

Thinking on Things Letter

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

Hello Loyal Readers

Hello friends of The Levy Launch. It's September and you better start doing your holiday shopping now for the best deals. Just imagine – you'll also avoid the grief associated with crowds. Look – I'm just giving you a courteous reminder so you can thank me later.

I hope you're good these days—healthy, optimistic and with lots of meaning in your mighty life. Remember – you're in charge of your wonderful life and are exercising your self-determination to lead a purposeful life that's providing you with genuine and enduring happiness. If you're one of my students in any of the senior centers, you know how to achieve enduring, genuine happiness. Just keep attending class so we can hook you up to that mighty IV of cultural literacy. Yup – all of my older adult students are so culturally literate and wonderful critical thinkers; always knowing how and when to ask the right questions and not accepting things uncritically or as self-evident truths. I'm so impressed with all of you – and please continue attending class so we can learn together.

I was reflecting on things the other day—and this time it wasn't an illicit drug induced moment of reflection. I realized I've been teaching at Norwalk Senior Center and La Mirada Activity center for 15 years. The woman I live with likes it for sure – because it's about sustaining job stability. I sort of like it too. Now that's a whole lotta time to learn an incredible amount of material.



Good news for our course on compassionate policing of the mentally ill

My brother Joe and I are continuing to run our course for police officers on compassionate policing of the mentally ill. Our course received POST certification from the state – meaning we will likely receive more work. So – we're still training law enforcement and we truly are making a difference in how police officers are interacting with the mentally ill in the community.

The Founders Report

We're all good at Founders House of Hope. The residents are working at Founders Hut (the on-site store) and they're working on their recovery program. We purchased a few laptops, MP3 players and a few other things for residents working hard on achieving their rehabilitation goals. I wrote in our last newsletter that a philanthropist named Halsey Minor donated \$25,000 to my nonprofit called Founders Outreach. Halsey's more than generous donation has allowed us to enrich the program, in addition to enhancing the quality of life of our residents. We are eternally grateful to Halsey.

Oherwise – I need to brag about a resident named Cecile Mermelstein who self-published her book of poetry titled "The Ironic Truth" Cecile spent the last year writing her poetry and I told her if she could write 80 poems, we'd self-publish her own book of poetry. Well – you know what happened next. So – we're all so proud of Cecile.

Here is the synopsis of her book she asked me to write:

In this collection of poetry, the author uses irony to "tickle the mind" and to remind the reader that contradictions in life are inescapable and function as a reminder of how precarious and unpredictable life is. Mystery and the unanticipated events that emerge in our lives are teachable moments and according to the author "fate governs life." For the author, irony represents deliberate contrariness. Reading this poetry will remind the reader of life's twists and turns. The poetic form used in this book of poetry is rhyme, in addition to incorporating mythological characters such as dragons, mermaids, centaurs and unicorns to have the reader dive deep into a world of magical realism. In the end, the reader will truly appreciate how the evocative themes and images expressed in the poetry captures the essential meaning of life.

Where I'm teaching these days:

University of Redlands

Southern California Univ of Health Sciences

Cerritos College

Cerritos Senior Center on Monday from 3:00 – 5:00

Norwalk Senior Center on Friday from 9:00 - 11:00

La Mirada Activity Center on Monday from 9:00 – 11:00

WHY CULTURES SURVIVE, NATURAL RIGHTS AND LIBERTY

By Elie Levy



Well, I think there's lots to be thankful for living in America and I'll try to explain it in this very brief historical-developmental piece. Let's start with defining culture as a shared system of symbolic knowledge where behavior is patterned from speech (language) and where predictable behavior patterns are established to nurture cultural stability (a fancy way of saying getting along with each other), in the form of cultural codes for social life, role expectations and social norms all for the purpose of creating predictability and survivability of the culture. Culture emerges because a people want to survive and live together on cooperative terms. How about we call culture a social glue for now. The goal of social organization and cooperative behavior is to reduce the incidence of unpredictability in behavior of a culture and its people. We can discuss it also in terms of reducing uncertainty in behavior of a people which reduces chaos/anomie (social disorganization). Culture also creates social expectations among a group of people. Rules, social norms and values surface to increase conformity and unity. Culture is a social bond that creates consistency in thought and action.

Cultures also evolve—meaning they develop new and more efficient functional methods of survival. It's an end product of civilizations that have survived for thousands of years. I need to remind you that human beings are the only species that communicate using higher order abstraction and a symbolic language. Remember, cultures survive because most members behave predictably which serves to create a safe environment for people to live. The use of language results in thought, religion, art, science, government and social institutions. For a culture to survive it needs to transmit cultural elements such as social organization, art, play, economic organizations, religion, science, technology, language and social control. So, what are the fundamental assumptions of the American culture? Self-governance is one of the assumptions posited early on by the colonists. The colonists were suspicious of the theocracies, monarchies or other forms of rule that threatened the rights of individuals and their liberty. What is liberty? Liberty is freedom from despotic rule. We enjoy religious freedom; meaning we can find G-d in our way and we have political freedom, physical freedom and freedom of speech. Ever wonder why some cultures don't survive? It's probably because members of the culture could not transmit culture bound values—they weren't open to exploring and interacting with other cultures to examine how other social systems function and bring vitality to their members or they were invaded and conquered by other cultures.

