

N O V E M B E R , 2 0 2 3

Thinking on Things Letter

An indispensable letter that's better than a bagel with lox, onions, capers, cream cheese and an expensive caramel latte. Yup !!!!

Hello Loyal Readers

Hello friends --- it's been a few months since the last installment of this mighty, impressive and wonderful letter. If you've suffered physical and psychological withdrawal symptoms, I'm sorry and this issue of the letter will certainly eliminate the symptoms. I'll be better and write a letter more often and will publish some creative writing any of you would like to submit.

Well -- lots has happened the last couple of years. I'll remind everyone that we published our second anthology of poetry at Founders House of Hope in July of 2022 and the book is titled My Voice Counts. You can download the entire book by going to my website and searching for it on the page titled Books by Dr. Levy. There are other books published by residents that are also available for you to read on my website. We also published an anthology of poetry at our other facility I visit called The Chateau earlier this year. The residents continue to pursue goals that challenge themselves to discover more about their talents and abilities. We had one resident complete a certificate program to become a pharmacy technician at the ABC Adult School. Other residents are considering attending Cerritos College and the adult school to earn their GED. I remain impressed with our residents setting challenging academic and recovery goals with a purpose.

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The Founders Report

We're all good at Founders House of Hope. A few residents are working at Grocery Outlet and we pay them a stipend. The co-owners are so impressed with their work ethic and they've been there for almost a year. The four residents get on the bus, around 8:00 am and return to Founders after working four hours. We purchased a few laptops and other things for residents working on achieving their recovery goals. A few residents are interested in attending Cerritos College and we'll be taking them to the college to meet with academic and career counselors. So -- all is good at Founders. The company I work for called Trucare has seven facilities and I visit all but one of them. They provide treatment for individuals with mental health conditions and I'm at the other locations one day a week. In January of 2022, the company established a nonprofit called Trucare Foundation for Mental Health Recovery. The purpose of the nonprofit is to generate funds to support the psychosocial rehabilitation program I operate at Founders and the other facilities. The funds are distributed across the other facilities and are dedicated to enhancing the quality of life for the residents. Finally, I want to mention our internship program at Founders. I established a partnership with California State University Dominguez Hills, California State University Fullerton and Long Beach City College to have interns spend time with us at Founders. We've currently got seven interns learning about psychosocial rehabilitation, recovery, how to co-facilitate skill acquisition groups and how to assess and write treatment plans for residents. It has been so gratifying for me to see these future clinicians learn and challenge themselves to pursue graduate work in social work and clinical psychology. I need to express my gratitude for having all of my senior center students from Norwalk Senior Center and Cerritos Senior Center eternally supporting my work at Founders. The material and financial donations you give me enriches the quality of life for our residents. All of you are sweet, loving souls making a remarkable difference in the lives of our residents. Your friendship means lots to me and the residents.

Knights of Columbus, Santa Fe Springs Council Supporting Founders House of Hope

Founders is blessed to be supported by The Knights of Columbus, St. Pious Church in Santa Fe Springs. One of the Knights named Renee Nault and his team of Knights have been supporting us for the last 20 years. These faithful, loving souls have donated material items such as televisions, laptops, clothes and tablets to our residents. Further, they have provided ice cream socials and snack items to support the operation of our convenience store called Founders Hut. Every X-Mas Renee loves to treat everyone to his homemade lasagna which he and his fraternity of Knights come to serve the residents. Each resident also receives several X-Mas gifts the Knights bring. The residents love to call Renee "The Lasagna Man." All of the men and women of the Knights are performing the Lord's holy work in the world. The women also come to serve meals and distribute gifts to the residents. We are truly eternally blessed and thankful to this charitable organization that only helps repair the world through their charity. Recently they began honoring residents who are veterans by surprising them with gift cards. The Knights of Columbus is the world's largest Catholic family fraternal service organization with 1.7 million members. It provides members and their families with volunteer opportunities in service to the Catholic Church, their communities, families and young people.

An Intractable Malaise

By Elie Levy

We live in relatively good, yet troubling times. Economic stability, low rates of crime and stable, governing institutions tend to predict good life satisfaction for Americans. However, our current political climate has never been so vitriolic, with political opponents viciously attacking each other's personhood. The uncertainties associated with political and cultural shifts proposed by candidates running for president leaves us confused and dizzying. Our society, democracy and culture grants us self-determination. Our innate needs include being autonomous, competent and to belong. Satisfying these and related needs promotes our well-being, survivability, and psychological and physical growth toward optimal functioning. Central to achieving optimal functioning is knowing what matters to you the most. Some Americans complain of long commutes to work, insecure jobs, inflation, chronic health issues and dissatisfying careers. These concerns surface from uncertainty regarding what we really want out of life and economic stability. Alienation is a pervasive and stable, subjective feeling produced by living in an impersonal, industrialized society.

