

The good life: formulating existential values for a new millennium

by Emmy van Deurzen

We live in a world where values have been questioned and changed. The rules of yesterday are no longer in vogue. Post-modern living requires a new attitude of unconcern. If we can muster a certain detachment and an uncaring, unquestioning attitude we can manage, or at least pretend to manage, rather well. If we care about old values, such as truth, loyalty and faith, we may well run into trouble as we get out of synch with the world around us. Much of the time the world is too fast for us to catch up, let alone to take enough time to think and re-orientate ourselves. People have lost their bearings and follow the morals of the media, which are often ephemeral and based on the fashions of the moment. The phenomenon of flavour of the month has pervaded much of human relations. It seems alright nowadays to switch allegiance, point of view or position, as long as one stays in line with the most fashionable perspective of the moment: the tyranny of popular opinion has replaced the dogmas of organized religion.

Philosophers, who once upon a time would think through the moral questions of the time, have learnt to limit their investigations to questions of logic, contradiction or definition. Few of them are willing to take a stance on the crucial matter of how people should live. The search for wisdom has been replaced with the search for knowledge. The new movement of philosophical consultancy is a welcome exception to this rule. But it is not just the philosophers who have abandoned the search for wisdom. We ordinary people have learnt to rely on facts to orientate our lives. It is the scientists, not the philosophers who dictate the way ahead to the future these days. But science has become so fragmented and specialised, that it has lost track of its original objective of the pursuit of knowledge. The outcome of scientific research provides us with lots of disparate and often contradictory facts. Our lives are thus directed by a constant flow of changing information. When the classical search for wisdom was replaced with the enlightenment search for truth, this may have seemed like progress. When the search for truth led to the investigations of science and the search for knowledge, this may still have seemed like a desirable step forward, in that people became aware of the relativity of the universe and the need to investigate it carefully. When the search for knowledge turned into a more specialised and detached search for facts we lost track of the network of connections that keep the facts making sense. This was the beginning of the loss of meaning we so acutely experience today. This loss of meaning has furthermore led to a continuous process of questioning and relativizing. This has resulted in the post-modern stance of cynical disbelief. Derrida speaks of the crisis of reason, and I quote here from his 'Writing and Difference':

But this crisis in which reason is madder than madness is more rational than reason, for it is closer to the wellspring of sense, however silent or murmuring - this crisis has always begun and is interminable. (Derrida, 1967: 62)

It is quite clear that in a post-modern world even facts are no longer taken seriously. They are now further reduced into smaller units, called data or information. Data can be

generated so rapidly and so confusingly that it leads to information overload. This in turn leads us to becoming increasingly sceptical. I thus think that post-modernism and its deconstructing of values has led us into a state of information fatigue and an era of sceptical disillusionment. On the cusp of the millennium change we are at risk of destroying the meaningful universe we have lived in for the past few thousand years. This is rather ironic since post-modernism was meant to be about mankind's realization that we had become capable of destroying our physical environment. Out of this realization seems to have grown a desire on the part of some to ruin the social, personal and spiritual dimensions of the human world as well as the physical. Perhaps this is not so much a matter of malice as a matter of ignorance.

When the Hellenistic philosophers popularized the activity of seeking for eudaimonia, or the good life, this was meant as a search for wisdom that could generate some real expertise about how to conduct oneself and live one's life. This was intended to provide a better alternative to demagogy or the following of empty opinions and superstitious beliefs. The movement from wisdom to truth, to science, to knowledge, to facts, to information, has led us full circle back to an era in which people base their actions once again on popular opinion and superstition. For in a society where information guides every day decision making, little credence is given to universal, religious or ethical principles. They just seem moralistic, old fashioned and boring.

When the internet provides us with an overview of what is available in human culture, this access to diversity, which is active and on line, i.e. on tap, it makes it tempting to pick and choose values in the same way as we pick consumer goods. The virtual universe is becoming our reality. We have left nihilism behind. The deconstructed universe has made room for the virtual space of unreality. I would like to speak of the new millennium as the era of virtuality. It is an apt word that captures both the unreality and relativity of human life in this age and the pressing need to find a way to replace the old ideas about virtue with a new virtuality. All one has to ask in this age of virtuality is whether the opinion one expresses is in line with the most recent data. The touch-stone of our orientation is thus: is this the latest, the most up to date view?

There is probably a lot to be said for this kind of active, driven, open ended, consumerist, versatile, inclusive, non judgmental, well informed way of life. Some of the advantages are that many more people can participate in the forming of opinion, in the creation of standards, in the upholding or breaking of rules. The problem is that this accessibility also means permeability: when everyone has access, the boundaries become more fluid. This changes the nature of human relations considerably. There are fewer certainties, fewer commitments, no more universally accepted truths to lean on. The virtual community provides its own credo, loosely defined as 'anything goes as long as it goes'. Take away the internet, television, radio, newspapers, magazines, cd's and videos that connect this virtual society of the global village together and you have an instant crater of boredom and confusion. As long as we run along with the constant stimulation, we lead hard working, hard playing lives. High energy, high performance, high visibility and accountability, a morality that leaves no room for sentiment or even seriousness, unless in jest. There can no longer be any reliance on things established in the past. People have

become as replaceable and easy to discard as the wrappers of their take away hamburgers, and yet they queue up to make their two minute contribution to public opinion or claim their little share of fame or recognition eagerly when given half a chance. The temporary nature of the everyday is so obvious that there hardly seems any point in making long term plans. Those who are fast on their feet will be the first to pick up the new opportunities, jump on the right band-wagon, drift in the most popular direction.

