

# **There is Meaning Beyond Absurdity – A Youth Manifesto**

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### **Part 1 - Absurdity**

At 18 years old, on the day of getting the exam results that would determine my future, my world went into freefall. My friends called by my house on that bright Thursday morning and we all walked to the school together to pick up our green slips of paper. Everyone read their results with a smile, or a sky-punch, as they had all done well... except me. My slip had a run of Fs and only one minimal pass grade. Amidst *their* cheering and backslapping, my world slipped into a numbed silence. I felt the falling, like a man drowning underwater. I still remember the shame I felt in that moment, before the eyes of my friends, along with the deep pain of such public failure at life's first major starting-block. Internally, I fell to the floor. A floor which, in that moment, I longed would open up like a trap door and swallow me up. The rest of that day was a blur. I had to face my parents with the news; then wrestle with the intense feeling of abandonment and loneliness at the realisation that all my friends were going off to college and I was headed nowhere. I was bereft and without resources to draw on. The bridge that was to take me onto the mainland of my future had blown up and I was left stranded.

As I reflect on my experience of that day, and the weeks and months that followed, life suddenly seemed absurd. It didn't add up. I had failed exams I hadn't ever wanted to take, but the system had demanded that I did. Almost two years previously, a month into the courses, I had told my tutors that I was doing the wrong subjects and needed to change, but they wouldn't let me. The inevitable crash of the results revealed a world that didn't make sense. All I could see were the paradoxes, the pointlessness, the ridiculousness, the stupidity, the meaninglessness of it all. That day revealed a brewing storm which erupted in the months that followed. I had spent the last 18 years on a path that had seemed to make sense, but now I couldn't trust myself anymore. Everything felt absurd.

That was my story. In the decades that followed, I discovered that everyone has a story from their youth, a time when life suddenly felt absurd.

In the last twenty years, during my work in Africa and Asia, I have felt drawn to see the world through the eyes of young people. In South Africa, children born after 1994 were called *Free Borns*. The name was supposed to capture a new generation born in freedom, full of hope, liberation and opportunity. The reality? For many, the meaningful life is to be recruited into the plethora of gangs that rule the underbelly of all their major cities. The beautiful showcase city of Cape Town is the murder capital of the world. 60% of children born on the Cape Flats don't have a father and often the gangs become their role models, as well as their substitute families. Gang leaders become their new surrogate fathers. It has been too easy for these gangs to fill the voids within the nation's youth. At the heart of the problem is a generation of young people, with an aching search for identity amidst the absurdity. They had been promised a new beginning, but in spite of the official changes that came with the ending of apartheid, social and economic segregation informally shape their world and their resulting frustrations to this day.

I've also worked a lot in Kenya, where the youth of Nairobi, and other towns and settlements across the country, witness a minimum average of 12 acts of corruption every day. Whether it's getting a job, getting good results, or just getting by, this is the environment that they grow up in and it shapes their view of how life works. They, as well as many other nations' youths, are told to study hard, go to college and as a result a job will be assured. But the truth is brutal. Over half of Kenyan youth are unemployed. The youth unemployment crisis stretches across the globe<sup>1</sup>. Many young people settle for work in the informal sector. My friend, Peter, calls them the 'hustlers'.

I remember jogging along the streets of a Nairobi suburb when a teenager came up alongside me in his torn trousers and broken shoes and started to run with me, without breaking sweat (you should never run with Kenyans if you want to keep your pride intact). We chatted, in between my gasps for breath, and I asked him what his dreams were. He told me about his love of music and how he wanted to learn to play an instrument and make

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<sup>1</sup> <https://plan-international.org/eu/youth-unemployment-facts>

music. The reality was that he was one of the many children who are too poor to attend school. I haven't met a Kenyan child that didn't have a dream for their life, but rather than realise their dream, or even find a basic job, they end up disillusioned instead.

I remember standing at the top of a tenement housing block in Dandora in 2012, a settlement built on the edge of the Nairobi city rubbish dump. I was shown where the young women are trained as prostitutes, the shebeens where the illegal brew is produced to numb the teenage boys, and industrial pollution that was spilling into the streams where children played. The dreams of the youth turn into hopelessness, as they watch their mothers and grandmothers working so hard but struggling to obtain a life, for their families, that transcends the insecurities of their communities. They are fighting the gravity pull of health and physical risks, the threat of drugs, alcohol and gangs and the impossible search for job opportunities. The message the young people inherit is that dreams are *not* achieved through struggle. Subsequently, what follows is a rise in early youth deaths through guns, knives, drugs and alcohol, as well as the rapid increase in gambling, made so easy now, through new mobile phone technology. All of these paths exemplify a life journey where there is no longer a destination. TV personality Russell Brand once said that the reason he became a drug addict was that it was too painful not to. The same is true for many youth of Kenya, South Africa, or rich or poor nations of the world.

Absurdity is not the sole domain of the world's poorest youth. I've worked with the highest educated, most affluent nations, as well as the poorest, and I see the same issues, only dressed in smarter clothes with rich-kids' toys. They are weaned on, 'what you see is all there is, so get what you can'. Their role models have told them that the world is their disposable take-away life, to use and destroy without thought for the future. No one is teaching them how to discover values, meaning or purpose. Consumerism, as a life philosophy, has been shown to be the emperor who isn't wearing clothes, but there are no other clothes on offer. There is nothing in its place that has the moral energy to guide them. Despite this, meaningful organisations and the climate crisis are high on a young person's agenda (and low on the real agenda of their elders). What they see their elders exhibiting is nationalism, tribalism and protectionism, rather than meaningful, sustainable futures.

It was summed up for me one day when I was coaching someone who represented the most well-educated, highest paid youth that the city of London could produce, with a young family and large suburban house as his reward. In our conversation he kept telling me what he didn't want in his life. *"I don't want this; I don't want to end up like that"*. After a while, I paused the conversation and reflected this back to him and asked him, *"What **do** you want; what values are important to you; what gives you meaning?"*

I remember the pause and then the slightly despairing reply, *"I have no idea"*.

Absurdity in a smart suit.

