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## Definitions

I started working on a longer book project recently. While the book is still taking shape and I'm not quite sure what it is even about—part autobiography maybe, part story, part continuation of the work I'm doing here—it's clear that there is something in the story about the supreme importance of definition in life.

And when I say “definition,” I am talking about the meanings of words and guiding principles, not the shape of muscles. Though I have spent a lot of my life concerned with that as well!

Thinking about it now, I guess this only makes sense. I've always been particularly drawn to study my Greek heritage and Socrates has long been a hero. Isn't this exactly what he was going around Athens talking about?

Anyway...

Part of the book so far is about the revolutionary transformation in my understanding of some the key words of life. One of the most serious and dangerous mistakes that you can make is to think you know something when you actually do not. Confidence in a false understanding can lead you down the wrong path and before you know it you might be too far to turn back. This is precisely why I think we hear things like “humility is the beginning of wisdom” (the Bible) and the

“the only thing I know is that I don't know” (Socrates). The complexity and uncertainty of life and reality suggest that we approach things with a supreme degree of caution and vigilance. The right mindset is more curious and less certain, especially the kind of certainty fed by the ego.

As I was writing the other day, I was struck by the emergence of this consistent theme in my life: I embark boldly on an endeavor with confidence that I understand the world only to discover later that I have looked through too narrow a frame and have been thinking all wrong about things. Most of the time these misunderstandings haven't been too serious but in a few instances they had me walking along a thin red line.

Now, I don't want to ruin the potential of the book by sharing these stories here but I will leave you today with some examples of misunderstanding that led me astray.

I used to think that “wealth” meant something like “having a lot of money.” Now I think it means something more like “the ability to give fully to life without reference to what you have or what you can get.”

I used to think of “freedom” only in a sort of negative sense, the “freedom from” something, especially rules and limits. In my case, I was fanatical about not wanting to have a reg-

ular job. I wanted to be free of the corporate life almost at any cost. Now my working definition of freedom is far more expansive and much more psychological: “the ability to bring sufficient awareness to the moment so that you are actually able to consciously choose your response to reality.”

Finally, I used to think that “integrity” meant “being a good person.” But I never slowed down enough to define for myself any coherent definition for what that actually means. This was the gravest of my mistakes. For in failing to have a clear, practical understanding I left the door open for compromise. So though it felt like I was walking on firm ground, slowly, subtly I was moving closer and closer to the frightening gray edge of no return.

“Integrity” is one of those really important Socratic words, like “justice,” “truth” or “love.” Words that we use all the time and in different ways but, if pressed, struggle to put a coherent definition together. It’s one of those things that, though you cannot say precisely what it is, you know it when you see it. The dictionary offers a bunch of possible meanings:

- Firm adherence to a code of especially moral or artistic values
- An unimpaired condition
- The quality or state of being complete or undivided
- The quality of being honest and having strong moral principles; moral uprightness

“Integrity” can be a condition. It can be something that we have, like a quality, or something that we do. It sort of means morality but yet implies something more. At the same time, “integrity” has something to do with the relationship you have with yourself and it’s tied up with the idea of identity. It’s really a very difficult concept to define. My current working definition is this: You have integrity when what you say and do are honest, sincere and wholly consistent with what you believe and value.

For a long time, my working definition included the word “think” along with “say” and “do,” but as I’ve gotten more and more serious about understanding myself I’ve realized how little control I actually have over what I “think.” As a result, I found it wasn’t helpful to include in the definition—at least for now—because it creates an unrealistic expectation and a pressure to do something that I cannot do. I have found that with thought it’s not so much about controlling its content and nature but rather learning how to bring awareness to it—just to actually know what you are thinking is a victory. From there you can figure out what to do with a thought—sometimes the right answer is to listen carefully to it but at others the answer is to ignore it or put it aside.

“Wholly” is a key word here. In my mind, it’s no coincidence that we talk about things like the “structural integrity” of a building. The language of engineering has captured something true about the meaning of integrity. The slightest compromise can put a whole structure at risk of failure. Everything has to be just right. Right proportions. Right connections. Right materials. All the disparate components must come together in precisely the right way. This is the only way a building can withstand the constant pressure and stresses imposed upon it by the Natural world and the Laws of physics.

My working definition of “integrity” asks a lot. First of all, you actually have to know what you believe and value. In and of itself, this is a challenge of a lifetime. Then you have to learn how to live in a manner that is completely consistent with those beliefs and values. And this is no joke. It’s not ok to believe one thing and say or do another. It’s not ok to do the right deed for the wrong reason. Just like with a building, a small compromise here or a little mistake there and the whole thing can come crashing down.

Much of my book project is going to be about unpacking and explaining how I came to this understanding and showing how to apply these big ideas in the practical challenges of day-to-day life.