Those who can manage this do well and get pleasure in feeling part of the flow. But many cannot keep up with this kind of warrior life style and they seek out other ways of coping. Hiding in hedonism is a popular turn of the millennium activity. Those of us who do clinical work are well aware of the casualties of alcohol and substance abuse. But there are other signs on the wall. The flourishing of fundamentalist religions in certain parts of the world is another product of the lack of clarity. The soaring interest in world religions and particularly in popular shortcuts to old superstitious beliefs and practices is a fascinating phenomenon that continues to spread. Self help books are bulging on the shelves of our bookshops. Many of these are written by psychotherapists and counsellors, the new moral guides of our era.

But there are other sources of comfort available to young people today. Pop music and soap operas provide the stories and tunes that used to be the province of religion. I do not think we should be scathing about this phenomenon. I personally think it is an example of how culture fills its own gaps and finds its own solutions to problems. There is as much to be learnt about the craving for values, from the lyrics of teen culture and soap opera scripts as there is in the learned books of the scholars of the day. What is startling is not that these new aspects of our culture are so dominant and quasi religious, what is startling is that we do not take them more seriously and think that a superior and dismissive stance towards them is sufficient. It is, in my opinion, crucial for us to investigate what is happening to the need for purpose and value at the grassroots level. It is equally important to contrast and compare these popular values with the values of yore and compare them to the age-old principles and values that have guided the generations before us. We need to ask ourselves how they compare and how we might understand the wisdom of the future in light of our learning from the past and the present. So let's take a brief look at both aspects.

The values of youth culture

Teenagers today do not believe in the same things as their elders. They have grown up in a post-war era, take consumerism for granted and their discourse on the subject of values is largely nihilistic. My thirteen year old daughter announced to me that the world does not exist and does not really matter. Life, she thought, is no more or less than a dream or a nightmare. Its reality is fleeting and virtual. In this virtual world values are relative to the mood one is in. When people are depressed they do not think anything has a purpose. If they are in a normal state of mind they might consider that the meaning of life, if there had to be one, would probably be to have fun and make the most of it. Alternatively you might get a rush from proving to people as you get older that what you said when you were younger is actually true, or has potential. No matter how old you are you can still be

right and proving this might be an important motivation when you are considered too young to have anything of value to contribute. Rebellion no longer seems an attractive option, since it would not seem as if it would make any difference to the world anyway. People have lost the sense of being able to have a direct impact, striving for fame might be the only way to achieve some influence. Also children are aware that most of what they do is what other people expect them to do. I was told by a reliable source that the only thing children feel they can do that they have not been asked to do and they might actually do against the parental wishes is watching television. It is quite extraordinary how the younger generation seems to have settled for materialism. They live in a world of advertisements and goods. To have or not to have that has become the question. The materialism is accompanied by a tremendous cynicism. Oscar Wilde's definition of the cynic as he who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing seems to apply to perfection.

And yet, somehow even these cynical young people need some principles, some values to live by. As I was writing this paper my niece, who is eighteen, sent me, quite by chance, a list of values to live by. It was a compilation of common sense remarks and statements by a number of business gurus and self appointed life guidance specialists. It was an internet document that was supposed to be sent around to as many people as you could within a day of reading the document and the promise was that your life would instantly improve if you did so. It was given credence by presenting itself as based on a Tibetan tantra. Superstition is always more attractive when accompanied with the glow of ancient and well-established tradition, preferably an exotic one. People crave tradition more than ever, even though our own is taboo. The superstition expressed in such practices is not exactly taken seriously by most people who partake in it. Mostly they do it just for a laugh, probably well aware it is a sales gimmick on the part of an internet provider. To some extent they also do it just in case, because you never know. They will, for a laugh, but with some hope that it may change their lives pass on the information. It becomes a kind of experiment, just a bit of fun with the wisdom of the world. Young people glean a lot of their life's wisdom in this kind of half-serious experimental way. My own children have shown incredible propensity for investigating all sorts of comical or flippant lists of what works and what doesn't. It seems to be the new way of gathering information, exploring and experimenting, without retaining much in a committed, permanent fashion, but still, in their own way, going around the houses, exploring what is on offer in our fickle world. There seems little to help them decide whether what they come across is worth taking seriously or should be dismissed as just another joke, so they take everything with a grain of salt. But their pursuit of truth is not so different to that of people across the ages. Their wisdom may be rather pragmatic but a lot of it makes sense and rings bells. Here is the 1999 list of instructions for life I was sent.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR LIFE

1. Give people more than they expect and do it cheerfully.
2. Memorize your favorite poem.
3. Don't believe all you hear, spend all you have, or loaf all you want.
4. When you say, "I love you," mean it.