An aura of dysphoria has penetrated the lives of some Americans and chronic discontent is keeping some hopeless and uncertain about their future. Certainly living in an industrialized, urgency driven culture can undermine the search for our authentic self, depriving some of meaning and genuine, enduring happiness. We experience existential dread and alienation. One struggles to overcome an unrelenting, nagging feeling surrounding their place in the world and their future. The ultimate question remains what is the meaning of my life? The world may appear meaningless and purposeless for some. Unexpected change creates troublesome adjustments, leaving us susceptible for turning to maladaptive coping strategies. These are all ephemeral, temporary fixes to serious, chronic and complicated problems that will only persist until we make a genuine investment to modify our life. The world may not appear to be an ordered, coherent place and one loses faith that efforts they make to generate meaning may be illusory and not be worth the investment.

In surveying Americans, estimates are that about 80% admit they're under stress. The lifestyles some lead, including long commutes to work, dissatisfying jobs, worry about our children, our health, anxiety and uncertainty about whether we'll be laid off can overload our system. We've experienced economic downturns; political conflicts and we are emerging from a pandemic. Our minds and bodies have been compromised in epic ways and it carries serious long-term consequences. At many turns, we're needing to manage a concern before it becomes a crisis.

In addition, estimates indicate that 33 million, or 14% of Americans are problem drinkers. A pervasive atmosphere of discontent is undeniably present in contemporary times. It is attributed, in part to the furious pace we're maintaining just to adapt to societal changes which can leave us emotionally and physically exhausted. We may experience life as complicated, impersonal and ever-changing in response to undesired change. Some are pulled away from appreciating commitments to family and friends. The existential vacuum we're trapped in produces feelings of alienation and despair in a seemingly impersonal world. The pervasive feeling of helplessness leaves us powerless and wishing for an elixir or to be magically fixed. Remember—despite all of us experiencing stress in our daily lives, stress only becomes unbearable and a tremendous burden if you feel you have lost control—that you cannot enact healthy, adaptive change to restore homeostasis, fulfillment and purpose in life. The confusion we experience may result from conflicts around what we really want out of life. Our society often prescribes values and expectations for us and unless you stop, regroup and ask yourself if pursuing these societal values adds meaning and purpose in your life, you'll be achieving for others and not necessarily you. We're told to attend college, get married and have children, enter a career, purchase positional good (status objects) and conform in general.

We are susceptible to being disillusioned, thinking relief comes from creating oversimplified strategies resulting from not asking the right questions, the ones that matter the most to us. We analyze the causes of inflation, health issues, dysfunctional marriages and relationships, high unemployment, homelessness, and poverty. A collective worry emerges; uncertainty and anxiety that hurts the quality of our lives. Many are paralyzed in a state of chronic helplessness and are investing ultimate faith for salvation delivered by a prophet. We cannot trust all in leadership positions to act in ways that serve the greater good, worrying they are motivated by self-interest and material gain. We share a collective disillusionment that is the product of a vital lie by leaders promising to have our interest and welfare in mind.

Robert Nisbet sums it up nicely:

It has become steadily clearer to me that alienation is one of the determining realities of the contemporary age By alienation I mean the state of mind that can find a social order remote, reprehensible, or fraudulent; beyond real hope or desire; inviting apathy, boredom, or even hostility. The individual does not only not feel a part of the social order; he has lost interest in being part of it. For a constantly enlarging number of persons, including, significantly, young persons of high school and college age, this state of alienation has become profoundly influential in both behavior and thought. (The Quest for Community: A Study in the Ethics of Order and Freedom, 1953)

The ridiculously rapid pace of technology has simplified and complicated our lives with digital vulnerabilities. The vulnerabilities include data breaches, cyber threats, information leakage and other types of exploitation. We are so addicted and dependent on technology to obtain immediate access to resources to live efficient lives. Navigating our urgency driven and hurried lifestyles is dominated by creating efficient strategies to maximize time and decrease worry. If access to our technology is blocked stress levels increase. Imagine not having access to Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Tiktok or online gaming. Every day, fascination with new technology demands our immediate attention.

Irony and unpredictability are a fixed element of human nature. It's an illusion to think you can immunize yourself from chance; unanticipated events that upset life. We are given to capricious, altruistic and benevolent behavior, only to be malevolent the next moment. Neuroscientists study the brain, theorizing and attempting to reduce hate, violence, narcissism and antisocial behavior to its neuronal components.

