

Letter from Utopia

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Dear Human,

Greetings, and may this letter find you at peace and in prosperity. Forgive my writing to you out of the blue. We have never met, yet we are not strangers. We are, in a sense, the closest of kin!

I am one of your possible futures. I hope you will become me. Should this wish come true, then I am not just a possible future, but your actual future: a coming phase of you, like the flower that follows the seed. I am writing to tell you about my life – that you may choose it for yourself.

I am really writing on behalf of all my contemporaries, and we are addressing ourselves to all of your contemporaries. Amongst us are many who are possible futures of your people. Some of us are possible futures of children that have not yet been delivered. Still others are possible artificial persons that you might one day create. We are all dependent on you to make us real.

We call our lives “Utopia”.

How can I tell you about Utopia and not leave you mystified? With what words could I convey the wonder? My pen, I fear, is as unequal to the task as if I had tried to use it against a charging war elephant.

But maybe you will overlook the weakness of my exposition.

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Have you ever experienced a moment of bliss? On the rapids of inspiration maybe, your mind tracing the shapes of truth and beauty? Or in the pulsing ecstasy of love? Or in a glorious triumph achieved with true friends? Or in a conversation on a vine-overhung terrace one star-appointed night? Or perhaps a melody smuggled itself into your heart, charming it and setting it alight with kaleidoscopic emotions? Or when you prayed, and felt heard?

If you have experienced such a moment – experienced *the best type* of such a moment – then you may have discovered inside it a certain idle but sincere thought: “Heaven, yes! I didn’t realize it could be like this. This is so right, on whole different level of right; so real, on a whole different level of real. Why can’t it be like this always? Before I was sleeping; now I am awake.”

Yet a little later, scarcely an hour gone by, and the ever-falling soot of ordinary life is already covering the whole thing. The silver and gold of exuberance lose their shine, and the marble becomes dirty.

Always and always: soot, casting its pall over glamours and revelries, despoiling your epiphany, sodding up your finest collar. And once again that familiar numbing beat of routine rolling along its familiar tracks. Commuter trains loading and unloading passengers… sleepwalkers, shoppers, solicitors, the ambitious and the hopeless, the contented and the wretched… human electrons shuffling through the circuitry of civilization, enacting corporate spreadsheets and other such things.

We forget how good life can be at its best, and how bad at its worst. The most outstanding occasion: it is barely there before the cleaners move in to sweep up the rice and confetti. “Life must go on.” And to be honest, after our puddles have been stirred up and splashed about for a bit, it is a relief when normalcy returns. Because we are not built for lasting bliss.

And so, the door that was ajar begins to close, and so the sliver of hope wanes, until nothing remains but a closed possibility. And then, not even a possibility. Not even a conceivability.

Quick, stop that door from closing! Shove your foot in so it does not slam shut.

And let the faint draught of the beyond continue to whisper of a higher state. Feel it on your face, the tender words of what could be!

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I am summoning the memory of your best moment – why? In the hope of kindling in you a desire to share my happiness.

And yet, what you had in your best moment is but a beckoning scintilla at most. Not close to what I have. No closer than the word "sun" written in yellow ink is to the actual sun. For I'm beyond words and imagination.

My mind is wide and deep. I have read all your libraries, in the blink of an eye. I have experienced human life in many forms and places. Jungle and desert and crackling arctic ice; slum and palace and office, and suburban creek, project, sweatshop, and farm and farm and farm, and a factory floor with a whistle, and the empty home with long afternoons. I have sailed on the seas of high culture, and swum, and snorkeled, and dived. Quite some marvelous edifices build up over a thousand years by the efforts of homunculi, just as the humble polyps in time amass a coral reef. And I've seen the shoals of biography fishes, each one a life story, scintillate under heaving ocean waters.

Does the whole exceed the sum of the parts or do the parts exceed the whole? What I have is not more of what you have. It's not only the particular things, the paintings and toothpaste-tube designs, the book covers, the epochs, the loves, the rusted leaves, the rivers, and the random encounters, the satellite photos, and the hadron collider data streams. It is also the complex relationships between these particulars. There are ideas that can be formed only on top of such a wide experience base, and there are depths that can only be plumbed with such ideas. And the games. And the lusty things, and the things I can't even mention.