5. When you say, "I'm sorry," look the person in the eye.
6. Be engaged at least six months before you get married.
7. Believe in love at first sight.
8. Never laugh at anyone's dreams. People who don't have dreams don't have much.
9. Love deeply and passionately. You may get hurt, but it's the only way to live life completely.
10. In disagreements, fight fairly. No name calling.
11. Don't judge people by their relatives, or by the life they were born into.
12. Teach yourself to speak slowly but think quickly.
13. When someone asks you a question you don't want to answer, smile and ask, "Why do you want to know?"
14. Take into account that great love and great achievements involve great risk.
15. Call your mother.
16. Say "bless you" when you hear someone sneeze.
17. When you lose, don't lose the lesson.
18. Follow the three Rs: Respect for self, Respect for others, Responsibility for all your actions.
19. Don't let a little dispute injure a great friendship.
20. When you realize you've made a mistake, take immediate steps to correct it.
21. Smile when picking up the phone. The caller will hear it in your voice.
22. Marry a person you love to talk to. As you get older, his/her conversational skills will be even more important.
23. Spend some time alone.
24. Open your arms to change, but don't let go of your values.
25. Remember that silence is sometimes the best answer.
26. Read more books. Television is no substitute.
27. Live a good, honorable life. Then when you get older and think back, you'll be able to enjoy it a second time.
28. Trust in God but lock your car.
29. A loving atmosphere in your home is the foundation for your life. Do all you can to create a tranquil, harmonious home.
30. In disagreements with loved ones, deal only with the current situation. Don't bring up the past.
31. Don't just listen to what someone is saying. Listen to why they are saying it.
32. Share your knowledge. It's a way to achieve immortality.
33. Be gentle with the earth.
34. Pray or meditate. There's immeasurable power in it.
35. Never interrupt when you are being flattered.
36. Mind your own business.
37. Don't trust anyone who doesn't close his/her eyes when you kiss.
38. Once a year, go someplace you've never been before.
39. If you make a lot of money, put it to use helping others while you are living. It is wealth's greatest satisfaction.
40. Remember that not getting what you want is sometimes a wonderful stroke of luck.
41. Learn the rules so you know how to break them properly.
42. Remember that the best relationship is one in which your love for each other exceeds your need for each other.

43. Judge your success by what you had to give up in order to get it.
44. Live with the knowledge that your character is your destiny.
45. Approach love and cooking with reckless abandon.

What can we deduce from such a list?

Firstly it does not deal with any of the big moral prohibitions found in most cultures, such as those of lying, cheating, stealing, adultery, blasphemy, violence and murder. We must assume that these are nevertheless taken as read. These are areas religions used to take care of. The fact people do not seem to attend to these basics explicitly is presumably related to the fact that we no longer feel the need to attend to these since they are dealt with by the law. If it is illegal then I do not have to think about it. I just do not do it. Except that there are those people who flout the law and who thus raise moral questions for us again. When is murder not murder but self-defence? When is cheating not cheating but creative competition? When is lying acceptable, if ever? These questions can surely not be left to the lawyers but need to be addressed in a serious fashion, by those who think for a living? In addition law makers need philosophers to help them perfect the rules and make them fairer. They need them particularly in their thinking about new areas for legislation that raise new moral issues, such as genetic engineering, abortion or body transplants.

Secondly the above list does not deal with human emotions, the human condition, or human predicaments or special dilemmas. It gives the sort of topical advice that grandparents might have given on specific occasions. It does nothing to help a person monitor their emotions as part of a clarification exercise in living in the right way.

Psychotherapists often do find themselves taking on these areas of expertise, sometimes without wanting to. Psychotherapists often follow theories of personality or development rather than asking questions about how people should proceed with their lives. But these ways of orientating ourselves in the world of our clients are backwards and unproductive. When my client is wondering whether she should or should not stay with a boyfriend and become his wife the question is not whether she is mature enough to form a stable relationship. The salient question is whether she considers a stable relationship to be desirable in the abstract and feasible and worthwhile for her now in this particular situation. Perhaps even more pertinently what we need to explore is whether the formation and maintenance of a stable relationship with this man is a project that she would like to devote her foreseeable future to. Considering this question is a complex business and can not be solved by a list of how to's or a list of character traits. It will take substantial effort and time to achieve it. It will require us to clarify the fundamental principles by which a good life is conducted. This means we need to define the values of a well-lived life. That means we have to re-value things and not just re-affirm old established values of the past. It was more than a century ago that Nietzsche taught us how to do this.

What values and virtue are not

In his 'Zarathustra', Nietzsche confronts us with the re-evaluation of values that he sees as the foundation of the new morality that will revitalise us. He challenges the old values,

which are worn out and dusty and enumerates some of the ways in which people fool themselves into the belief that they are virtuous.

1. For some obedience is the only virtue: they writhe under the whip and do what they are told.
2. For others they just become more and more lazy so that even their vices fall asleep and doing nothing they reckon they have become virtuous.
3. There are others who are drawn downward and they believe that everything that they are not is good. This is also self-deception.
4. Others go along heavy like carts going downhill and they put the breaks on in their going down: they call these breaks their virtue.
5. Others are like household clocks, wound up and they stick to the tick-tock of a predictable boring and unthought out existence and call this virtue. These people can easily be wound up though...
6. Others are proud of a handful of righteousness and they stand on it, push it down other people's throats, drowning the world in unrighteousness. They raise themselves only in order to lower others.
7. Others sit in the swamp of their rotten life and they claim that to endure the sitting in that swamp is virtuous.
8. For others virtue is a sort of pose, a pretence, an imitation of some sort of model. They speak of virtue a lot but their hearts know nothing of it.
9. Some others keep telling us that virtue is necessary, but they only see it as something to impose on others by virtue of a police-force making people comply.
10. Some people think it is virtue to speak of all that is bad in man and show themselves contemptuous of it. This of course is no guarantee that they have even thought about virtue.
11. Some want to be told what virtue is and they want to be educated to become virtuous, thinking virtue can be learnt from a book.
12. 'Almost everyone firmly believes that he is participating in virtue; and at least asserts he is an expert on 'good' and 'evil'. Judging others comes particularly easily to most of us.

The reality is that virtue is hard to come by. It is life itself that makes virtuous when it is lived to the full. Then virtue coincides with health, a health of body and soul, even though the body may be injured or broken or old and even though the soul may have been much hurt and be tired and full of doubt.

