

# Life as a Quest – The Antidote to a Wasted Existence

*Academy of Ideas*

“Adventure shatters the oppressive, insistent reality as if it were a piece of glass. It is the unforeseen, the unthought-of, the new. Each adventure is a new birth of the world, a unique process. How can it fail to be interesting?”

*José Ortega y Gasset, Meditations on Quixote*

As creatures of habit we derive comfort from our well-established routines. Our routines help us impose order on an unpredictable environment, and good habits repeated daily are one of the keys to success in life and career. But for some of us our habits and routines are not the promoter of a great life but instead are webs of thought and behavior that imprison us and limit our potential, and so the thought of them can elicit feelings of futility and dread.

“There are many, lucky or unlucky, for whom the course of their lives shows little or no departure from these well-ordered routines. As comforting as this may seem, in the end it is also an unspeakable horror.”

*Teofilo F. Ruiz, The Terror of History*

Or as Jose Ortega y Gasset echoed:

“Soon after we begin living we become aware of the confines of our prison. It takes us thirty years at the most to recognize the limits within which our possibilities will move. We take stock of reality, which is like measuring the length of the chain which binds our feet. Then we say: “Is this life? Nothing more than this? A closed cycle which is repeated, always identical?” This is a dangerous hour for every man.”

*José Ortega y Gasset, Meditations on Quixote*

Reflecting on the repetitive nature of existence can elicit dread, but as the poet Holderlin pointed out: “*Where the danger lies, also grows the saving power.*” (Friedrich Hölderlin) If the monotony of our days has become a practice in futility, it is a good sign we need to take measures to introduce more novelty into our life. For given that death is coming no matter what we choose to do, is it not better to burn out in an exciting life, than to fade away in monotony and boredom?

“I would rather be ashes than dust. I would rather my spark burn out in a brilliant blaze than be stifled by dry rot. I would rather be a superb meteor, every atom in magnificent glow – than a sleepy and permanent planet. The proper function of man is to live, not merely exist...I shall use my time.”

*Jack London, Tales of Adventure*

If our goal is to live, not merely to exist, how shall we best use our time? One option is to follow in the footsteps of Don Quixote, the main character of one of the greatest tales ever told, and instead of acquiescing to a repetitive existence, to structure our life as a quest.

“Don Quixote... is an allegory of the life of every man who, unlike others... pursues an objective, ideal end that has taken possession of his thinking and willing; and then, of course, he stands out

as an oddity in this world.”

*Arthur Schopenhauer, The World as Will and Representation*

In seeing our life as a quest, we can, like Don Quixote, choose to live in the service of self-chosen values and ideals, become incomparable and unique, and try to make our life unpredictable, adventurous, memorable, and perhaps even worthy of one day being told in a tale. As the playwright Tennessee Williams advised:

“Make voyages! Attempt them. There’s nothing else.”

*Tennessee Williams, Camino Real*

To make the voyages of a questing life, we must become bold, as all quests necessitate leaving the terra firma of the familiar. Quests are defined by their uncertainties, dangers, and risks, and so we must learn to cope with our primitive fear of the uncertain and unknown.

“The bold adventurer succeeds the best.”

*Ovid*

Boldness is in part promoted by the act of becoming more childlike – by regaining our capacity for wonder, curiosity, and most importantly, play.

“Those who approach life like a child playing a game, moving and pushing pieces, possess the power of kings.”

## | *Heraclitus*

Unlike the “normal” adult who is dead inside and who consumes junk food, drugs, alcohol, and mindless entertainment in the frantic search to feel alive, it is natural for the psychologically healthy child to see the dawning of each new day as a new adventure, and to feel as if exciting discoveries beckon and continually lie in wait. Children instinctively rebel against monotony and boredom. Like Don Quixote, they go searching for adventures.

“A man’s maturity is to have regained the innocence of a child at play.”

| *Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil*

Along with cultivating boldness, to turn our life into a quest we also need to determine the values, ideals, and types of adventures that will define our existence. One of the more obvious options is to leave the security of home and with the mindset and values of an explorer, venture forth into the great unknown.

“The traveler is active; he goes strenuously in search of people, of adventure, of experience. The tourist is passive; he expects interesting things to happen to him.”

| *Daniel Boorstin, The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*

Becoming a world traveler, however, is not a viable option for all. Financial constraints coupled with government tyranny and commitments to family and a career, can limit the degree to which we can travel. Fortunately, we do not need to physically leave home to turn our life into a quest, as we can also go on a quest that takes us into unexplored realms of our mind, and one of the ways to do this is to orient our life around the pursuit of knowledge. In devoting his life to a quest for knowledge, Nietzsche found the Ariadne thread that not only saved his life, but infused it with purpose, excitement, and joy.

“No! Life has not disappointed me! On the contrary, I find it richer, more desirable and mysterious every year, – ever since the day when the great liberator came to me, the idea that life could be an experiment of the seeker of knowledge – and not a duty, not a calamity, not a trickery! – And knowledge itself: let it be something else for others, for example, a bed to rest on...or a diversion, or a form of leisure, – for me it is a world of dangers and victories in which heroic feelings, too, find places to dance and play. “Life as a means to knowledge” – with this principle in one’s heart one can live not only boldly but even joyfully and laugh joyfully, too!”

*Nietzsche, The Gay Science*

Questing for knowledge is valuable for its own sake. “Knowledge is the food of the soul” (Protagoras), Plato has Socrates say. When asked whether it is better to be born or not to be born, the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Anaxagoras replied that being born is better because it grants one the opportunity to “study the heavens and the whole universe.” (Anaxagoras) But devoting our life to a quest for knowledge, while valuable for its own sake, is made more valuable by the secondary benefits it confers, one of which is that it helps us escape mediocrity and to become a better human being.