When I was 19, something changed. After the array of failures of the previous year, I landed with a bump onto the concrete road of self-discovery. I woke up. No longer was life determined by being on the conveyor belt of my Western education system. I could now find my own path, however messy it seemed, and it was essential that I did. Is there something universal for all youths at about age 19? To some degree, it's an age that is shaped by the fact that you've likely launched yourself out of the nest of education. You have soiled your hands a little and hit some 'adult world' reality face-to-face. For me it was a threshold year, a crossing over, *Attraversiamo*, as the Italians would say.

In 1972, when I was 15, two things happened – one in my own life, and the other thousands of miles away. That year, I had my first encounter with the sense of something bigger than myself. Call it spiritual, call it what you will, but I had a real experience that demonstrated there was more to life than could be seen with my own physical eyes. It was my first independent experience of the meaning of life and thankfully, there was no one around to tell me I was wrong, or stupid. The second thing that happened that year was that poet, philosopher and Rabbi, Abraham Joshua Heschel, was interviewed by NBC TV in America. It was, as it turned out, 10 days before he died. Towards the close of the interview, a very prescient question was asked. Did Heschel have any special words that he would like to say to the young people of the world? What followed were some of the simplest, but most meaningful words of encouragement that have been spoken.

Their wisdom is timeless and yet they echoed my own 19-year-old consciousness.

He said,

*"Remember that there is meaning beyond absurdity."*

*Know that every deed counts;*

*That every word has power.*

*Above all, remember that you must build your life as if it were a work of art"*

I needed to hear that message; that there **is** meaning beyond absurdity. That was the clear call into the future that I was hungry for. It was the call to my 19-year-old self, in response to what my 18-year-old self had painfully experienced, and my 15-year-old self had glimpsed.

## **Part 2 – Meaning & Hope**

The months that followed my 18-year-old car crash, into the reality of life's absurdity, were leaden. It felt like I was wearing weighted boots and every step was hard, deliberate and joyless. I was in a hole and I needed to find a way out. No one was offering a hand up of any sort. I was left to figure it all out for myself. My friends did all go off to University and I continued to feel the left-behind-shame and loneliness that I'd had a foretaste of, on results day. The acute rawness was repeatedly exposed each time I visited them for a day, at their respective Universities, and met their new friends, drunk in stories of their new adventures, surroundings and opportunities. Their lives were rapidly moving on. Mine wasn't. I'm sure I felt depressed, in the bodily sense of that word - pressed down, confined, trapped, unable to move. In those months I was picking through the rubble of what was meant to have been called 'the future'. I got a part time job for some cash, tried to salvage some of the subjects I'd failed and more importantly, I set out on a new path; studying the subject that I really did want to learn. A subject that I chose and that gave me joy.

The turning point, the hint of the possibility of meaning beyond absurdity, came three months later. Normally when one thinks of 'beyond', we see it as a point in the future, or some location further down the road. What I discovered, as the pain of absurdity dug deep, was that the 'beyond' wasn't in the future, it was now, it was within myself and it was stronger than the pain. I discovered that, for me, 'beyond' meant learning new perspectives on myself and my world, nurturing new levels of seeing. The ancient Christian saying was,

“unless you are born again you can’t see....”. It wasn’t about what I was doing, or where I was headed, so much as what I was now seeing. The dissident writer and leader Václav Havel once wrote,

*“Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out”.*

This is the meaning beyond absurdity.

This was further illustrated for me by what has become known as the Stockdale Principle. Vice Admiral James Stockdale was a prisoner of war for over 7 years during the Vietnam conflict. He was interviewed in later years about why he thought some prisoners survived and others did not. He said that the people who didn’t survive were the optimists. Those who kept setting deadlines in their own minds for when they believed they would be released. “I’ll be out by Easter”. Then it didn’t happen. “I’ll be out by Christmas”. Then it didn’t happen. Each time that their self-created deadline didn’t see them released, they became ever more discouraged, until eventually they gave up. Stockdale’s conclusion regarding those who did survive was that in order to make it, *“You must maintain unwavering faith that you can and will prevail in the end, regardless of the difficulties and also have the self-discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be”*

So, in those gloomy autumn months something slowly started to shift in me. While I still felt low, something was changing. Not in my circumstances, but within myself, the internal scenery of my mind was starting to evolve. It was the birth of a different kind of hope. The first step in discovering a meaning beyond absurdity.

What was it that stirred up the first glimpse of hope?

In December, three months on, I was invited to a school reunion. Understandably, the thought of it filled me with mixed emotions. It would be a reconnection with old friends, but also a reconnection with shame. My friends ‘successes’, all brought together in one room, would be a mirror to my own failure. Why would I put myself through that again? But I did. I

went to the event and remembered nothing about it except that I met Hazel. A gentle, well-grounded friend, who I'd travelled with through 7 years of schooling.

What created hope that evening? Love. I don't mean falling in love, I mean the love of feeling totally accepted. It could have easily been the love of empathy, of kindness, or, as I have witnessed thousands of times since, the love you experience when someone looks into your defeated eyes, probably for the first time in your life and tells you that you, yes you, have amazing potential. Ultimately all change, all transformation, for all youth, rich or poor, is rooted in relationship, not theory. It's rooted in love, not spreadsheets and action plans.

That evening, I left the conversation with Hazel feeling like I was, after all, ok. I really was ok. My failure hadn't written me off in the eyes of others and so I could look upon myself with more kindness. My failure wasn't final. Who I was, the friend whose qualities she had enjoyed in the past, still existed as far as she was concerned. I had been seen and not rejected, as I had rejected myself. There were no fireworks that evening, no fanfares, but I had experienced love and acceptance for the first time in months and that experience awoke a real, tangible, hope. A hope that enabled me to move on and be ready to see and receive the opportunities that soon followed. It was a new hope that opened me up to the possibility of learning new ways to live my life, beyond the limiting scripts of absurdity.

It was this lifting of the trap door that drew me gently towards the daylight of new possibilities and deeper insights into the meaning of my life - personal life leadership, the discovery of transcendence, the confrontation with the ego and the importance of mystery.