Being able to tackle such questions takes consistent questioning of oneself. You cannot work on values with a client unless you have been confronted with the breakdown of values for yourself. Unfortunately the only way to discover about value is to discover about loss. Every catastrophic event that happens exposes the gaping holes underneath the surface of our world. Some events make craters in the world one once knew and took for granted and only then, when we count the cost of life, do we see the foundations of the world revealed for what they are at rock bottom. As old worlds explode and shatter, new understanding may be fostered. But it does not happen so quickly or so easily. The fall-out of one's misfortunes spreads over many subsequent years, altering familiar landscapes and shattering one's inner confidence. In an individual life it often takes years

before a person can find the energy and courage to start clearing the rubble of old ruins- let alone plan new constructions in their place.

At a macro-level we see the same thing happening to humanity. As we approach the new millennium human beings seem defeated by post-modernism and prevailing scepticism. It seems hard to find safe places for our aspirations and beliefs. Our faith in benevolent gods or superior powers has been largely undone. There is no homeland in which we can hide from the reminders of our mortality, our guilt, our failure, our forsakenness. We can no longer just believe in goodness, since evil greets us every step of the way. It is high time that we ask the question of what it is that can redeem us and help us carry on. It is high time we go beyond the data of the global village and wonder what moral future we want to create.

Penelope's shroud

It is a question I have asked myself over the past years, since the fabric of my own life unravelled like Penelope's fabled shroud. The whys and hows of this upheaval are not pertinent to this discussion- suffice it to say that I went through a wretched phase of loss and mourning when the life I had painstakingly created, came apart at the seams. Eighteen years of marriage and family life and eighteen years of building up an academic institution with colleagues came undone within the same year. It was a time when the blinkers that had guarded me from seeing some aspects of reality came falling from my eyes and it was no longer possible to carry on with hypocrisies and lies. The contradictions of one's life come to their climax eventually. Crisis and catharsis are never far apart from each other and it taught me much to be so tried and tested. I subsequently found it easier to resonate with clients who are struggling with situations of distress or terminal loss.

The words we put to the events that happen to us are never the whole story. They do not reveal the complex structures of events and emotions of all the protagonists in the story. They allow others to misrepresent and manipulate what has happened, minimizing the pain which to strangers always seems unbearable and which they try to avoid at all costs by avoiding you when you suffer. You learn that suffering has to be borne by oneself and alone or with those that are prepared to truly love. The narratives about the disasters are only the surface names on things, that enable us to accord them a particular place and status. It helps to speak the words, but they never exhaust the layers of pain underneath. Words can never cover that pain, never absorb it. For it is so far greater and cannot be seen or heard or redeemed. The actual events underneath fan out over many years to follow. The aftermath of the struggle reveals fault lines in the world and in self and other that had never been guessed at before and that may seem unsurmountable.

I now recognize so well in my clients' descriptions of their predicaments that sense of slowly breaking down; the chronic incapacity in relation to certain places - certain people - certain situations. Out of it grows a fear of one's own desire for retaliation, the deep instinctual wish to be avenged for the injustices inflicted and for having been deprived of one's basic human dignity. To have no livelihood, to be a single parent on the dole, to be

shunned by others, any remaining self-esteem in tatters by the actions and words of some, who unthinking and unknowing, tread on you. Trying to keep up appearances, playing at being a hero or heroine sometimes, drawing nearer to those who have experienced this too, avoid those who haven't, for they do not understand and with their incomprehension endanger your inner balance. Finding that most people are anyway repelled by the smell of failure, not wanting any part in defective operating. The many fading away from me in the same numbers in which they used to hang around in pursuit of a piece of the pie.

Discovering the flipside of life is instructive. Seeing the dark side of human nature in action is not a pleasant but nevertheless strangely edifying spectacle. How daunting it is to be confronted with the fickleness of human relations and the insipidity of self-important conversations or the writings of those who would rather be raiders or traitors than friends. Was one like this oneself once? Did one commit those sins as well? Is that why this has happened? Were you so self-deceived? Were you not the paragon of virtue you once thought you were? Everything is now in question, including oneself.

Meaning seeps away in the cracks of one's ram-raided life. Years before you can begin to ponder, wondering about the second chance you have actually been given. Gradually a new day dawning reveals the realization that you have perhaps stumbled upon one of the secrets of life. Your life is no longer exempt from the terrors and horrors you were trying to avoid and you can now taste the exquisite flavours of existence at the edge of the world. Released of the burden of perfection and ambition, at least temporarily, you rid yourself of the hypocrisies and deceptions and of the lies of defective affections. What a relief to be free.

Then with renewed urgency the fundamental question presents itself: what to do with this hard-earned freedom? How to use it? Now the mind is nicely focussed. The old ways of drifting along with the crowd or with one's best sense of what seems vaguely interesting or desirable is no longer enough. It becomes suddenly very obvious that some things matter more than others. Value is created in action. It is the measure of what one is willing to give up for what really matters. In dragging oneself through the desert of one's temporarily suspended life a new source of meaning is discovered at the back of one's mind. When so much reality has been sunk into our existence we discover many new pieces to the puzzle of good living. But they still have to be fitted into place. This requires nothing short of heroism and heroism is in short supply since one feels more like a victim, like a wounded heap of human misery. But perhaps that is the better starting point, to find oneself at the nadir of one's life.

As Merleau Ponty once stated:

'Today's hero is not sceptical, dilettantish, or decadent; he has simply experienced chance, disorder and failure.' (Merleau Ponty 1964:186)

This would seem to suggest that we can only be heroic if we have first experienced this total collapse of individuality and societal esteem. Deconstruction precedes existence and

existence precedes essence. Only in the bedrock of our low water mark can we begin to build anything essential and solid. Dreyfus' view on Merleau Ponty's hero was that:

'this hero is condemned to follow out fragile meanings without either the triumph of an absolute or the relief of despair. (ibid. XXVI, intro.)

