



Zero to One In Life

I've been working on something exciting lately. My encounter with the Rabbi got me thinking really seriously about what I want to do next with this creative endeavor. I've been at this now for two years and have published 24 issues with over 250 pages of writing and who knows how many words! The writing has changed me—there's no doubt about that—and I find myself feeling compelled to keep going and to venture off into some new directions. While I am not quite ready to unveil everything today, consider this a sneak peak!

Today, I have something radical for you all to consider:

What you most need to do is learn how to move beyond the self.

You might be wondering: "Wait, just what the hell does that mean?" This is a good question. But I realized something important after I met with the Rabbi. You see, what I've been doing the last 6 or 7 years is trying to figure just what this statement actually means! In a moment of deep personal crisis, somehow, by the grace of God, I stumbled across this exact idea. I wasn't looking for it, at least not consciously, but came across it in what feels like an accidental way—a chance reference in a newsletter I had been reading regularly for years. And coming across this idea sparked a moral, intellectual and spiritual revolution in me that has quite literally changed the nature of my life.

The point of this essay is not to try to answer the question—we don't have enough time for that—but simply to try to pique your curiosity a bit. What's so interesting about this is that it is an idea that just keeps appearing over and over again, all over the world and all throughout history. It is literally everywhere. Just consider this small collection of quotations:

Krishna: “Selfish action imprisons the world. Act selflessly, without any thought of personal profit.”

Buddha: “Life is suffering and the cause of suffering is selfish desire.”

Lao Tzu: “The highest virtue is to act without a sense of self.”

Jesus: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Confucius: “The superior man is one who has equal benevolence for all, and who is without selfishness and without partiality.”

Saint Francis: “It is in dying to self that we are granted eternal life.”

Gandhi: “The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.”

Einstein: “Only a life lived for others is worth living.”

If these historical examples seem too out of touch, consider for a second the work of psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who is looked at as a sort of OG modern guru in the self-help world. He defines “flow” as:

“[B]eing completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you’re using your skills to the utmost.”

Sounds kind of familiar, right?

Hopefully, I have your attention now! It’s not some coincidence that this idea keeps popping up all over the world and in all ages and times.

Admittedly, “going beyond the self” is a confusing phrase but it has something to do with overcoming the impulse to selfishness, learning how to be fully present in the moment and learning how to live in service to others. People keep arriving at this idea because eventually they figure out that things like happiness, purpose and fulfillment are rather elusive and don’t follow inevitably from success, wealth, fame or power as we all assume. In fact, these things might even be negatively correlated!

What these great minds keep figuring out is that you can never really be happy until you get over your self. Here’s something fascinating to consider: this is something that you already know or at least a part of you does. You see, somewhere inside of you there is a reservoir of truth and, even if you cannot see it or don’t believe it’s there, it’s trying

to communicate with you. And what it’s trying to say is “stop focusing so much on your self!” That feeling of emptiness you get when you achieve all your goals and dreams, that feeling of existential dread that sometimes comes over you, these are reflections of the truth you didn’t even know you knew. A life exclusively oriented towards the self is a false path.

But as simple as it sounds, it’s not so easy to assimilate into daily life, especially in this era where we worship at the altar of personal success and celebrate the individual with almost God-like reverence. Just about the entire world is focused on self-improvement. It’s got to be one of the world’s biggest addictions, that and alcohol. If you look at book sales, podcast downloads or YouTube video views, you realize quickly that the world is absolutely obsessed with self-improvement. But what the great minds of history are trying to tell us is that it doesn’t matter how much self-improvement work you do. It doesn’t matter how much success you have or how optimized your life may be. If you don’t figure out how to move beyond this, you will literally never get better.

To be sure developing a strong ego is an important arc of the life journey and I believe wholeheartedly in self-improvement. It’s important to note that the message here isn’t to abandon the self, it’s to move beyond it. The key is to understand that an empowered, fully actualized self is just the table stakes for a fulfilling and meaningful life, a necessary but not sufficient quality for the good life.

I think Peter Thiel’s framework in “Zero to One” provides a useful analogy. There are businesses that become successful by making incremental improvements (i.e. they go from 1 to N) and there are those that change the world by inventing something new and revolutionary, creating whole new products and industries (i.e. they go from 0 to 1). The task of self-improvement, of building-up a strong, healthy sense of self, is like the businesses that don’t really innovate but just make incremental improvements upon something that already exists. Yeah, you might figure out something that makes you better but you haven’t really transformed yourself. When you focus exclusively on self-improvement, over time, you build-up a sort of scaffolding for the ego, which while super important, is just not enough. It might make your life better in a sense (i.e. maybe you’ll be healthier, more financially successful, more self-confident...) but it doesn’t quite leave you feeling happy or fulfilled. To go from zero to one in life you simply have to figure out how to go beyond the self.

My new project is going to be an exploration about just what this means and how to go about living this way. I cannot wait to get started and begin sharing it with all of you. Stay tuned for updates! □