Historically our culture's roots began with the colonist's focus on liberty. The early colonists agreed that self-governance was a cultural value that resulted in the writing of the constitution and Declaration of Independence. The Civil War reflected a pivotal period in our history and culture because it represented a war about individual rights. Essentially, our country was divided around the issue of slavery and natural rights. What is the one core value of American culture? It is "natural right" and the shared belief that everyone belongs. On the flip side, the pursuit of happiness through self-reliance and the belief that one should pursue his/her own destiny can lead one to be emotionally detached from his/her social institutions. A few authors label this phenomenon as a "culture of narcissism" or preoccupation with the "private self" which interferes with our desires to deepen our involvement in the lives of others. The other concern and natural outcome related to our culture's emphasis on individual rights and achievement is the belief in "rugged individualism" where one makes it on his/her own. Do we have a national identity? We must realize that our national identity shifts from time to time depending on changes in the political climate and social conditions. During WWII America was strongly united against the forces of fascism and Nazism. Our national identity was strong and unswerving. Today our national identity is sometimes perceived as fragmented by partisan politics about war and the causes of our social ills.

The Quick Ways

by Ezra Lunel

I was born with a wealth of not-so-steadfast knowledge, which through childhood and youth I chipped at, chiseled away. I used to believe that everything existed forever, in time where friendships not only never ended but continually renewed, where love was unfairly consummated and nothing got too complicated, not to be solved by whim or imagination. There was a sky of vivid possibility which canopied us the way memory, disruption, ending and loss do now. I may never recover with such assurance from the quick slippery ways of this world.

Thinking About Work

By Elie Levy

Should our work be more to us than just a paycheck? And what's wrong if work is just a paycheck to us? Work is an indispensable activity for defining our sense of self. However, work alone does not pull for or engage our total self. It represents one dimension of our multiple identities from which we draw self-esteem. Interestingly, work will influence how others think of you. It is more than just an instrument enabling us to live a utilitarian life. The view of work as instrumental is a traditional American view, a consumerist perspective of work which may or may not fulfill our yearning for meaning and purpose in life.

One could define work as an activity performed for economic security and sustenance. In this way, work is conceived as instrumental and a means to an end. In contrast, responding to a calling also represents work—but it is an activity carrying deeper, inherent value for the individual and society. In this condition of employment, the individual sees clearly how performing their dignified work contributes to enhancing the lives of others or connecting to the larger community. Americans want to work and we have a peculiar curiosity about what each of us does for work. We believe we should work, even if we don't need the money. Our belief that work, in part defines who we are has its origins in Protestantism, and is defined as the Protestant Ethic which asserts that work is virtuous, we have a duty to work and for some, it may represent a calling. The individual who works benefits by gaining self-worth.

Work Alienation

Work alienation is likely to occur when an employee experiences less control over the process and function of their job. Further, their job seems overly routinized and simplistic. One could describe their job as meaningless and feeling isolated. The inability of an employee to connect what he/she does to the successful performance of the organization can result in meaninglessness. Such an employee may also feel isolated and a lack of purpose in their work. Studs Terkel (1974, 557-558) describes the following blue collar worker's expression of his dissatisfying job:

After forty years of workin' at the steel mill, I am just a number. I think I've been a pretty good worker. That job was just right for me. I had a minimum amount of education and a job using a micrometer and just a steel tape and your eyes—that's a job that was just made for me... Bob (his son) worked in the mill a few months during a school vacation. He said, "I don't know how you done it all these years. I could never do it." I said, "I been tellin' you all your life never get into that mill."

Connectedness

For some, work needs to provide deeper meaning so that one understands how their job connects to the big picture; how what they do makes a difference in the lives of others. It can express our deepest yearnings for validation and we want to know that the individual receiving your service appreciates you.

The Search for Meaningful, Sacred Work

Ideally--- what should drive work? Perhaps it needs to be charged by spirit; by something that ultimately deepens and enriches our lives; that allows us to connect the work we do to the larger picture. Our needs for validation and feeling worthwhile can derive from the work we do when others acknowledge that our work (relationships with others) has made a difference in their lives. William James said "I will act as if what I do makes a difference." Remember, you want to make meaningful contributions to the world—and by clarifying the values that drive your life, the more often you'll see a connection to how your work contributes to the satisfaction and pleasure of others. I think sacred work is something you truly value—it's work that pulls for the best in you; something that is intrinsically motivating for you and it's work that is valued for itself. If one feels that his/her work truly pulls for their knowledge, talents and assets; and they are passionate about their work— then he/she can assert that it's real, true work. Passion comes from deep inside of us—it's charged by spirit and it intrinsically drives us to perform at our highest levels. Since childhood, our socialization process taught us we needed to be something; to become something as life unfolded—to become a nurse, plumber, lawyer, teacher, bus driver, firefighter, pilot, mechanic. Also, do you think that we're socialized to "have" rather than "be"? If being informs our actions, and defines our self-concept as a great mother, father, plumber, recruiter, lawyer, student—then we're likely to become self-assured and feel the connection to what we've become and what we are with others; we are a great sibling, plumber, mother to my kids because I operate in my role as a mother exceptionally well—I draw self-esteem from my functioning as a mother in this role. On the flip side--- to "have" suggests we concern ourselves with materialistic consumption where we're likely to define who we are by objects to accessorize our lives.