How true this is. The hero today is not the person fighting a just war or crusade, not the valiant leader who will be considered deserving whilst being cheered by the crowds. Such comforts are reserved for those who play at being heroes and heroines in the limelight of the television cameras. Real heroism takes place behind the drawn curtains of living rooms in which small human tragedies are played out in the dark of the night. The anonymity of heroism is almost its precondition. As soon as we have an audience there is a salve on our wounds. We can then afford the luxury of despair or grief once more. We can even begin to think in terms of retaliation or reparation. Once more the lines of public thinking can be pursued and one's destiny becomes meaningful. But as long as we suffer the isolation of the licking of wounds that no-one wants to know about, we have to invent our own compensations, make up our own values and carve our own steps in the hard rock of life. To get out of the pit we have to grit our teeth. The values of our reclaimed lives will not be handed down to us from a mountain. We have to dig them out of the mud and devastation of our broken lives. So, assuming we do this; what will we find? What will it mean to us now to live a good life?

Values for an age of virtuality

First of all in the age of virtuality, virtue is relative and virtual, not certain or absolute. Virtue is defined as that which makes a difficult life good. It is never about avoiding difficulty, pain or trouble and can not be achieved without these. We have to discover virtue out of the mistakes and disappointments of our lives. Like Ivan Ilyich, in Tolstoy's novel 'The Death of Ivan Ilyich', we gradually discover the fickleness of human living and learn to look for value and virtue in places where we did not look at first. And in his imagination he called to mind the best moments of his pleasant life. Yet, strangely enough all the best moments of his pleasant life now seemed entirely different than they had in the past- all except the earliest memories of childhood. Way back in childhood there had been something really pleasant, something he could live with were it ever to recur. (Tolstoy 1886:119)

It took Ivan Ilyich a lot of suffering to find out that he had wasted much of his life. Even then it wasn't obvious to him what good living would have consisted of. In virtuality good living needs to be worked out by every single person on every single day anew and there are many different ways to achieve it, but even more ways of getting it wrong. Baumeister's work on the meaning of life, after reviewing many separate studies, shows that people have given up on believing that they can achieve fulfilment or happiness once and for all. We have learnt the hard way that nothing will bring constant contentment. There is no single recipe for living the good life.

Good living is more like good cooking: there are many different good foods and many different ways to cook, but not all are desirable and not all ingredients are good. There are certainly issues of taste and preference involved in what cuisine or what life to choose. And we may not want the same menu all our lives. But there are certainly culinary secrets. There is an art of cooking and it can be learnt and perfected. We cannot all be chefs or cordon bleu cooks, but we can all learn to prepare palatable food and make a meal more tasty and satisfying. Life, similarly can be served up with more zest and flavour when we know more about it.

There is not just one way to lead a good life. There are many possible virtual lives that are worthwhile. What is good is relative to what you want to achieve. Every definition of good needs to be put into its proper context. But we can know quite a lot about desirable ingredients and activities. We can know quite a lot about the effect of mixing different ingredients together. It takes both experience and creativity to discover the relative virtues of things and to make them work to best effect in specific situations. Helping people to learn live a good life in their own way is what existential psychotherapy aims to achieve. This is about learning to recognize what one's objectives and purposes are whilst understanding the ways of the world that provide the means to achieve them or the obstacles to block them. Making a necessity out of virtue and virtue out of necessity makes all the difference between failure and a well lived re-orientated life.

That is the idea of virtue: creating meaning out of meaninglessness and turning bad to good. It is this ability to transform reality that is one of the most precious gifts of being human. It is a gift more available to us in the age of virtuality, this capacity to shift life and not just find resilience against adversity but liquid energy in the swamps of misfortune. It cannot be taught as a technique and it can not be predicted or prescribed. But it is within everyone's means and different people have different means at their disposal to create pockets of meaning in sadness or craft rafts to cross the rapids of their torpedoed lives. All can do it, but few come to discover that they can.

Now the good life has to not just be discovered, or won, it has to be created. It has to be affirmed for it to come into existence. The quest for good living and the search for meaning and fulfilment are one and the same thing. We can no longer expect to be given prescriptions on how to achieve these things. The onus on every individual is greater than before. The returns increase accordingly. The more I put in the more I will take out when I succeed in creating a positive reality. Of course if I do not win the good life the failure may also be devastating.

What is it that we would want to win? Some time ago I might have said: being. But being alone is not enough. What matters is how this being is enacted. It is as Levinas said:

'the question par excellence of philosophy is not: 'why being rather than nothing? But how being justifies itself. (Levinas 1989,p. 86)'

Similarly when we ask the question about what a good life is the salient issue is not whether a good life is possible or what it consists of but how we might achieve it. The good life has to be created in action. Finding goodness in life is not a random activity. It requires careful planning and creativity. Meaning is not intrinsic, it is extrinsic: it has to be added, not found in what we experience or bring about in the world. It is like Merleau Ponty's definition of philosophy in *Phenomenology of Perception*:

Philosophy is not the reflection of a pre-existing truth, but, like art, the act of bringing truth into being' (Merleau Ponty 1945, p XX).

So how to bring truth into being. Nietzsche's answer was to learn to live one's life in such a way that its eternal recurrence would be a good thing. To live in such a way that you would love to repeat it over and over again if that is what you were doomed to do, seems a good motto for living with care. It is not so dissimilar to Heidegger's recommendation of living with anticipatory resoluteness. For Heidegger though this anticipation is largely the anticipation of death, which is rather the opposite of Nietzsche's anticipation of eternal recurrence of life. To live so that you are ready to die has been a recipe for the good life since time immemorial. To live for the sake of life may be a little harder to do.

