth exterior, and robbed of the sarcophagi and all the relics they originally housed. And in their shadow reposes the great sphinx, seemingly unconcerned that its nose and beard are missing – mutilated, according to legend, when Napoleon's artillerymen used it for target practice. The Parthenon, an enduring testimony to the architectural brilliance of the ancient Greeks, suffered the indignity of ruin when a Venetian mortar round set off the munitions stored in it by the Ottoman Turks in 1687. Venus di Milo, one of the most revered statues in the world, lost both her arms sometime between her creation over 2000 years ago and her rediscovery in 1820.

And although throngs of tourists come to see all of these, although the mysteries of the pyramids and the mythology of the sphinx and the beauty of Venus di Milo echo through our culture and our history, no image remains as ubiquitous, as persistent, and as inspiring as the Mona Lisa. Like the light of true wisdom, she sets a standard to which we all can aspire, blending idealism with realism, passion with poise, wisdom with innocence.

As Will Rogers said:

> *Mona Lisa is the only beauty who went through history and retained her reputation.*