You could say I am happy, that I feel good. That I feel surpassing bliss and delight. Yes, but these are words to describe human experience. They are like arrows shot at the moon. What I feel is as far beyond feelings as what I think is beyond thoughts. Oh, I wish I could show you what I have in mind! If I could but share one second with you!

But you don't have to understand what I think and feel. If only you bear in mind what is possible within the human realm, you have enough to get started in the right direction, one step at a time. At no point will you encounter a wall of blinding light. At no point will you have to jettison yourself over a precipice. As you advance, the horizon will recede. The transformation is profound, yes, but it can be as gradual as the process that grew the baby you were into the adult you think you are.

You cannot get here by any magic trick or hokum, or by the power of wishful thinking, or by semantic acrobatics, meditation, affirmation, incantation, or by an act of parliament. I do not presume to advise you on matters theological or political (decisive though these may be). But what I urge on you is a reconfigured physical situation through technology.

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The challenge before you: to become fully what you now are only in hope and potential. For this, new capacities are needed.

To reach Utopia, you must discover the means to three fundamental transformations.

First Transformation: Secure life

Your body is a deathtrap. This machine, unless it jams first or crashes, is sure to rust anon. You be lucky to get seven decades. That is not sufficient to get started in a serious way, much less to complete the journey. The path to maturity of the soul takes longer. Why, even a tree-life takes longer!

Death is not one but a multitude of assassins. Do you not see them? They are coming at you from every angle. Take aim at the causes of early death – infection, violence, malnutrition, heart failure, cancer. Train your biggest gun on aging, and fire. You must seize control of the biochemical processes in your body in order to vanquish, by and by, illness and senescence. In time, you will discover ways to move your mind to more durable media. Then continue to improve the system, so that the risks of death and disease keep receding. Any death prior to the heat death of the universe is premature if your life is good.

Oh, it is not well to live in a self-combusting paper hut! Keep the flames at bay, and be prepared with liquid nitrogen as a backup, while you construct yourself a better habitation. One day you or your children should have a secure home. Research, build, redouble your effort!

The Second Transformation: Expand cognition

Your brain's special faculties: music, humor, spirituality, mathematics, eroticism, art, nurturing, narration, gossip! These are fine spirits to pour into the cup of life. Blessed you are if you have a vintage bottle of any of these. Better yet, a cask! Better yet, a vineyard!

Be not afraid to grow your collection: the mind's cellars have no ceilings.

What other capacities are possible? Imagine a world with all the music dried up: what impoverishment, what loss! But give your thanks not to the lyre but to your ears for the music. And then ask yourself, what other harmonies are there in the air, that you lack the ears to hear? What vaults of value are you witlessly debarred from, because you lack the key sensibility?

Had you but an inkling, your nails would be clawing at the padlock in sacred frenzy.

Your brain must grow beyond the bounds of any genius of humankind, in its special faculties as well as its general intelligence, so that you may better learn, remember, and understand, and so that you may apprehend your own beatitude.

Mind is a means: for without insight you will get bogged down or lose your way, and your journey will fail.

Mind is also an end: for it is in the spacetime of awareness that Utopia will exist. May the measure of your mind be vast and expanding.

Oh, stupidity is a loathsome corral! Gnaw and tug at the posts, and you will slowly loosen them up. One day you'll break the fence that held your forebears captive. Gnaw and tug, redouble your effort!

The Third Transformation: Elevate well-being

What is the difference between despair and delight, between aching boredom and shrieking thrill?

Pleasure! A few grains of this magic ingredient are worth more than a king's treasure. We have immense silos of it here in Utopia. It pervades all we do, everything we experience. We sprinkle it in our tea.

The universe is cold. Fun is the fire that melts the blocks of hardship and creates a bubbling celebration of life.

It is the birthright of every creature, a right no less sacred for having been trampled upon since the beginning of time.

There is a beauty and joy here that you cannot fathom. It feels so good that if the sensation were translated into tears of gratitude, rivers would overflow.

