

Untapped Potential

“The unexamined life is not worth living” was said by Socrates in Plato’s, *Apology* dialogue recounting the trial of Socrates. Everything we know of Socrates comes from the writings of Plato, Aristophanes and Xenophone, yet the most extensive portrayal of Socrates that we have comes from Plato’s writings. After *Apology*, Socrates’ final lesson to his students is accounted for in Plato’s, *Phaedo* which recounts the dialogues between Socrates and his dedicated students where Socrates engages with them on his final lesson of the immortality of the soul. By the time leading up to his death, Socrates seems to have reached a point of life where he has become more identified with his soul, than his body and his human existence as Socrates.

Socrates’ philosophy developed in response to his teacher, Anaxagoras, a Presocratic philosopher, although at the time the terms “Presocratic” and “Socratic” were not used to describe philosophers, they are a modern way of distinguishing the early Western philosophers. Anaxagoras was a dualist and emphasized that one could understand the nature of reality through two things, “nous” and “seeds”. According to Anaxagoras, seeds provided explanation for the physical world, everything material and that seeds are infinitely divisible and do not get narrowed down to an atom, such as Democritus claims. Anaxagoras claims that behind the infiniteness of the seed lies nous, rather than seeds being divided down eventually to one atom. Nous can be translated to mind, and similar to how a mind operates according to logic, so does nous. Therefore, the world in which we live also operates according to logic. This concept of nous provided by Anaxagoras was developed in response to the materialist, monist explanations for the nature of reality that the presocratics before him claimed. Anaxagoras claims that nous is

what flows through us and makes us animate, whereas things that are inanimate do not contain nous.

Socrates was inspired by Anaxagoras' alternative, dualist approach to explaining the nature of reality, and like all good philosophers, Socrates ultimately became disappointed with his teacher's explanation of nous and sought to develop his own philosophy. It's suggested that Socrates was similar to modern psychology by his fascination with the inner workings of the mind and felt critical of the Presocratic thinkers before him because they seemed to address *how* things happened, rather than *why* things happen. Socrates wanted to know *why*, and to eventually reach an absolute truth about our place in the world. This pursuit of an ultimate truth led him to develop Elenchus, commonly referred to as the Socratic method. The Socratic method is an unfolding dialogue of questioning and answering between two people with the common intention of reaching the truth. The Socratic method can be practiced alone, but it is more rich if practiced with someone, for that allows the two parties to push each other further and deeper towards the truth, which practicing alone would take much discipline to sort through one's thoughts. According to Socrates, this practice of Elenchus can lead to a life more meaningful than the shallow pursuits of pleasing the appetites can provide.

When Socrates stated in *Apology* that "The unexamined life is not worth living", he is calling out his fellow Athenians for their seemingly indulgent and shallow pursuits of satiating the appetites through material goods and pursuits of pleasure, power and money. He likened them to a herd of sheep who do not question their lives and just go about life following after these shallow pursuits. According to Socrates, participating in Elenchus can allow you to step away from the herd and carve out a more meaningful life than any material things can provide. Rather than setting up a school to teach people seeking his wisdom such as Plato later did,

Socrates traveled throughout his city-state of Athens to engage with people in the practice of Elenchus in public places such as the agora marketplace. To his critics, perhaps the most infuriating claim Socrates made was that wisdom comes from one's acknowledgement of their own ignorance. When the High Priestess Oracle at Delphi claimed that Socrates was the wisest person in Athens, he was perplexed, for he claimed to know nothing, there surely must be someone more wise than he. So he set out to speak with people who were highly regarded in their fields, but he discovered that these highly regarded people were not wise, for when he applied his method of dialogue with them, through incessant questioning, they ultimately became frustrated with him and did not have a justifiable answer to why they did what they did. This led him to conclude that all they knew was nonsense and they did not hold true wisdom, for they did not admit to their own ignorance. Socrates' engagement in dialogue with people eventually led to his trial where he was charged with "impiety" and "corruption of the youth". Despite his efforts to convince the court otherwise, his trial ended with a death sentence by drinking an herbal concoction of the poisonous hemlock flower. Even up to his final breaths, Socrates was engaging in Elenchus with his students and his final lesson to them which was on the immortality of the soul and that death is not an ending. This makes me think of Professor Jon Kabbit-Zin's quote, "He who dies before he dies does not die when he dies."¹ This sentiment speaks to what Socrates is trying to convey to his students on the practice of letting go. The one guarantee in life is death and if we can come to terms with that before it happens, it can lead to one living a more meaningful life, for recognizing our body's finitude and our souls as eternal, it can give meaning to life because a part of us is only here for a certain amount of time, so we might as well make the best of it and strive to be the best versions of ourselves. However, I do recognize that some

¹ Jon Kabbit-Zin

<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/79450-he-who-dies-before-he-dies-does-not-die-when>

people may come to that realization and get stuck in a more existential way of thinking where life is finite, so what's the point? Might as well die now, or might as well binge on all the pleasures of the body and not strive for truth, because what's the point if we are going to die anyways? Ultimately, I don't think that way and I truly believe that if someone really came to terms with the essence of what Socrates is trying to convey on the immortality of the soul, that one would come to peace with it.