Again—in moderation this isn't so bad--- but if you're primarily driven by attaining objects of status to show others your success then you'll be working long hours for more money, spend time looking for others to compare yourself to and discover they've got more than you, and you'll likely become what I call the "hungry and dying for attention" individual. Accumulating material status objects does not lead one to be passionate about their work. What's the problem? In our culture money can be used symbolically to define success and for some, it is life-enhancing; in other words, it buys one life—because without money you experience social death (those in poverty).

In summary, we pursue utilitarian objectives (economic) through work and search for ways to express our deeper desires for connecting with the larger social and cultural community. One can assert that all human beings desire to discover how they belong to the larger community of humanity. Clarifying for oneself how he/she belongs—feels connected to community anchors will more clearly validate his contribution to improving conditions for living for all.

AN INTRODUCTION TO EXISTENTIALISM BY ELIE LEVY

Existentialism is a philosophical movement emphasizing individual existence, choice and freedom. It was given birth to in Europe by writers in the 19th and 20th centuries. The themes that most existentialist writers subscribe to include the individual's subjective experience and freedom in the world. Essentially, existentialists assert we are what we consciously have chosen to be. The founding of modern existentialism in the late 19th century is generally attributed to a Danish philosopher named Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855). Kierkegaard's existentialist philosophy was a reaction to Plato's writings on the highest ethical good being the same for everyone—that all needed to strive for moral perfection. Kierkegaard, in contrast insisted that each individual needed to define for himself the highest moral good, to pursue and define his truth leading to a liberated, meaningful life. For Kierkegaard, honoring objective, universal truths based on absolute morality was a contradiction to the major existential premise of denying a rational basis for moral decisions. Kierkegaard objected to the reigning absolute, idealistic German philosophy of the time being promoted by Hegel. Hegel proposed a total, well reasoned rational and systematic explication of humanity and history. Kierkegaard's thinking deemphasized the rational basis of understanding the human condition, and in contrast, focused on the absurdity and ambiguity of life. Kierkegaard professed it was each individual's responsibility to commit to leading a life of truth which may require one to defy the norms of society, thereby transcending what might be the good for all and honoring what is good for me. In this situation, Kierkegaard proposes one take a "leap of faith" to avoid experiencing further despair. The majority of existential writers stress that one must be passionate and maximize individual choice leading to individual action. It is only when one acts on their freely chosen desires that they arrive at truth—or approximate truth. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche stressed that there exists no rational or logical premises which derive from a systematic analysis of nature. They and other existentialist writers explicate this existential principle in many of their parables and aphorisms. The denial of rationality is not absolute though, for they understand that under certain conditions rationality is necessary to deepen our understanding. In the final analysis, the existentialists will claim that to answer the most compelling, significant questions in life, reason and science are insufficient. The bold Nietzsche asserted that no order exists in the universe and that the assumption that it does is an illusion.

Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980), considered the leading existentialist philosopher of the 20th century, lived and worked in France. In his classic work *Being and Nothingness* (1943) he expounded his premise that existence precedes essence, meaning that one's biological, physiological or material being exists before one's awareness of innate factors such as reason and consciousness. Sartre, an atheist further asserted that life is not sacred theologically; that human beings were not created in the image of G-d or any other supreme deity. For Sartre, human beings enter a materialistic world and are condemned to make choices which define their true nature. Thus, each individual represents the sum of their choices and actions, and all human beings are "condemned to be free." One of the most prominent themes in existentialism is choice. Choice means that each unique individual can create his own nature. For Sartre, existence precedes essence and choice is inexplicably part of humanity. It defines and validates one's existence. Choice is inescapable and in every moment of existence, we make choices. Invariably, the refusal to choose represents a choice and with this choice comes responsibility. Individuals then come to accept responsibility for the consequences of their choices. Additional themes in existential philosophy emphasized by Kierkegaard are dread and anxiety. Dread characterizes a general apprehension, a conscious knowing that G-d obligates each of us to define and lead a meaningful life. Anxiety naturally leads one to confront awareness of his nothingness and that he may discover emptiness when searching to justify the choices he makes. Sartre uses nausea to refer to the individual's awareness of how the universe is devoid of moral absolutes, and the word anguish refers to the absolute freedom of choice all of us are presented with in life and which is a burden for human beings.

Sartre's model is atheistic, suggesting that there exists in the universe no compass for moral guidance, no G-d for divine inspiration and no moral absolutes. For some individuals, this recognition creates despair, acknowledging that one lives in a meaningless world, and that it is each individual's responsibility to impose meaning in a meaningless world. It is in this condition of pure nothingness that generates anxiety and awareness of the inescapable inevitability of death.