To live the life of re-evaluated values means to live a life, which is calibrated on the purposes that seem most right in light of what we know. Wisdom will not be based on opinion, it will be based on knowledge, knowledge on facts and facts on information, information on data. But the data will be interpreted in light of the purpose and values that we opt for in life and they will be evaluated in light of the new ethical principles distilled from the thinkers that are not afraid to think about life. Those principles will always consider the individual interpretation and they will address the subjective evaluation of a person's life as it is lived rather than dictate a general rule. This makes it difficult to lay down a moral law and sets the requirement of enabling people to evaluate their own morality. People need to acquire or perfect their own moral ability. I like to think of this as learning to perfect one's morability. Moral ability is the capacity to work out what is right and wrong in the context of the world you live in and in relation to the purpose you want to achieve. It has to take the physical laws into account and the laws of the society one lives in. It also has to obey the personal laws of the individual and finally the laws of ontology: the laws of human existence.

I am well aware of the tentativeness of the principles I shall be describing. I would like to suggest that in the art of living there is room for many good cookbooks. My formulae will not be yours. Not everyone will want to follow recipes anyway. But here, for what they are worth are some of my own ingredients and basic rules of thumb. In this I follow a model of four world dimensions, physical, social, personal and spiritual. We live life on all these dimensions at once and are continuously dealing with opposing forces on each. Our existence on the physical dimension confronts us with the pull between life and death, on the social dimension with the conflicts of love and hate, on the personal with the challenges of strength and weakness and the spiritual with the tension between good and evil. There are of course many variations on these themes and many complexities of

the interactions between the levels and their paradoxes. I have written about this elsewhere and shall spare you the details.

The abuse of power in the therapeutic relationship

There is currently a hot debate abroad about what the proper role and functions of psychotherapists are. Some, such as Jeffrey Masson (Masson 1990) question the appropriateness of therapeutic intervention all together. Others argue in favour of a psychotherapy profession practiced only by those who have been trained in such a way as to eliminate any significant shortcomings, coming to grips with these in a thorough and full training analysis. Neither of these extreme views do the profession a great service, neither advance our understanding or clarification of the pertinent issues.

Many of the arguments are based on dogma and aim at either protecting vested interests or at undermining these. Critical thinking is often sadly lacking and even within the professional body the different modalities of psychotherapy have been safely insulated from each other so as to avoid major challenges across the divides. It is a sad illustration of psychotherapists' lack of willingness to consider various worldviews that they feel compelled to establish such tight boundaries around their theoretical concepts in this way. One cannot escape from having to ask the question whether therapists who are willing to hide away from challenge in this manner can be open enough to the varied and wide ranging worldviews of their clients. Is it possible for therapists to make room for the particular outlook of their clients if they are trained to bring everything back to the blueprint of their own theoretical model? What are the consequences of therapists interpreting other people's worlds in terms of pre-set theoretical notions? What effect does it have on clients to be treated as entities to be explained in alien terms rather than understood on their own terms?

There can be little doubt that there are multiple ways of looking at the same phenomenon. Take the example of Mrs. M. who reported to her therapist on how enthusiastic and worked up she recently became fighting against a particular injustice that she felt had been done to her. She mentioned how her boss had accused her of 'behaving like a raving feminist' and she said that she had felt hurt by his remark, which had added insult to injury. Her therapist interpreted to her that her reaction to the perceived injustice was out of proportion with reality and showed that she used manic defences to negate her deeply felt fear and melancholy, illustrating that she was actually afraid of her boss' behaviour and depressed about her own inability to cope with it. In hearing this interpretation Mrs. M. felt further offended and put down, because, she was only too aware of the weakness underlying her frantic efforts to overcome it and did not need to be reminded of it. To term her enthusiasm a defence reduced her to a pulp and made what had seemed like a victory over her usual victimization into yet another symptom. Mrs. M. felt condemned to view herself once again in the light of pathology and she felt as much thwarted in her efforts to rise above it by her therapist as by her boss.

Mrs. M before anything needed some recognition for the fact that she was trying to be heard by her boss. She needed acknowledgement from her therapist that her enthusiasm

in countering perceived injustice was not just a manic defence but much more like an act of existential courage. To recognize the positive element in her attitude would not mean that she would neglect to note the terror underlying her courage. On the contrary: it is obvious that a person is only capable of courage because of the difficult circumstances and in the face of considerable apprehension and anguish. To note that someone has courage posits their fear as a given, but goes beyond it, to note that the person is actively engaged with life, in spite of the difficulties, it gives credit where credit is due and thus gives hope and strength. An interpretation in terms of defences can all too easily destroy a person's desperate attempts at gaining mastery over fate and can make a client feel selectively listened to and misunderstood.

The Mrs. M.s of this world need to have their efforts and progress noted and heard if they are to be helped to feel proud of their struggle with existence, if they are to be enabled to rise above current predicaments, instead of being merely kept wanting and made aware of failings. It is all too easy to keep patients patiently at the mercy of their own pathology and dependent upon the therapist's superior skill in pointing it out to them. The therapist's work may actually hinder people's endeavour to take charge of their own life. Some interpretations seem designed to keep patients helpless and in need of ever more therapy. To empower clients to note the fruits of their labour as well as the remaining difficulties has got to be one of the important objectives of good psychotherapy. We do not achieve much if we merely gloss over problems by calling the glass half full instead of half empty. The aim is not semantic, nor is it about replacing negativity with positiveness, it is rather to strike a balance in enabling a person in facing reality whilst learning to value their ability to do so.

Serving not healing

Psychotherapists all too often are afraid to face up to reality themselves as they have become used to pathologizing their own problems and are specialists at recognizing symptoms of pathology everywhere. It is comforting to take on the mantle of professionalism and feel the right to hide in sometimes rather grandiose interpretations that can make clients feel caught out and weak, rather than heard and understood.