Death is part of the human experience and something that we will all experience ourselves eventually and if we're around long enough, we'll experience the passing of a loved one. My best friend, Jasmine² died in 2015 after a two-year long battle with cancer. Jasmine's death catapulted me on my own journey of self discovery. Similar to Plato's absence at Socrates' death, I was absent from Jasmine's death at the hospice. At the time, I was not capable of truly being present with her on the precipice between worlds. My decision to not be there with her turned into immense grief and regret after her passing—*I should have been there for her. Did she know how much I love her? Why couldn't I be there? What was I running away from?* This insurmountable grief and regret led me to a crossroads where I was presented with two very different paths to continue my life after Jasmine. Path one was light and familiar and upon the entrance of the path was a wooden coat rack with a veil-like piece of silk hanging from it with a note. I reached for the veil and the note read, "*Put this on to see what can be*"-*Maya*. I put the silk over my head and as I peered down the path, I witnessed a dreamlike scene play before me through the veil, where glowing beings moved about. These glowing beings eventually became detailed and I realized I was watching a scene of myself, of what my life could be like if I chose this path. I saw myself seemingly happy, going about my life as I had always done. The scene then evolved to show the familiar shapes of various family members. I watched scenes of various

² Coincidental side note: Jasmine's dog's name is Socrates.

family members going off to work, embracing motherhood and practicing their religions, all seemingly happy. Yet, as I continued to watch these scenes, I could see that just below the surface of the heart area, there appeared to be a pulsing darkness and as I focused on it, I felt an aching in my chest, a deep sadness. I stood there, transfixed on the scene before me and noticed that the beings started to take the form of both my maternal and paternal grandparents. The immense sadness I felt seemed to be connected to them as well and the weight in my chest felt insurmountable and I knew that what I was feeling was not just mine, but that of my ancestors before me. After what felt like a lifetime, I removed the veil from my head and returned to the crossroads with the understanding that if I took path one, it would lead me down the familiar path of the same old pursuits, but it would not dissipate the darkness contained in my heart that seemed like it was being passed down through generations. I realized that if I took the familiar and seemingly light path one, I would only end up with shallow fixes to deeper wounds. I sat at the crossroads and contemplated for some time and eventually decided to travel down path two.

Path two was dark and unfamiliar and led for a few feet to a seemingly impenetrable wall of tangled forest. I conjured up the courage to take the path less travelled and headed into the darkness. Despite the tangled vines I entered into, I had the comforting feeling that the darkness was not malevolent, but mysterious and I had the trusting feeling that continuing on this unfamiliar path was the only way to dissipate the darkness inside of me. I thought about Jasmine and what it must have been like for her during her last breaths, on the cusp of this world and the other side. I felt her strength, but I also felt her fear, and I felt as though I was about to enter into my own version of dying, yet not a biological death, but I felt I was on the brink of a death of an

old way of being and rebirthing into my highest potential and that the only way to do so was through the darkness...

Taking the unfamiliar path two turned out to be the best thing I have done for myself and for the first time in my life, I made my health and healing a priority. I found others along path two who provided me with support, guidance and friendship and encouraged me to get honest with myself. I started reflecting through journaling, therapy and meditation which allowed me to identify the self-destructive patterns of behavior that were holding me back. The darkness I carried within me began to dissipate and I was able to step into my true self and who I am meant to be. Stepping away from the familiar path of illusionment and untangling myself from transgenerational baggage opened up room for me to align myself with my soul's fullest potential in this lifetime expression as Madeline. Self reflection also allowed me to forgive myself for not being with Jasmine in her final days, which led me to overcoming my grief and return to remembering the true essence of our friendship. Self reflection also allowed me to overcome the limiting beliefs about myself and school and set goals for myself, such as pursuing my Bachelor's degree. So yes, I do agree with Socrates on the importance of self reflection and that it can provide meaning to one's life because I have experienced first hand the fruits of the labor that self reflection can bring. However, I would not go as far as to say that a life not engaged in self reflection is not worth living and that whoever is not practicing self reflection might as well be dead. A few months into my own journey of self reflection, I was awakening to what felt like mind-blowing truths about the universe and life and I was excited to share these insights with my family and friends. I was so excited that I tried getting some family and friends to join me in the dark forest of path two, which eventually turned out to be magnificent and full of bright promise and hope after making it through the darkest parts. Yet, all of the people I tried

to get to join me refused to follow me. They were afraid of the darkness and what they might find there. They were comfortable where they were and did not understand why on Earth I would dwell there and could not fathom the benefits it could bring. So these friends and family stayed on path one. This upset me at first, until I realized that I cannot force someone to participate in the practice of self reflection. Whether they're too busy raising kids and don't feel that they have the time, or perhaps they are simply happy with their life and even a few people felt their life was meaningful through the religions they practiced. Whatever the reason is, it's ok. I've realized it's better to meet people where they're at and I have stopped trying to get people to join me. So I don't think they're life is not worth living, rather that there is untapped potential just lying dormant there and that one of the paths is through the dark forest of path two and deep self reflection.

When I think of Socrates, I am reminded of Timothy Leary and how Leary was so passionate about what he thought LSD could do for humanity. Similar to Socrates, Leary has a polarized reputation where some refer to him as a prophetic teacher who did great things for society, whereas others claim him to be a disruptor, a nuisance, a sort of "gadfly" and "corruptor of the youth". They were so certain that what they had discovered was the thing that could ultimately change humanity towards the good and in their certainty, they somewhat arrogantly trampled over anyone who resisted. This led them to both get in over their heads with what they considered to be the absolute path to truth and their persistence in getting the masses to wake up ended up being their downfall. I could relate to the passion they have on their findings because I too have wanted to get people to join me on what I thought was the path to meaningfulness. However, I was not all consumed by the desire to get people to join me to the point that both Socrates and Leary were. Rather than saying "The unexamined life is not worth living", I think a

more inclusive statement would be “The unexamined life does limits us from fulfilling our highest potential.” However, that doesn’t pack a punch Socrates’ statement. Well, one thing I know is what’s done is done and we cannot change the past and Socrates in all his arrogance and wisdom paved the path for the Western philosophy as we know it to emerge.