### **Part 3 – Meaning & Leadership**

The exam results had been published in August. Hope had been a conscious, welcome guest in mid-December. Then one cold Saturday in late January I found myself standing in a village hall, at a local music gig. At the end of the event a youth leader, who I knew (but not at all

well), pulled away from the conversation he was in, looked around the room and came over to me.

*“Do **you** want to come? There’s a place available. Someone’s just dropped out”.*

*“Come where?” I asked, “For what?”*

I had no idea what he was talking about.

And so, by virtue of the fact that I just happened to be standing in the right place, at the right time, I found myself being invited to join a selected group of 12 young people, to go away for a weekend retreat, to be immersed in the topic of... leadership.

As we headed north on our three-hour drive, on the damp Friday night, I had no idea what a leadership weekend would be about, but I was excited, because I was hungry to learn and had an intuitive sense that leadership was going to be important. And it was. Life-definingly so. The weekend was life-changing for me as a 19-year-old. Saturday morning began with watching a film called *Step Over The Edge*, which was all about a group of youth learning what it meant to lead their lives. The remaining sessions were case studies of famous leaders, often from the Bible, and what we can learn from them. I was inspired from the start. Leaders made things happen. Leaders changed the world. Leaders had a real sense of purpose and direction. In-between sessions we talked a lot, and walked a lot, and processed all that we were learning. The final session on Sunday afternoon was truly significant, as we dug deep into the true heart and character of great leadership. If it is possible to have a conversion experience to leadership, then that weekend was it for me and set the agenda for the next forty plus years.

It was the pure accessibility of leadership that captured my imagination. Everyone can be a leader of, at least, their own life and relationships. My only understanding of the word up until that point was that leaders were people in positions of power, whether that was governmental, or my local school. It had a ring of the elite about it; something rare and scarce. It was some years later that I was able to put a credible definition to what I’d witnessed. I was doing some work in the local University library and came across Howard

Gardner's book, *Leading Minds*<sup>2</sup> and of the four hundred plus definitions of leadership out there, I was inspired by his.

*"Leadership is the ability to create a story that affects the thoughts, feelings and actions of others".*

There it was. The idea of leadership being about writing a story captured it all. Everyone understands the idea of 'story', young or old, rich or poor. People think of leaders as being people with authority, but that very word is rooted in 'author'. We can all be authors of our own life-story to a large extent. Poverty occurs when people have that choice taken away from them. To follow the authorship metaphor, they no longer have the pen. A 'poverty mindset' is where we develop mindsets that propel us to give away the pen from our own hand.

*"I can't do this: I'm no good at that: Nothing ever works out for me"*

This realisation was transformational – leadership is for everyone, not just the few; that my life is a real story being written every day and I need to get hold of the pen, or someone else will do it for me. They will take the authorship of my life. That I can create a meaningful, impactful story with my life, was the conversion experience for me. Not only did it explain the leadership actions I'd taken as far back as the age of ten, but it gave me a basis for being able to pick up the pieces of my sense of self, and like an artist, start creating something new.

*"I have the pen"*, as a metaphor for leadership, undergirded the next 40 years of my life, resulting in the last fifteen years spent in some of the world's most vulnerable communities, to show young people that every one of them is a leader of their own life.

I remember one day turning up to a vineyard in South Africa's Western Cape, to visit the café for lunch. The vineyard, one of South Africa's finest, was part of a community that we had delivered training to, a few months earlier. We had spent three days training farmers and pickers, developing the idea that each of them could be the author of their own life-

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<sup>2</sup> *Leading Minds*    Howard Gardner    1995

story. As we got out of the car, some voices could be heard shouting. We turned to scan the area to see who was calling who, when we realised that there were two young men in the distance calling to us. We walked across to them and as we got closer, we recognised that these young men, in their working overalls, had both been in the training. They were gardeners on the estate. As we approached, all full of joy and smiles at recognising each other, even before getting close enough to shake hands, we noticed they were both holding up an imaginary something in their fingertips.

*"We still have our pen",* they were proudly proclaiming.

They had both discovered the same conversion to life leadership that I had discovered at 19.

## **Part 4 – Meaning & Transcendence**

If you believe that the ceiling is as high as you can fly, then that is how high you will fly. What you see (the ceiling), is what there is. The ceiling is a hard fact and it would be pure fantasy to think that there's life beyond the ceiling. This is the world I, as a 19-year-old, grew up in. I had watched the last vestiges of any religion in mainstream UK culture disappearing in my childhood. I was the son of an ardent atheist. While a few families still sent some of their children to Christian Sunday school, it was usually abandoned well before the teenage years arrived. The bright sun of the so-called enlightenment, had passed its full height and left us with nothing transcendent to cling to, just a rational world where what you see is all that there is. There was no place in life for 'other', divine, God, or transcendence. We were taught that the ceiling *is* the ceiling and it's fantasy to think otherwise. I'm not going to give the ceiling question a name, other than the word 'transcendence' – beyond or above the normal range of human experience. You can put in whatever descriptor suits you – God, Higher Power, Spirit, Living Presence – it's your choice. Whatever you choose to call it, it doesn't really matter, because it doesn't change what it is.

My first encounter with the ceiling question was in the year of Abraham Joshua Heschel's TV interview. He was 65 and I was 15. My problem with the pure ceiling-is-fact position was that at 15 I had an experience that didn't fit that theory. The 'ceiling advocates' would roll their eyes and say experiences are not facts and I'd reply with the question, *have you ever*

*fallen deeply in love?* My experience of the transcendent wasn't dramatic, it didn't take place in a church, or any other religious building. On the contrary, it was on a farm, in a barn, seated on hay bales, with mice running across the beams. What the experience gave me was a taste of something 'more', something *beyond* the ceiling of life.

And it happened again. An experience of transcendence. It happened when I was 19, on the same weekend retreat where I had been 'converted' to leadership. As I look back at that weekend, two things happened. I was *converted* to leadership and I *experienced* what I can only describe as transcendence. At the end of the final session, sitting in a room with a dozen other young people, I had this experience of transcendence that took my breath away. I couldn't move. I couldn't speak. I was just sitting in this silence, for what seemed like half an hour. Time stood still. In the silence I had a meaningful, transcendent experience that I couldn't explain. If leadership had converted my thinking, my inspiration and my life direction, then transcendence gave me a deep sense of belonging, meaning, letting go and possibility.