Much of our practice has lost track of what it means to hear and heal a person. Perhaps we have most of all forgotten that therapy in the original meaning of the word stands for 'serving', not 'healing' and that the psychotherapist by this definition is meant to be the servant of the soul, rather than a master of interpretation. One can wonder whether therapists these days actually do take that serving aspect of their role to heart or whether they are so preoccupied with gaining mastery over their discipline and themselves that they end up gaining mastery over their clients as well.

In this sense it is interesting to think about the situation of employment that exists between the client who pays for services and the therapist who is therefore in the employment of the masterclient, as a true servant. In this scenario the employer, i.e. the client, would decide on the terms and conditions of the servant, i.e. the therapist. It would be the client who would retain all rights to hire and fire, change rate of pay and allow the

servant, the therapist, certain periods of leave, paid or unpaid. It would be the client who would judge whether progress was being made and whether the servant therapist was still doing the job satisfactorily or whether resistance to the work and reluctance to perform properly were getting in the way.

Unfortunately the true masters, our clients, have been submitted into believing that they are incapable of making such judgments, and they have been falsely led to believe that only the servants can call the shots, even though the servants may in many cases have lost total track of what they are supposed to be doing for their masters and instead do a lot for themselves. The servants have become the true masters of the situation and the ones who pay them and should be the actual masters have in fact become the servants. Such a situation can only be maintained for as long as the masters believe that they are suffering and are in need of total dependency on the servants they are paying to look after them. The fact that these servants have become quite masterful at the confidence trick of turning masters into slaves by keeping the masters ignorant and wanting is half the success of psychotherapy. Of course the client-masters who have become servants really do need the therapist-servants who have become masters, but in emphasizing this aspect of the dialectic, the other side, namely that the therapists need the clients even more, has been cleverly obfuscated and gotten lost. As there is a concerted attempt to keep the client in the submissive role there can be no easy transition to the completion of the dialectic and a recognition of mutual dependence and cooperation.

This false and artificial situation can be maintained by the mystique of psychotherapy where the knowledge and wisdom of the therapist are a commodity so precious that the client is at the mercy of kind dispensation, rather than in a position to pick and choose, whilst checking on quality. It is this preciousness of commodity that is in jeopardy as soon as there is professional accountability and open access services to the public. Until this is a reality therapists will continue to relate to clients as if they are at the mercy of their superior and snooty insights, leaving clients often feeling weaker after treatment than before. Alternatively therapists can wield their power not by bringing the client down to a level of patient victimization and disempowerment, but by lifting the client to an equally unrealistic level of empowerment and imaginary omnipotence, which merely flatters the therapist's own sense of power, being able to dispense such potency.

The tragedy is that it is those who already feel disempowered who come to the psychotherapist, making it all too easy for their power to become further eroded in the process of therapy itself. Much of the premise of psychotherapy is that people's predicaments have more to do with individual failings and difficulties than with contextual or cultural ones. This view of personal difficulties becomes more and more cultivated as psychotherapy develops as a profession and a power relationship ensues where the client is kept in the oppressed position. For clients to liberate themselves through an awareness of their power requires for them to have an initial grip on their existing struggle with reality. They can only get such a grip through well conducted therapy, where their right to be heard and not just listened to and interpreted is fully respected. The problem is that such liberation would deprive therapists of their privileged position and would force them to question much of their secure theories behind which

they hide. As long as we do not move in that direction however we may find that psychotherapy is the oppressive instrument par excellence which hurts and harms as much as it heals and helps.

Therapy as distortion

It isn't always possible for clients to balance the impact of the therapist's goals by referring to other possible explanations, complementary interpretations and their own worldviews. Many consumers of psychotherapy are not in a position to make up their own mind about how to think of themselves and others and make decisions accordingly. It is therefore necessary for therapists themselves to think clearly about these issues.

In order to come to a fair hearing for the client we must be able to start by acknowledging that therapy is by definition a distorted power situation, perhaps specifically because we set out to do good to the other. For as Nietzsche suggested power expresses itself through the doing of good and evil. As he suggested in *The Gay Science* :

'By doing good and doing ill one exercises one's power upon others... we benefit and show benevolence to those who are already dependent on us in some way; we want to increase their power because in that way we increase ours; or we want to show them how advantageous it is to be in our power; that way they will become more satisfied with their condition and more hostile to and willing to fight against the enemies of our power.'
(Nietzsche 1882, 13)

This is an interesting and thought provoking idea. Perhaps one of the keys to understanding psychotherapist motivation is that we like vulnerable people to get better enough to recognize how good psychotherapy is for them whilst keeping them needy enough to be grateful to us. Others perhaps even like to keep them dependent enough for long enough to make a living off them and benefit both in kind and by feeling needed and superior to these inferior creatures, the clients.

This is precisely the sort of thing that professionalization sets out to challenge. Setting boundaries to the profession is about stopping the professionals from getting too much out of their clients, be it financially, emotionally or sexually. Of the three forms of abuse emotional abuse is by far the most serious and frequent. Consumer organizations for clients of psychotherapy and counselling get far more complaints about trained therapists who keep them dependent for too long, than about sexual abuse by charlatans, but the latter gets a lot more press coverage. Professionalization is about setting boundaries to our own power, not about increasing it. This may explain why psychotherapists have been so resistant to making the final commitment to a professional body. For in increasing the visibility and accountability of psychotherapists and in training more therapists clients achieve a more powerful position to choose who will hear their troubles and whose interpretations or versions of their hard earned reality they will pay for.