The Lord knew He took chances creating us and now we work at creating conditions for people to live peacefully without religious, political and other forms of persecution. We need governments led by ethical leaders whose systems serve the greater good. Historically, we painfully admit hate exists and it derives from fear, ignorance and mistrust. Hate is the most destructive element in human nature and it accounts for the epic number of deaths in history. Genocide and wars resulting from religious, political and racial intolerance has annihilated millions.

Culture is a meaning making system with its social institutions, language, religion, arts, customs, language and much more. The values that regulate our culture are visible and play a central role in shaping our collective, cooperative behavior. An emphasis and recognition is placed on achievement, beating your competitor and displaying status, luxury symbols. We are an individualist society honoring our unique abilities, traits and autonomy in pursuit of success. We are also innately altruistic, more than any other species. If we're driven to maximize self-gain then why be selfless and help a stranger? We know the reward center in the brain's limbic system is activated when we're altruistic. Ironically altruism can also end one's life when coming to the aid of someone being assaulted and dying in the process.

Cooperative behavior has produced a culture to satisfy our many needs and preserve our survival. Life expectancy has risen impressively and we're less likely to experience a violent death. Our living standard has increased and we've made revolutionary discoveries in medicine to sustain life for souls living with chronic illnesses. Human beings are endowed with an authentic, true self that when expressed generates inner harmony, meaning and purpose in life. We attempt to satisfy our core needs, desire to increase self-awareness hoping that knowing ourselves better will add to life fulfillment. Discovering your true self will allow you to make decisions that better fulfill your social, physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual needs. Experiencing life fully is the ultimate journey and goal. The existential questions raising anxiety will be tamed, such as what is the purpose of my life, my reason to live and why am I here. Yet how many of us are motivated to express our authentic self? It would constitute an ultimate shame for one to ignore pursuit of their genuine self. The authentic self is the inner hero seeking expression and is a treasure chest needing to be unlocked. Unless it's unlocked, your treasures will never be shared with the world. The hero within you is an archetype deeply embedded in your soul and psyche.

A Problem in Human Nature

We have a problem in human nature. All of us act in ways that serve our self-interest. The physical laws of nature are rigidly fixed compared to the less predictable theories in the social and behavioral world. These are universal and theories indicate that human beings have different desires, interests and motivations. If your interests match up with others, then your needs will be satisfied. From an economic, psychological perspective, we must realize that resources are limited. Given this reality we create strategies to achieve the things we desire; nice cars, fancy homes, expensive vacations and devices to enhance quality of life. Aristotle the stoic early on reminded us that we innately desire to embrace truth, to behave morally so we can taste the good life. Activating virtues are a central, vital component of experiencing happiness and possessing the capacity to make the right ethical choices when encountering an ethical or moral dilemma. For Aristotle, virtues include bravery, wisdom, justice, honesty, and generosity. Similarly, Plato believed human beings were rational social animals, needing others to have our needs met.

Taming Insatiable Desires for Attention

Human beings desire things to fulfill their needs and this is healthy and adaptive. I purchase dental floss to maintain my oral hygiene and healthy gums. I need the dental floss but not the newest \$10,000 triathlon bike. The triathlon bike I ride is just fine for now. To temper desires, one needs to cultivate an attitude of having a good enough number of things. Practicing good enough thinking will help tame the desire to overreach for overconsumption, power and excessive need for attention. Otherwise, one is at risk for purchasing unnecessary devices and goods that increase debt. Our consumerist history has capitalized on our vulnerabilities and persuasive ads and marketing strategies has us believing it will produce enduring happiness. Genuine, enduring happiness results from doing our fitting, true work and meaningful relationships. The expensive car, cell phone or expensive piece of jewelry will not add to my genuine, enduring happiness because they're objects of illusory happiness outside of myself. However, we are reminded by society that we can impress others by what we have; the glamorous, expensive accessories of life most people cannot afford.

Undoubtedly, our culture and society has an embedded system that glamorizes and admires individuals possessing positional goods and fame. Our hunger for incessant adulation must be fed, along with thirst for showing our unlimited success, prestigious job titles, power and fame. Our culture conditions us to define success by financial prosperity, power and possessing objects of high value. Greed is the unlimited pursuit of all these things and it fills one with the illusion of securing lasting happiness. In the end -- one is left with an insatiable appetite for things of value.