Writer and broadcaster C S Lewis once said that the 'ceiling' mindset, when it has an experience of the transcendent, takes revenge on the feeling by '*calling it names like Nostalgia, Romanticism and Adolescence*', or just calls it '*beauty*' and then passes by the experience with some embarrassment. But if we take revenge on the experience, as it occurs in young people, by calling it '*Adolescence*', then we have shut one of the doors to helping that same youth to discover the meaning beyond absurdity.

How does transcendence help young people to discover the meaning beyond absurdity? I would suggest it helps in four different ways. Firstly, studies show that having some kind of anchor in the transcendent frees up our own resourcefulness. In other writings Heschel himself says, what wise elders have been saying for thousands of years, that '*the human soul wanes when detached from what is greater than itself*'. We atrophy. Further, he says, '*unless we aspire to the utmost, we shrink to inferiority*'. Transcendence liberates much more of our potential.

Secondly it keeps us humble. It puts our personal, small scenario of a life into a much larger frame. We are not God, we are not independent, we are not infinite or eternal. We are actually one small, but meaningful, manifestation of something much wider, longer, higher and deeper. We are a wave in the ocean, not the ocean; we are a leaf on a tree, not the forest; we are a part of the whole, not the whole.

Thirdly, transcendence gives us perspective, like the difference between viewing life from the eye of a soaring eagle, or the eye of a chicken pecking seed from the ground under its nose. It enables us to view our lives from a distance, as well as up close and personal. Perspective is the first of the Dalai Lama's key principles for a happy life.

Finally, transcendence gives us hope. This seemingly absurd universe that we live in each day – is it *for* us, or is it *against* us, or doesn't it care either way? Is the universe working *with* a young person by revealing their full potential to them? Transcendence says 'yes', there is a Living Presence, a divine flow, a living movement of energy working through all circumstances that is directed towards liberation and transformation. Not in some reductionist, kindergarten way, that makes us smaller people, but that through the complexity and uncertainty of it all there is something, rather than nothing, that is on our side and making us larger, if we choose to embrace it.

As for my experiences of transcendence as a youth, I cannot prove them to you any more than I can prove to you that I fell in love with my wife. What the evidence does certainly show, some forty plus years on, is that the experience shaped my heart and the direction of my life-story (leadership).

I would like to know how we can make a space for young people to be open and curious, to honour the possibility of the transcendent in their lives.

## **Part 5 – Meaning & Ego**

The months that followed that pivotal weekend in late January were seemingly turbocharged with new hope and direction. I quickly hooked up with a small group of youth who felt similarly motivated to make a difference in the world. I worked hard and passed a two-year course in just 8 months to secure a place on a teaching degree starting that autumn. Most significantly for me, I got a summer job in international youth work in Austria. That summer abroad exposed me to outstanding leadership, a holistic way of working with young people – mind, body, social and spiritual – and ...the wider world. I had summoned the braver part of me, stepped into a new country with a different language and was meeting and working with youth and youth leaders from across Europe and beyond. Suddenly the world was a bigger place; in fact, compared to the summer of the previous year, with its lowest of lows, my world was unrecognisable to me. And yet something remained that wasn't changing. It had taken me a long time to begin to see that finding meaning beyond absurdity, as a young person, wasn't just about discovering leadership and transcendence, but required a showdown with my ego. What I can explain now, I couldn't have explained at 19, but I desperately wished that I could have had elders in my life who could have prepared me for my journey. Maybe in that final Sunday afternoon session, focused on the heart and character, I was offered clues, but it took me a long while to spot them.

The 'I', the me I know as Trevor, my identity, is often called the ego. What I hadn't understood in my youth is that my identity was still a work in progress. The ego is and was the developing sense of self, being formed through childhood and youth experiences, the ways in which they are processed and the conclusions that are drawn from them. For me, it was a real mix, made even more complex by the crushing failure of the previous summer. I had created a catalogue of conflicting conclusions about myself and I believed them to be true. Beliefs such as,

*I am an activist; I am an idealist; a romantic; I am a great friend; I am shy; I am a risk taker; I am weak; I am strong; I am not that bright; I have a sharp mind.*

The things I really didn't know about my ego at 19, were twofold. Firstly, I didn't know just how hungry my ego was to feel good about itself. That didn't start with exam failures, but it was seriously compounded by it. I was hungry to be seen, to be impressive, for people to be quietly amazed by the seemingly altruistic actions I took. I wanted to be seen as strong, invulnerable, resourceful, the guy who gets things done, makes things happen. I didn't want to be seen as weak, fragile and defenceless.

The second thing that I didn't know about my 19-year-old ego, was that it was provisional. As young people we create a provisional sense of self based on met and unmet needs, good and bad experiences with others and the personal meaning that we make of it all. We build and try out versions of this provisional self, like putting on a suit of clothes and stepping out of life's changing room to see what a watching world makes of us. Like? Dislike? Works? Doesn't work? Keep? Change? This provisional self is the normal scaffolding that every single young person ever born constructs for themselves. For some, the provisional becomes permanent.

Hence, to truly help us, when we are youths, to discover the meaning beyond absurdity, we have to, like the ancients, learn how to face down our ego and live from a more genuine, authentic self. We must discover the underlying, foundational DNA - our essence - rather than the provisional scaffolding that should just temporarily support its growth. From C G Jung, to Richard Rohr, the message of wisdom is consistent – this journey to the true self, as it is often called, is generally the work of the second half of our lives. The work of making friends with ourselves as a human being, rather than a human doing and surrendering what was a vital, provisional self, in exchange for the discovery of our true, authentic, larger self.