“Knowledge is that which, next to virtue, truly raises one person above another.”

*Joseph Addison*

Knowledge, like fine wine, improves with age and eventually turns into wisdom; and wisdom is what moves us towards the ideal state of the Philosophical Sage. Questing for knowledge also confers practical and economic benefits as it can open new career and vocational opportunities. One historical example of many is George Washington Carver. Born into slavery, Carver died a renowned agricultural scientist and inventor. His insatiable desire for knowledge helped him overcome immense obstacles and

rise above the indignities he was cruelly subjected to by virtue of his birth.

“I wanted to know the name of every stone and flower and insect and bird and beast. I wanted to know where it got its color, where it got its life – but there was no one to tell me.”

*George Washington Carver, Scientist and Symbol*

If questing for knowledge does not appeal to us, another option is to go on a quest for beauty. “Beauty is the great seducer of man” (Paulo Coelho, *The Alchemist*). Or as the late Roger Scruton wrote:

“...beauty matters. It is not just a subjective thing but a universal need of human beings. If we ignore this need we find ourselves in a spiritual desert.”

*Roger Scruton, Why Beauty Matters*

Questing for beauty proves difficult not because of a lack of beauty in the world, but because many lack the eyes to see it. Our aesthetic senses tend to atrophy in our most formative years due to the daily memorization practices, repetition rituals, and rote learning which constituted our so-called “education”. Through state sponsored schooling, we are conditioned to block out the beautiful and to see the world through the hues of lifeless ideas and mindless conformity.

“Though we travel the world over to find the beautiful, we must carry it with us or we find it not.”

*Ralph Waldo Emerson, The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*

To go on a quest for beauty we need to re-activate our aesthetic senses, and we can do this by setting aside time each day to appreciate beauty. There are two sources of beauty in the world we can fixate our

attention on. Firstly, we can learn to find genuine pleasure and delight in the natural world and see the brilliance that inheres in every seed, plant, tree, insect, animal, human, landscape, mountain and lake.

“To speak truly, few adult persons can see nature. Most persons do not see the sun. At least they have a very superficial seeing. The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child. The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood.”

*Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nature*

Secondly, we can tune our aesthetic senses to the beauty created by individuals, past or present, which Arthur Schopenhauer called “the flower or net profit of existence” (The World as Will and Representation) as a result of his realization that man-made beauty is one of the purest sources of joy and pleasure life has to offer. Nietzsche once wrote that “Without music, life would be a mistake.” (Twilight of the Idols) and the same can be said for art, poems, novels, philosophies, and all the other beautiful creations brought forth by the hands of men and women. These stores of beauty are so vast, that in going on a quest to appreciate such profitable beauty, we have within our hands enough to justify life. As Albert Camus wrote:

“There is not a single true work of art that has not in the end added to the inner freedom of each person who has known and loved it. Yes, that is the freedom I am extolling, and it is what helps me through life.”

*Albert Camus, Resistance, Rebellion, and Death: Essays*

But going on a quest for beauty does not have to consist solely in the appreciation of beauty. We can also create beauty and thereby add to Schopenhauer’s “flower and net profit of existence”. We can create

music, poetry, art, stories, philosophies, cinema, beautiful gardens or strong and independent children. Or we can transform our own body or character into a beautiful work of art. Why put in the time and hard work that is required to create beauty, we may wonder? “I suffer, therefore I create” is the fundamental principle to which the creator of beauty abides.

“As a suffering creature, I cannot do without something greater than I – something that is my life – the power to create.”

*Van Gogh*

Or as Nietzsche wrote:

“Creation, that is the redemption from suffering, and life’s growing light.”

*Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

Each of the aforementioned quests involve uncertainty and risk. In becoming a world traveler, we expose ourselves to the unknown dangers that lurk in the unfamiliar corners of the world. In questing for knowledge, in becoming what Emerson called “an endless seeker” who “unsettles all things”, we can stumble upon terrible truths and knowledge that shakes the foundations of our worldview. “*For in much wisdom, there is much sorrow.*” says the book of Ecclesiastes. In going on a quest to appreciate beauty, we may become more aware of the transience of life and the sorrows of death: “*The force that through the green fuse drives the flower...Is my destroyer.*”, the poet Dylan Thomas penned. And finally, in seeing our life as a quest to create beauty, we might become a target of the envious. For as Rollo May explained: it is the “*artists, poets, and saints [who] are the ones who threaten the status quo, which each society is devoted to protecting.*” (Rollo May, *The Courage to Create*)



*Yet we must ask ourselves: are such dangers enough to keep us confined to our well-established routines, to the closed circle of our life that in its repetition fills us with feelings of futility and dread? To help us ponder this question we will conclude with a passage from the Italian philosopher Giacomo Leopardi, who put the following words into the mouth of an explorer on the high seas, in search of new lands.*

“...if at this moment you and I, and all our companions, were not aboard these ships, in the midst of the sea, in this unknown solitude, in a condition as uncertain and risky as you please; what other situation in life would we find ourselves in? What would we be doing? How would we be spending these days? Do you think, more happily? Or would we not rather be in some greater trouble or anxiety, or else full of boredom? . . .Even if we gain no other benefit from this voyage, it seems to me that it is most profitable to us, in that for a while it keeps us free of boredom, renders life dear to us, and makes us value many things that we would not otherwise take into account.”

*Giacomo Leopardi, The Moral Essays*

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