Narcissism: A Fixed Element of the Human Condition

The word narcissism derives from the Greek mythological character Narcissus who was admired for his beauty. Narcissus discovers a body of water and after seeing his reflection in the water, he spends much of his life admiring his beauty. The modern term narcissism has now become one of the personality disorders Narcissistic Personality Disorder and it is characterized by an incessant need for self-adulation, self-absorption, grandiosity, sense of entitlement and having little empathy and concern for others. If not given special attention, these individuals become unhappy and their relationships suffer. A narcissist expects to be given special attention and he/she claims to have unlimited success while exaggerating their many impressive accomplishments to reveal their financial prosperity. There is a tendency to devalue others and be manipulative and exploitative. If they don't receive excessive attention, they can become angry, impatient and have difficulty interacting with others.

The tendency for people to be self-important, seek constant attention and talk about their unlimited success seems to be a fixed part of our human condition. Certain individuals enjoy standing above others to experience self-aggrandizement. The desire to command center stage wherever I am invites attention and adulation from others. Human beings need to be experienced as worthy by others and this generates optimal levels of self-esteem. Self-enhancing strategies are healthy maneuvers to reveal our competencies to others. However, there may be a tendency to exaggerate our talents and abilities. We have a fundamental need to also do social comparisons, some of which are downward comparisons so we can feel personally and culturally superior to others. Interestingly, studying self-enhancing strategies cross culturally reveals that it is more common in western, individualistic cultures to make social comparisons.

Acknowledging one has self-worth is healthy and adaptive. One needs to know he/she is a valued human being for the good they bring to the world. Ideally, others say you matter to the world because they see you acting in altruistic ways; you are thoughtful, kind, empathic and selfless. These are soul traits we admire in just, decent and good people. One can succeed in life by not chasing materialism and displaying their positional goods to gain attention. Not all of us are competitive, trying to outsmart and outgain others to show our financial acumen and be admired.

The rise in narcissism can be attributed to internet, media and celebrity circles. It pervades the fabric of our society and can be toxic to our relationships. It has distanced us from commitments to family, friends and communities because we've become more self-indulgent, selfish and self-absorbed with our appearance and outlandish objects. We are fascinated with reality shows depicting celebrities in their outlandish lifestyles. Some immerse themselves in these shows and these people show their narcissistic traits. Our perceptions can be influenced by watching tv reality stars live abundantly; multimillion dollar homes, lavish cars and flying around in their private jets surrounded by their personal aids attending to their needs. Aside from reality tv, lyrics in songs and materialism, sex, money and drug use are rampant. Social media allows people to display their riches living in high society. People don't post on facebook who their favorite authors are or the ten most influential books they've read in their life. Some people post they took a shower after running a 5k, and a moment later a friend posts they just ran a marathon and are taking a shower. If you want to truly impress someone to gain attention, outdo the 5k runner and marathoner by posting you just crossed the finish line at Ironman and are taking a well deserved shower and having a colossal, 15 pound lobster tail.

One then asks if narcissism is a modern epidemic? Perhaps too much emphasis has been placed on individual striving for success, competitiveness, fame and power. Is America the most narcissistic country in the world? It is and estimates are that 1 in 200 Americans would meet criteria for narcissistic personality disorder. We read stories in print media, television about celebrities, athletes and politicians purchasing 40 million dollar homes, exotic cars, yachts and islands. So what contributes to people desperately needing to impress others? Perhaps it is attributed to our historical pursuit of individualism; the belief that each individual must carve out their piece of the goods in society while being self-reliant, independent, pursuing their own goals and valuing the needs of the self over collective, societal needs. Individualism inherently drives competition and the expectation of a reward for strong efforts made. We have shifted from a concern for the greater good of the community to an obsession with the self; an identity cut off from the collective whole.

Honoring our individual liberty and expression of our unique individuality however shouldn't necessarily produce a self-absorbed, immodest and self-entitled individual desiring constant adulation. The narcissist has a powerful need to be seen with their positional goods which conveys their unlimited success in life. The more we honor these individuals, the more self-centered a society we become. The essential features of narcissism include a lack of empathy, grandiosity, a sustained sense of entitlement and an endless desire for admiration.

However, our analysis of the origins of the narcissistic individual reveals that they suffer from a fragile self-esteem and their inflated sense of self-importance, excessive need for attention and admiration results from an unconscious strategy to repress pain and shame from not having their basic needs met at some developmental stage in early childhood.