As I sat in that room on the Sunday afternoon at 19 years old, while meaning was propelling me beyond absurdity in leadership and transcendence, the ego was quietly dragging like ballast along the ground and was trying to convert this new found energy into a project of how to get noticed, how to impress and how to be invulnerable. This would have been a good moment to be sat down by the equivalent of the village elders, or taken on an initiation rite, as the youths of countless generations before had done, and face down the ego. But the good news that I identified was that the deeper discovery of transcendence,

and the sometimes bruising reality of leadership, conveyed to me the message that the universe is *for* you, not against you. I had learnt that life, generally, serves up plenty of opportunities to change, when you are ready to receive its teachers.

## **Part 6 - Meaning & Mystery**

As I surveyed what I further required, as a young person, to find meaning beyond absurdity, I judged that the final ingredient was a sense of control. At least that was what I thought was the fourth and final piece of the jigsaw. With absurdity, as we have seen, things don't add up, life is full of paradoxes, pointlessness and unanswered questions. So, I had naturally thought that to get beyond absurdity I would require certainty, answers, and then I would feel like I had regained control. But that was not the answer my 19-year-old self got, or really needed, because in the world of reality, control is an illusion. What I discovered was the invitation to mystery. Mystery is the fourth, needed ingredient.

Einstein, a scientist, who you'd think would thrive on the idea of certainty and control in the universe, once said,

*"The fairest thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science. He who knows it not and can no longer wonder, no longer feel amazement, is as good as dead, a snuffed-out candle".*

What I realised, as I headed into the summer of international youth work and what lay beyond, was that I had an invitation to begin a journey, not land at a destination. According to Einstein, the journey that I was being invited into was one of continual learning, creativity and constantly having my eyes opened wider through awe, wonder and amazement.

The future was not a pre-set, iron cast, that my life would be poured into in some fixed, predetermined way. The future was an invitation to a dance, to a mystery. Mystery doesn't mean that it is unknowable, just unknown as far as the eye can see at this time. Mystery

isn't a fundamentalist religious prescription that has every question sewn up into clear, unambiguous answers. Mystery means that there is a larger story, whose inner working I am not privy to right now.

I don't know how things changed within me in that January, February, March and on, but they did. To me it was a mystery. I didn't know where studying teaching would lead, but it did lead into new creative directions. I have spent most of my life teaching...but not in schools. The future was not set in concrete in some closed system, it was a drama taking place within a vast, creative, full-of-possibilities universe, that is bursting with mystery. Some would become revealed and some wouldn't. The meaning beyond absurdity, as poet T S Eliot summed up, is that, *"we shall not cease from exploration"* but in the end we shall *"arrive where we started / and know the place for the first time"* (Little Gidding The Four Quartets).

Life is a mystery that calls and invites us into a ceaseless exploration where there might not be any clear, controlled ending or outcome, just a deepening of our understanding of where we were when we started out on the journey.

Years later, as I turned my early 19-year-old experience into the story of the NGO *Emerging Leaders*, I realised that I had often caught myself thinking, *'when I get to that milestone...then...'* or *'when we secure that substantial funding...then...'*. I kept trying to turn 'beyond absurdity' into a final destination. But there is wisdom, I discovered, in mystery. A wisdom that reveals that there is no 'there', or 'then' (some point in the future), only a continual journey. The meaning is in embracing that journey.

Mystery is not an excuse to stay still, to hide from knowledge, to hide from the big and difficult questions within simplistic, formulaic, or head-in-the-sand ignorance. It is a call to wonder, to creativity and to the mystery that will reveal some of its secrets to us in time, just as it did to Einstein. There will be many other secrets that it will not yield to us. As Jostein Gaarder, author of the world-acclaimed novel *Sophie's World*, said,

*"if there is a god, he is not only a wizard at leaving clues behind him. More than anything, he's a master of concealment. And the world is not something that gives*

*itself away. The heavens still keep their secrets. There is little gossip amongst the stars” (Maya - Jostein Gaarder)*

## **Part 7 – Every Deed Counts**

*“I’m thinking of giving up. It’s just too hard”.*

These were the words of Joseph, a young Rwandan entrepreneur, born into extreme poverty, recently graduated from college and who had set up three social impact projects with his friends. Still in his early twenties, he was getting around 120 young children, also caught in poverty as he had been, into school, ensuring that all of them were being fed and also arranging for anchorless local teenagers to be educated in the issues of sexual health. He was scraping a living from a part time job, using some of his own meagre funds to keep the projects going and fighting with the impact of COVID-19 lockdown. Progress seemed to have dried up, along with his energy and resources. He was battling with himself to keep going.

Despair and hopelessness come in many shapes and sizes. The urge, the pull, to do nothing, to give up, to not bother, is like a strong rip-current on your body. You feel powerless to fight it.

There is the inaction, like Joseph, that comes from trying and trying and simply not breaking gravity pull, falling exhausted to the ground.

There is also the inactivity of a myriad of young people who have seen previous generations suffer. One young woman from Nigeria told me yesterday, “my grandparents were poor; my parents were poor” and her expectation and terror was that she too would spend her life being poor. She wanted something different, but feared that the script of her life had already been written for her. For young people this translates into inactivity; don’t look for work, there’s no point, don’t bother, don’t try and create your own employment, don’t start

a community project. Why? Because life is absurd and meaningless. No amount of my effort will achieve anything, so why take action to change anything.

Absurdity shouts inside our heads, *“Why bother to do anything at all. It doesn’t matter what I do or even if I do nothing at all – none of my actions matter; nothing I do achieves anything that makes me feel good about myself. No one sees me and what I do, no one hears me; no one is impacted by me. My life is a silent scream into a noisy world.”*

I have thought long and hard as to why Heschel said to the world’s young people, “every deed counts”.

I’m sure it’s because he knew that they think their deeds do not count. Either you do nothing, or you execute destructive actions that express your pain to a world you feel angry with. But, says Heschel, every deed **does** count. He is not, I believe, just reminding us that everything we do has an impact. That’s not the hope-filled news that he was trying to convey. A young person already knows that when you pull the trigger on a gun, a bullet comes out and someone will get hurt; they know that when they don’t try for a job, one won’t magically appear; they know that when you don’t study for an exam, you won’t miraculously get A grades. Young people know that their actions have an impact. Heschel is saying more than this, something much more important, that is rooted in biology, not wishful thinking.

