

THE STONE

Waking Up to the Gift of ‘Aliveness’

By Sean D. Kelly

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A few weeks ago, I found a surprising line in my lecture notes. I don’t know how long it had been there or how it got in. I don’t remember having written it or even having seen it before. It said, “The goal of life, for Pascal, is not happiness, peace, or fulfillment, but *aliveness*.” I believe the line may have been written by my teacher and friend, the philosopher Hubert Dreyfus. Bert died in April at the age of 87.

It is strange, on the face of it at least, to think that Bert may be speaking to me from the grave. It is stranger still, perhaps, that from that less-than-ideal vantage point he could be telling me about a possible goal of life. But if you knew how my lecture notes work, it might not seem so peculiar.

You see, I’ve been teaching the 17th-century French philosopher Blaise Pascal, and the Existentialist tradition he prefigured, since Bert introduced me to them almost 30 years ago. The lecture notes I use started out as notes I took as a student in his courses. Over the years they grew and matured, not only in response to what I learned from my students but also, and especially, in response to many continuing conversations with Bert. The strands of influence in those notes are so many and so various that they have long grown obscure. It is sometimes a surprise, even to me, to discover what they contain.

Surprises like these are wonderful, but sometimes perplexing too. What could it mean, after all, that the goal of life is aliveness? It sounds almost banal, or even tautological. But perhaps, after a bit of thought, it resonates.

Think of the way that life really can become lifeless. You know what it's like: rise, commute, work, lunch, work some more, maybe have a beer or go to the gym, watch TV. For a while the routine is nurturing and stabilizing; it is comfortable in its predictability. But soon the days seem to stretch out in an infinite line behind and before you. And eventually you are withering away inside them. They are not just devoid of meaning but ruthless in their insistence that they are that way. The life you are living *announces* it is no longer alive.

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There are at least two natural, but equally flawed, responses to this announcement: constantly seek out newness or look for a stable, deeper meaning to your existing routine. In the 18th century, these responses were centered in Italy and Germany, respectively. Their descendants persevere today.

The Italian — Casanova was the paradigm — decides that what is missing from his life is spontaneity: He has died within his routine because it kills all his natural desires. To become alive again, he commits himself passionately to following his desires, take him where they may. He takes on many lovers — thrilling, consuming affairs! — but eventually he leaves each one for the next; he lives in the moment without a care for his past commitments or his future possibilities. His life moves from one raw excitement to another. Eventually, however, he becomes isolated, inconstant and unmoored. He hurts those around him. He becomes incapable of genuine connection with anyone and unsure of who he really is. He despairs.

The German takes a different approach. Shall we call him Kant? He decides that what is missing is a reason for his routine. He seeks it out. He tells himself a story, one that delivers a meaningful justification of his daily life. And then he enters into the routine once again, determined this time to live in the knowledge that no matter how deadening it becomes, it is justified and therefore must be pursued. It is his duty to do so. But even though he knows the *why* of what he is doing, he

cannot escape the feeling that he is not *living* by doing it. The monotony re-establishes itself. He cannot escape the ruthless assertion of its insignificance. He despairs.

We see what these responses are aiming for — the aliveness they hope to achieve — by seeing how they ultimately fall short of their goal. To be alive is to have the passion of Casanova without its isolation, inconstancy and despair, or the resolute certainty of Kant, without its monotony and insignificance. Indeed, perhaps the best we can hope for is to point to the phenomenon in its absence: Aliveness is whatever is lacking when the monotony of the routine forces itself to the fore. But can we say something positive about what aliveness is?

A complete definition of the phenomenon is no doubt beyond our grasp. But there are two distinctive features of its elusiveness that I believe we can identify. The first is that every apparent source of aliveness disappears upon the inspection of it — the ground of aliveness recedes from view. Consider a simple example: the love you feel gazing at your lover's face. When you are in love, you are alive; the whole world vibrates with significance. It is natural to want to hold onto that aliveness, to make it last forever, to find its source. And where else could it be but in your lover's face? So you look. But beware! Look too closely and something falls apart.

For the greater the love that face evokes, the more transcendent your experience of that person, the less it seems possible that a face, a *physical* face, could actually be its ground. The phenomenon is filled with the deepest mystery, like the man who is God or the brain that is mind. After all, how could this fleshy, corporeal thing, of skin and veins and muscles and fat, how could this mere physical stuff and substance give rise to the ecstasy and transport of love? Of course it does! But the more you look at what a human face is, the less it seems capable of doing what it does. The object of love, *as an object of love*, dissolves in looking at it. The ground of aliveness withdraws from view.

The second feature is equally enigmatic. When you really feel alive, your past, your present and your future somehow make sense together as the unity they have always promised to be. I sometimes feel truly alive, for instance, when I am

teaching my students. When it is going well, when we are connected and engaged and the classroom is buzzing, it is not just that we are sharing a special moment together. For me, that moment has the special character that it does because it fulfills the promise implicit in moments like that from my own childhood and youth. It is the validation of what came before just as it is the preparation for what comes after. When you see in your students the sense that what is happening now will stay with them, will remain alive as a future memory that can sustain them in some other moment, far away and very different from the one we are now sharing, then the moment vibrates with an energy it wouldn't otherwise have.

That is at least one sense in which Bert unquestionably did write the line about aliveness in my lecture notes, because he manifested the very phenomenon it was about. For me, Bert's classroom was the most alive place on earth. The line in my lecture notes that three decades later demanded my attention — that line was not an isolated entity. It referred back to and was prepared for by the very phenomenon of aliveness that Bert's classroom introduced me to. The line is the fulfillment of all the aliveness that Bert's teaching held and promised for us.

But recently, I began to wonder whether there isn't a more literal sense in which Bert was the author of that line as well. Don't get me wrong. I don't believe I ever heard him talk about aliveness, and I don't associate the thought with any others I know he had. It doesn't even look like it belongs with the other lines around it there in the notes. But even so I am certain that line somehow emanates from him. For as surprising and unexpected as it is to hear that the goal of life is aliveness, I can see now that it is the view demanded by the life he led. And after all, isn't that the way it is sometimes? There are things that you know must be said, that are necessary, even though you don't know why. And only later, in your later years, will the necessity and the significance of those statements become clear. Because you grow into them, or they grow into you. Or both.

And isn't this, ultimately, another way to be alive? That we overflow with words and actions and ideas, at each moment saying and doing what it seems we must, but rarely understanding in its full depth why it is required? And sometimes we are wrong; we say or do things that mischaracterize or mistake. But sometimes we are

right, deeply right — we say what is really and actually true — without knowing that we are right or understanding why. And when that happens our words and actions take on a life of their own — they come from us but extend beyond us, extend beyond even themselves.

So if Bert really was the author of that line, it's not just because he wrote it. It's because moreover, without even knowing it, he somehow buried it there in my lecture notes, long ago, as a secret treasure. And there it lay for years, for decades, waiting for the time when it could sprout up and come to life. A gift. A gift from him.

And now it is announced.

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