Social Media and its Effect on Mental Health

Undoubtedly social media has proliferated in the last few years. Facebook has approximately three billion users worldwide. It does provide positive experiences such as community building and healthy sharing of life experiences. We are immediately connected to school, work and friends and it reduces isolation. Yet it is incredibly addictive and users spread misinformation about issues important to all of us. Fatigue comes after one spends hours on social media. Studies document the relationship between heavy use of social media and an increased risk for depression, anxiety and loneliness. Viewing others on social media enjoying luxurious vacations, owning luxurious cars and living abundantly can lower one's self-esteem and lead them to believe they're experiencing a poorer quality of life. In the end, one evaluates themselves as missing out on experiences and perceiving themselves as incompetent. People may ask themselves why am I missing out on these experiences? What does it say about me and my capabilities when I compare myself to others seemingly better off than me?

Social media platforms are outlets for people to cyberbully and promote unhealthy and unrealistic expectations about body image and how to become popular. A vulnerable teenager can easily be seduced into behaviors he/she is missing out on by not having the ideal body image and other desirable traits to be popular.

Spending time on Facebook, Instagram and Tik Tok can adversely affect one's mental health. It can contribute to developing an anxiety or depressive disorder, in addition to body image and eating disorders, especially among adolescent females. Social media is effectively modifying how people perceive what is beautiful. The rampant images and texting of unrealistic standards of what beauty represents seduces viewers to strongly identify, internalize and believe these ideas. Some make upward social comparisons to models and celebrities, their glamorous lifestyles and they end up feeling dissatisfied with their life, in addition to having a negative self-evaluation.

Body Dysmorphic Disorder can result from an obsession of knowing how your body is flawed. Some individuals constantly compare themselves to others. The risk factors for body dysmorphic disorder include being a teenage boy or girl and being victim to teasing in school, neglect, embracing society's views/expectations of what constitutes beauty and having a tendency to being perfectionistic. Other risk factors include having a low self-esteem and social isolation.

I've collected what some of the greatest thinkers have to say about the meaning of life. Enjoy.

Abraham Maslow – Meaning is experienced by the self-actualized, growth motivated person who delights in using his creative powers for their own sake, and who can affirm himself and simultaneously transcend himself through peak experiences.

Paul Tillich – Man can choose to make his life meaningful by surrendering in faith and love to Jesus. By opening to Jesus and experiencing His acceptance and forgiveness, one experiences the joy and freedom of new being and the courage to be oneself.

Abraham Joshua Heschel – Man experiences his life as meaningful when he lives in G-d's presence—not simply by encountering G-d in the world, but primarily by serving G-d in everyday life, infusing every moment with the spirit of G-d and by dedicating himself to ends outside himself.

Rollo May – Meaning is experienced by a person centered in himself, who is able to live by his highest values, who knows his own intentionality, feels the power of his will to choose, and is able to love.



On my last visit to Chicago a few years ago, I saw this rusted, seemingly eroded, dead not but not defeated c clamp on the sidewalk by the Riverwalk. I immediately picked it up and put it in my pocket to bring home with me. I was delighted to bring this death defying, immortality symbol of brute, knuckle busting gritty work that immigrants and others did in this mighty, city infiltrated with freight yards, slaughterhouses, and manufacturing plants. I brought it home, framed it and it sits in my living room to be admired and talked about. Finally -- I wrote a free verse poem glorifying its life giving utility; the meaning and work it brought to every blue-collar worker whose life it dignified. Chicago - Sandburg's hog butcher of the world; with a skyline that scrapes the sky and with cache like no other city. The holy, fertile soil of that city gave life to Poles, Turks, Jews, Puerto Ricans, Spaniards, Italians and the Irish. I lived in Chicago six mighty years; from age six to about 13.

A Monument to Eternal Life

I angrily defy death and am a monument to gritty, fiercely unpretentious work
in the construction yards of my mighty, soulful and fertile Chicago soil.

Skyscrapers couldn't have touched the sky,
my grip, tightened by bloodied hands and knuckles,
erected impressive brick and mortar buildings
designed by fancy architects known to this brutal, muscular city Chicago.
Sandburg called Chicago hog butcher of the world.
Rusted but not busted; defying death in the boneless construction yards
of my Chicago is where I belong.

Use me in the freight yards to connect decayed rail.
Haul working class Poles, Turks, Italians, Puerto Ricans and Jews to a manufacturing
joint where pastrami sandwiches from Lieto's are consumed by greasy, beaten hands.
I am alive; an eternal, death defying symbol of a time punctuated by profound dignity
in labor; a simple pleasure with each bite of Lieto's pastrami sandwich and filthy, smiling
faces of immigrants who used me up; relentlessly so that I never entered the cemetery.
I rest in the boneyard; above ground; in a holy cathedral of sorts;
where the ancient tools of immigrants built impressive cathedrals, Sears Roebuck,
skyscrapers, and impressive monuments for humanity to inhabit.
Oh the endless, profound grief I'd suffer if I lived in a mausoleum.