The prefrontal cortex of a young person, the newest part of the brain, is hardwired for meaning and action. It isn’t a caricature to say that a youth just wants to change the world – they do! They are hardwired in their brains to change it. Their young brains crave meaning and action and making a difference, not absurdity and inertia.

When I first entered Dandora, a very tough part of Nairobi, Kenya, in 2012, it was a very scary experience. I was asked to do some filming there, to put a context around some training that we were doing. I was carefully ushered in and out of this unsafe, unknown world. Dandora is built on the edge of the city’s rubbish dump and in those days, the garbage was piled as high as a few double-decker buses and as wide a space as Hyde Park in

London. Dandora was home to gangs and violence. Youth were not expected to live long, with knives, guns and addiction being the main killers. Young people had long given up on education; the best hustled, the rest just gave up on a future.

But something changed in Dandora in the years that followed and it was largely youth led all the way. In 2012 we worked with some ladies in a nearby factory, who packed cut vegetables for the European supermarkets, training them in life leadership. We gave them a challenge to action. Start something; start a project that will make you money and benefit the community. We also challenged them to share what they had learned with others in Dandora and they did. They took action. Walking home from the training each evening, they saw the gangs sitting idly on the pavements and so they took courage and went to tell them what they were learning. Amazingly the youth listened with interest. They wanted to hear more. It was creating hope inside them. Their brains were scanning for this love and the good news that they had potential, had a future. The youth began to take action too. Within months they had set up nine community facing projects that ranged from a security initiative that reduced the incidents of murder and rape in Dandora from one a night, to one a month; they cleaned and humanised their streets, planting flowers where they could and vegetables in unused strips of land. They created music and dance outreach projects. They set up income generating projects from a tiny café, to garbage collections within the tenement blocks. They created Dandora's first ever library for children to study in safety and for older youth to get back into some kind of learning. Of the original group, almost all of them now have jobs, or have gone back into further education. Dandora is a different place to walk around these days.

Every deed counts.

In Senga Bay, on the shores of Lake Malawi, poverty and environmental neglect were stark. A lady who owned a guest house on the shores of the lake noticed that the community had no library for children and so she made it her aim to build one. The whole community got involved in taking action by collecting every single bit of plastic within sight for recycling. The money raised from the gathered plastic was used to build a community library. Then every household dug a pit to bury their own garbage, rather than spread it. Youth were having an effect on other youth and causing them to change the way they treated their

environment and develop a thoughtful mindset towards their community. The youth then influenced the polluting activity of the fishermen to clean up the lake. Then they influenced the Chief against corruption and got food subsidies released into the community, rather than his own family's pocket.

Every deed counts.

London boy, Charlie, seeing the nightly plight of the city's homeless sleeping rough in the cold and wet streets, took over old, unused commercial buildings and enlisted other people to set up a pop-up night shelter providing safety, food and basic health care. He went on to create a project to help these homeless people to lead themselves and build a new life off the streets.

Every deed counts.

The life of South Africa's gangs is only (understandably), viewed in negative terms. Gangs are a concert of activities of violence, intimidation, coercion, abuse and addiction. I think what Heschel is saying to the world's city gangs is that *every deed counts*. People join gangs for good reasons. In a broken society, gangs provide home, family, older 'siblings', a degree of safety on the streets, food and a sense of belonging and a chance to make an impact. All of these are basic needs for every human being. Rather than just denigrate the existence of gangs, why not take these basic human motivations and turn their polarity to good use; constructive life-offering, potential-releasing use. Gangs for good.

Every deed can count for the good.

Everything we do builds something. Esther took her experiences of abuse as a young woman and created *sTandTall* (<https://www.standtall.org>), a movement that, "*helps women and girls who have been abused and bullied to get back onto their feet, achieve their full potential and sTandTall again*". And she also created a series of books, *Sophie Says.....*, to liberate the potential of primary school children by building self-esteem.

Every deed counts.

A deed is a small thing. It's one step, one action, one phone call, one email, one cup of coffee with a friend, one brick laid on the new library, one plastic bottle picked up off the

street, one mouth fed, one school book purchased. The reason why each deed counts is that it has power locked up inside of it, that is only released when the deed is done. Doing deeds creates movement, momentum. One deed is one action closer to something, rather than nothing. Not only does a deed have power and momentum locked within it, ready to be released, it also has hope. And, as I discovered at 19, it is hope that is the pre-runner of all human transformation. Youth education expert Paulo Friere said that where there remains inaction, no deeds, then the result is hopelessness and despair. Doing deeds saves our lives, because without hope we cannot begin the process of growth and change. Deeds are for the long haul of our lives, not just a day or two. Everything we do, every deed, can build towards our legacy; something that will outlive us. Very few people know who Martin Cooper is. He is the guy who is credited with the idea of the mobile phone. That is his legacy. We may not know his name, but we know that his deeds counted.

## **Part 8 – Every Word Has Power**

In my 19<sup>th</sup> summer, working in International Youth work in Austria, I discovered a new and powerful life-force ...words. To be specific, the power of positive words. I surely knew the power of negative words, the ones spoken into my face, by those I'd expected love from, and the equally negative words that I had spoken over myself. I'd been working in the youth centre, a recovered old Schloss, or castle, that dated back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century, for about two weeks. It was a Saturday morning, change over day, with 150 beds that needed fresh duvets. I set to my task with a contended focus. Half way through the morning someone more senior on the staff asked to chat with me for a moment. I stopped what I was doing and caught the serious look on their face. Had I done something wrong? Missed something? What they said to me on that August morning was a drop of water to a thirsty soul. They said how much they valued my work and my attitude under pressure. No one in my life had ever said those words to me before. At the end of the summer I was asked to have tea with the founder and director of the centre and he was equally affirming, so much so, that he asked me to come back again for a full summer, the following year, to take charge of the

visiting groups from across Europe. The words of both people told me that I'd been seen, I'd been noticed, I had potential, I was doing something worthwhile.