Empowerment of our clients flows from a better supply of therapists and more therapeutic competition. When such a situation of scrutiny is brought about psychotherapists will become the true servants of the people who consult them and they

will have to keep their mastery of their profession in check. Therapists will not be able to hide in the ivory towers of their superior insights any longer, they will have to account for the effects of their own words and interpretations of reality. The clients will have to be heard if they are to continue going to therapists, they will exercise their right to be heard and not hurt.

Moral ability on four dimensions

In order to find one's way in the post post-modern world of virtuality we need to be capable of responding to a multiplicity of possibilities and demands. The old system of values that was based on certainty about what was desirable is long defunct. It was temporarily replaced with the nihilism of deconstruction and we could remain stuck in a post-modern attitude of deconstructing truths and realities, but there is not a lot of mileage in continuing to do so. When we have experienced the levelling process described above we soon discover the need to make meaning out of nothing and create new values. These values will necessarily be relative to the situations and circumstances that we are in. Values in an age of virtuality are context specific. This is what I refer to as morability: the ability to think in moral terms without being moralistic and rigid about our values. It is the ability to think in terms of givens, purposes and consequences before we decide what is worth giving up for the values we choose. There are only a few basic principles guiding our moral ability and I shall mention some of these.

A good life needs a good physical foundation. The principle at work here is that of vitality. Vitality is the capacity to manage oneself creatively in life. A vital attitude leads to a creative use of our energies. This includes an ability to give into suffering and death when it comes. Vitality is about being as dynamic as is feasible or desirable in a situation. It requires us to look after our own physical well being, without damaging that of another. We have to learn what makes our physical life good. This is about creating cosiness and excitement in fair proportions. It is about protecting one's own safety and have enough, not too much or too little. It is about staying nimble and alert and resting and replenishing oneself enough to maintain one's physical balance. It is about nurturing oneself in a manner that is pleasurable without being greedy.

In the social dimension we need good relationships to our fellow human beings. This requires several principles including responsiveness and equity. Generosity is good, but it works only as long as the other is going to be generous too, otherwise you get depleted. If you have been wronged you need to make sure there is compensation and restitution. A good standard for relationships is that of reciprocity or mutuality. Reciprocity leads to the creation of community. What works best here is to recognize the principle of kinship: what I do to you I do to myself. As Martin Luther King once said:

In a real sense, all life is interrelated. All men are caught up in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. (Luther King, 1963:70)

You no longer need to follow Kant's moral imperative to do to others what you would have them do to you. Nor is it necessary to follow the bible's instruction to love your neighbour as yourself. It is enough to recognize how we all are affiliated and how what I do to you I do to myself by the same token.

The individuality of the person is perhaps much overrated. In the personal world we need integrity and resoluteness, but that integrity can only be respected as long as my self is inserted harmoniously into the world around it. I need the courage to recognize my connections and elaborate these in such a way that I create a self as I relate to the world. The ability to know who one wants to be thus becomes crucial. We need to develop a sense of authority in deciding when to let ourselves believe things about the world that are of use and when to challenge them instead. To be an individual requires an ability to be both anxious and capable of the quietude and comfort that comes from illusion formation and self-deception. In the end it is an overcoming of self and its illusions that brings true freedom (Murdoch 1970). As Iris Murdoch put it:

Humility is not a peculiar habit of self-effacement, rather like having an inaudible voice, it is a selfless respect for reality and one of the most difficult and central of all virtues. (Murdoch, 1970:95)

Thus ultimately the good life can not be brought into being without a spiritual foundation and purpose. We need to release ourselves into a wider sphere than that of our narrow self and worldly interests. On the spiritual dimension of our existence we find the releasement of our tensions and worries as we begin to see ourselves in the context of the history of mankind and of what lies beyond us.

We discover the dialectical movement of our lives as we become aware of the greater good that surpasses us and that puts our temporary concerns in context and perspective. Giving in to this dimension beyond us allows us to be regenerated by it. This can only be done to the extent that we let ourselves become transparent, allowing the forces of life to shine through us. We can now move forward and discover something closely resembling good faith, as we learn to constantly re-evaluate the consequences of our own actions. This ability to see reality and place ourselves in it is what defines our new moral ability in an age of virtuality. In order to achieve this we have to become disenchanted with the ties that bind us to the past and our narrow self-interest. Our pride has to wear thin so that a true humility comes through, which is an openness to reality in all its complexity. The most important asset for our age of virtuality is our hard-earned ability to re-evaluate and see ourselves in the relativity of our circumstances and then move onward in a new direction. In doing so we should remember Montaigne's warning that:

Virtue shuns ease as companion. It demands a rough and thorny path. (Montaigne 1580, Essays XI)

It is perhaps not what we would have wanted, but the path of virtue is hard and not easy to pass. We have to learn to bring our own limited freedom into existence and let ourselves be touched by the challenges of reality. And so, in fear and trembling and with

doubt, but also hope in our hearts we shall discover the never ending truth of human existence, that will not be changed by the passing of a millennium: that human living is to love and struggle, laugh and cry, live and die. Life is always shorter than we think it will be and we should not postpone living it well until it is too late. If life is to be lived well, it is up to us to create its goodness. This goodness is to be found in the individual interpretation of the ordinary everyday realities and challenges. This may not seem like much of an answer to the great questions of the millennium, but perhaps it is not such a small thing to at least learn to live before it is too late. Perhaps Henry James got closest to it when he pointed out that it wasn't so much living a good life as living itself that mattered. I would like to conclude with his wise reflection:

Live all you can; it's a mistake not to. It doesn't so much matter what you do in particular, so long as you have your life. If you haven't had that what have you had? (James, *The Ambassadors*, bkV, ch. 2)

I hope you will think about it and draw your own conclusions.