I reach in vain for words to convey to you what it all amounts to... It's like a rain of the most wonderful feeling, where every raindrop has its own unique and indescribable meaning – or rather a scent or essence that evokes a whole world... And each such evoked world is subtler, deeper, more palpable than the totality of the reality that you have encountered. One drop would justify and set right a human life, and the rain keeps raining, and there are floods and seas.

I will not speak here of the worst pain and misery that is to be got rid of; it is too horrible to dwell upon, and you are already aware of the urgency of palliation. My point is that in addition to the removal of the negative, there is also an upside imperative: to enable the full flourishing of enjoyments currently slumbering in their bulbs and buds, unknown to man and woman.

The roots of suffering, however, are planted deep in your brain. Weeding them out and replacing them with crops of well-being will require advanced skills and instruments for the cultivation of your neuronal soil. Take heed, for the problem is complex! All emotions have a function. Prune and weed carefully lest you accidentally reduce the fertility of your plot.

Sustainable yields are possible. Yet fools will build fools' paradises. I recommend you go easy on your paradise-engineering until you have the wisdom to do it right.

Oh, what a gruesome knot suffering is! Pull and tug on those loops, and you will gradually loosen them up. One day the coils will fall, and you will stretch out in delight. Pull and tug, and be patient in your effort!

May there come a time when rising suns are greeted with joy by all the creatures they shine upon.

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"How do I find this place? How long will it take to get there?"

I can pass you no blueprint for Utopia, no timetable or roadmap. All I can give you is my assurance that there is something here, the potential for a much better life.

If you could visit me here for but a day, you would henceforth call this place your home. The place where you belong. Ever since one hairy creature picked up two flints and began knocking them together to make a tool, this has been the direction of your unknown aspiration. Like Odysseus you must journey, and never cease journeying, until you arrive upon this shore.

"Arrive?" you say; "But isn't the journey the destination? Isn't Utopia a place that doesn't exist? And isn't the quest for Utopia, as witnessed historically, a dangerous folly and an incitement to mischief?"

My friend, that is not a bad way for you to think about it. To be sure, Utopia is not a location or a form of social organization.

The blush of health on a convalescent's cheek. The twinkling of the eye in a moment of wit. The smile of a loving thought... Utopia is the hope that the scattered fragments of good that we come across from time to time in our lives can be put together, one day, to reveal the shape of a new kind of life. The kind of life that yours should have been.

I fear that the pursuit of Utopia will bring out the worst in you. Many a moth has been incinerated in pursuit of a brighter future.

Seek the light! But approach with care – and swerve if you smell your wingtips singeing. Light is for seeing, not dying.

When you embark on this quest, you will encounter rough seas and difficult challenges. To prevail will take your best science, your best technology, and your best politics. Yet each problem has a solution. My existence breaks no law of nature. All the needed materials are laid out in front of you. Your people must become master builders, and then you must use these skills to build yourselves up, without ever crushing your cores.

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What is Suffering in Utopia? Suffering is the salt trace left on the cheeks of the oldtimers who were around before.

What is Tragedy in Utopia? It is tragedy enough when Mr. Snowman melts in the spring.

What is Imperfection in Utopia? Imperfection is how we honor the traditions and wishes of the past, and the commitments we made along the path.

What is Body in Utopia? Body is a pair of legs, a pair of arms, a trunk and a head, all made out of flesh. Or not, as the case may be.

What is Society in Utopia? A never-finished tapestry, its weavers equal to its threads; the unfolding patterns a mesh for life and adventure, an inexhaustible generator of beauty.

What is Death in Utopia? Death is the darkness that ultimately surrounds all life.

What is Guilt in Utopia? Guilt is our knowledge that we could have created Utopia sooner.

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We love life here every instant. Every second is so good that it would blow your mind had its amperage not first been increased. My contemporaries and I bear witness, and we turn to you to request your aid. Please, help us come into existence! Please, join us! Whether this surpassing possibility becomes a reality is something you can influence. If your empathy can perceive at least the outlines of the vision I am describing, then I believe your ingenuity will find a way to make it real.

Human life, at its best, is wonderful. I'm asking you to create something greater: life that is truly humane.

Yours sincerely,

Your Possible Future Self