*"Every word has power"*

When Heschel spoke these words, he knew the hunger in every young person's heart to hear affirmations like,

*"you have amazing potential"*

*"you can do this..."*

*"you are gifted in..."*

Positive words are a powerful mirror to our lives. They tell us that someone has seen us, noticed us, is interested in us and wants to help us on our journey. Every word carries an energy charge – positive or negative. Every word we speak to others and every word others speak to us, they all have power to change us. Not just change the words inside our heads, but change the very motivation and the energy that this generates in our lives.

Words can change the world. In AD 404, the young Telemachus stood up in the Colosseum in Rome and shouted "No. Stop", to the senseless, gratuitous massacres of the gladiator fights. His defiant yell, to the heart of power, brought about his own martyrdom, but also instantly emptied the stadium and saw the quick collapse of this 'sport' across the empire. When Greta Thunberg spoke truth to power at the UN in late 2018, it was the beginning of a youth movement against climate change.

Words can also pull us down. Our own inner critics pile more aggressive, abusive words upon ourselves than many street gangs do with their fists. We tolerate, within our own heads, what we would not stand for if we heard someone talking to another person like that. Youth pour scornful and shameful words on each other in the playgrounds of schools, streets and Facebook pages. Every day, TV shows fill us with bleak conversations, words of unhappiness and disruption. Richard Rohr tells how he stopped watching a famous American TV sitcom, as he realised that for 30 minutes the humour was all based on put-downs, sarcasm and cynicism. These are the words that young people are being taught to

imitate. People learn to use their words to make themselves feel good at someone else's expense.

There are the words of criticism that tell us we aren't much good at something, or that we have failed to measure up to some arbitrary standard. My neighbour was once publicly shamed, by her head teacher in front of the whole school assembly, for her singing voice. Those words framed her view of herself as a singer and from that day on she could never bring herself to join a choir. Silent words, absent words, words not spoken that we longed to hear – all have the same power to hurt us. When we receive these kinds of words, we shrink inwards, we defend, we protect, we build walls, we distance, we try to project ourselves as invulnerable. 'Names will never hurt me', becomes the persona we portray.

Young people live in a world that stockpiles words; builds mountains out of words. There is no silence. Social media proliferates words in a way that are powerful and yet dismissed within seconds by further words. Heschel says to these same young people – pause – reflect – every single word that you say, directed at yourself or to someone else, will have the power to lift them up or knock them down. So, use every single word, assess your choice of every single word, knowing that you can change lives for the good, every time you open your mouth, just as you'd love the life changing words of others spoken to you.

Words are liberators. All words have that kind of power.

## **Part 9 – Build your life as a work of art**

Imagine the scene. It's your first day at school. You are about to start the 12-year long journey of education. Everything is exciting and unknown and scary, all at the same time. Your mum or dad leave you with your first teacher who helps you find a peg for your coat and then shows you to your table. When everyone is settled, the teacher says, in words that make sense to you,

*“Children, today is your first day at school. Do you remember at preschool you did paintings and drawings and made things with glue?”*

The children nod.

*“Well, that is called art. The purpose of school is that today and every day, until you are 18 years old, everything that you do in this school will show you how to build your whole life, just like a work of art”.*

I’m sure that no one ever spoke to any of us like that. The message that we received was that the next 12 years would be about attainment, exams and making the grade. There was nothing creative about it. Art was simply something you did for an hour a week. No one said that your life was full of amazing potential and that every day will be an art lesson in life. Rather, every day the system encouraged a passive, accepting view of life – this is the way the system works and this is what you do to succeed in it.

*“Build your life as if it were a work of art”.*

Heschel was a true prophet of our time, because he cut through the hopelessness and absurdity of the system, to take us to the heart of the yearning and potential of every young person. When we are young, we long to lift ourselves out onto the stage of life and make something good, admirable, unforgettable, worthwhile and inspiring. Anita Roddick summed it up well when she said, *“lead your life and make it extraordinary”*. If leading our lives is, *“the ability to create a story that affects the thoughts feelings and actions of others”*<sup>3</sup>, then leading our lives is art. As one writer says, *“great art elicits powerful sentiments and tells meaningful stories”*<sup>4</sup>.

Until a few years ago, I lived very close to the factory that makes the iconic Mini car. The factory spreads over an area the size of ten football pitches at least and what you see inside looks like a scene from a sci-fi movie. It’s a state-of-the-art manufacturing process, with countless robots assembling all the ingredients - chassis’, car bodies, engines, doors, wheels,

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<sup>3</sup> Howard Gardner Leading Minds

<sup>4</sup> The Artist [www.theartist.me](http://www.theartist.me)

trims, colours and electronics. The result is that every few seconds a new Mini is literally driven off the assembly line for transportation to somewhere in the world. There are multiple variations of colour and features, but essentially, they are all unmistakably the same car – a Mini. In fact, our education system was modelled on this exact industrialised process of churning out mass numbers of the same product. The system teaches you what to think, much more than how to think. Mass production doesn't create the uniqueness and individuality that our world needs. Art does.

Building our life as a work of art, is a direct challenge to the system a young person is reared in. The system isn't designed to see you as you, but as another set of exam results to be published. But no youth is a cookie-cutter, cut-out person; a production line success or reject, a prescription delivered to order. Picasso sums up the battle ahead for the child when he says, *"Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain one once they grow up"*. Heschel is challenging the system as much as he is liberating young people from it. He is calling out to them to hear a different possibility from the one they were immersed in. The powerful work of Paulo Friere uncomfortably reveals the inherent oppression of the education system, built on the power imbalance of the teacher (I know) and the pupil (you don't know). Liberation of youth potential comes with the arrival of equality and conversation between teacher and pupil – a creative dialogue.

The dictionary defines art as, *"the conscious use of skill and creative imagination"*<sup>5</sup>. A youth is the creator, the author, of their own life story. The pen, the authorship, is in their hands, not someone else's. Other voices always think they know better. I listened to someone talk about my friend's art recently. Originally, they had loved his work but since he had started trying new things, she was full of indignation. *"Why doesn't he stick to what he did before? Why try out this new stuff? He should go back to the old way. He should just produce what people like"*. She wanted to force him into her own viewpoint of what 'good' looks like. But our lives are not someone else's picture. Others may take a view, but not the pen. If you asked my son when he lost his interest in art, he would tell you it was the day his art teacher

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<sup>5</sup> Websters Dictionary

told him he was no good at it. There are many such voices that youth have to contend with from a young age.

*You can't do this*

*You should do that*

*This is what success looks like*

*You're no good at this*

*That route won't get you anywhere.*

These are the voices that encourage young people towards fatalism, frustration, and hopelessness and even radicalisation; the feeling that life is absurd. Heschel is giving youth back their pen. Like a chained-up dog that has suddenly been liberated finds it hard to make use of its freedom to roam, so youth need great encouragement to create their own lives.

What does it mean to create your life as if it were a work of art?

Firstly, it means to dream it. Imagine the work that you want to create. Everything is created twice. The first creation is in our heads and the second creation is in reality. My mobile phone was first created in someone's head and then it was physically created in a factory. The same is true for everything. Young people can be taught to dream, or recover their dreams. I have not yet met a young person in the poorest countries I've worked in, who didn't have a dream. Your dream is the unique voice of your DNA calling out to you. Some people call it your daemon, your deep true self, your essence. The dreams, the vision, the imaginations within a young person echoes artist Francis Bacon's words when he says, "*The job of the artist is always to deepen the mystery*". This is the opposite of a one-sized-fits-all life. If we don't teach young people to listen to their dreams, to engage with the mystery of who they could become in the world, to play with their dreams, explore with them in their minds, shape them and reshape them, then we do not serve them well.

Once we have dreams, the next stage of the creative life is to play with those dreams in real life. To begin to test them out. Youth are gifted at experimenting and yet we often castigate them for their failures, rather than focus on how they learn; for their mess, rather than their originality; for their lack of focus and follow-through, rather than their searching. In one of

my grandchildren's Peppa Pig books the highlight of the story comes at the end when the children all jump up and down in muddy puddles. Youth need freedom to jump up and down in life's muddy puddles. Have you ever seen a tidy artist's studio?

The compass point for creativity is less about destination and more about a journey. Scottish painter Paul Gardner once said, *"A painting is never finished — it simply stops in interesting places"*. Destinations fill our world – the destination of exams, of success, of reward. But the journey of creativity is governed by whether my life is creating beauty, liberating personal energy and engagement and giving us joy. Paraphrasing author Paulo Coelho, *"When you have lost your joy you have lost your way"*. If I had known this artist's secret at 16 years old, I would have chosen different subjects to study at school and maybe even left school earlier and taken a different route.

Creativity comes out of discovering the art of seeing. We don't really see the world, or each other most of the time. We glance, we make quick assumptions, we look to confirm our biases. We often tell young people what we think they should be seeing, rather than validate what it is that they are observing for themselves. Any artist will tell you that the first thing in creating art is to stop and look. Really stop. Really look....in order to see what is actually there. Artists will also tell you that seeing is a skill that can be honed.

A few years ago, my wife and I did an afternoon in a school with 11 – 13-year-old children, on the issue of life-leadership. As part of the session we asked them this question, *"What do you see in the world that makes you say to yourself 'this is not ok; something needs to change'?"*

From the 120 children we got 120 responses.

*"Climate change...."*

*"Child trafficking...."*

*"Inequality between rich and poor"*

*"Gender inequality....."*

We were amazed to witness a room full of young people who could all see and were troubled about, the great issues in their world. They were ignited in their eagerness to

explore what they could see and debate how to respond to it. The danger is that the system doesn't help them honour and sharpen their sight, but rather dismiss and blunt it.

Once an artist has seen, they respond. They act. They start putting something solid into the world. Helping young people develop what is called the middle voice, is crucial. The middle voice is a grammatical term that translates into the whole of life. It explains how we respond to what we see in our world. The passive voice means we see (or don't see) and do nothing. The active voice often means that we still don't see, or we only see an impression, a caricature, of what is really there, but we just throw ourselves into being busy, trying to fix things. The middle voice is an active response to what we have clearly seen. The discovery of the middle voice matters because many people are not creating their lives, they are not seeing the world they live in and creating a unique response to how they can leave a legacy-story in it. They are often breathlessly and anxiously, racing through their days, but not building their lives as if a work of art.

Artists Stop.

They look.

I mean they really look and look again. Then they act. They make something happen. Then they step back again and ask themselves, is this working, is this creating the story or image that I had in mind? Artists, like great leaders, work with space – space to make intentional choices, space to create rather than just get caught up in a mindless production-line life, space to make different choices if necessary.

Within their actions, artists take hold of anything that surrounds them. They use life, rather than get used by it. They may pick up oils, or charcoal, or pencil, or fabric, or clay, or acrylic. They experiment with all of the materials that are available. They are not looking to get it right, to be purely successful. They are looking for what is right, what fits, what belongs. Youth can learn to play with all of the 'materials' of their experiences - talents, resources, passions and experiences .... whatever surrounds them. Like artists, they can experiment and discover what is their preferred medium. Artists that I have watched try things out. They are experimenting all the time and are not afraid to erase, tear, bin, break and scrape off all the oils from their canvas and start again. Because they are creating art they aren't

limited by a notion of 'getting it right'. They embrace the struggle to make something out of what they have in their hands.

Michelangelo once said, *"If people knew how hard I worked to get my mastery, it wouldn't seem so wonderful after all"*.

Like artists, young people need their elders. The wiser person who has travelled further down life's road and have already come a long way in building their own life story as a work of art. Elders don't tell you what you should do, they simply help you discover wisdom to add to your passion in order to create what it is you are trying to do with your life. Their job is to ensure that lessons are being learned, experiences are being converted into wisdom and that the unique journey of this young life is continuing, rather than getting stuck, or caught up in some eddy of self-destruction.

To build your life as a work of art requires self-kindness, self-patience, self-compassion and self-care. It is a creative flow to work with, not work against. Life is not a business deadline to hit, or an exam to pass. A young person's life is a unique gift to the world, to be built, as if it were a work of art. And the world will gratefully bear witness to its beauty.