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THE IDEAS START
IN THE KITCHEN

Family portrait
The walk from Alésia

was made of many things,
A coronated bird
with lavender feathers,
the sixty-year-old woman,
herself, alive.
Even a tree was lop-sided,
making noise in
the wind.

28.7.06
on a postcard
to Sardinia.
Alésia is a metro station in Paris, on the purple line 4 out near Porte d’Orléans. I was walking in the direction of Parc Montsouris at night in late July 2006. The window, above, is from Porto. Reminds me of my Aunt Irene.
What is kindness? When I was a child, I learned to read slowly. I was in the brontosaurus reading group. I spent all my time in wood shop or drawing. The way I drew was to take an elementary writing book with broad lines next to a blank page. I wrote either home or war on the right. Then I action-drew on the left, blank page. “America” was coming out of the Vietnam War. When my parents separated for a year in the mid-70s, I remember a collage at the home of my mother’s friend: a charred, melted toy baby on a field of paint and scraps.
Some common sense becomes radical when it extends through the details of life. The development of kindness takes us to support human rights and a form of biocentrism: attitudes, customs and policies that express respect for all living beings. The extension of kindness also modifies a range of institutions—e.g., education, science, business, the law, punishment, and politics. It makes us utopian out of common sense. It leads us to respect a being’s drive to live and to be free.
Imagine me at thirty-seven. I live in the United Arab Emirates. I teach philosophy, learning it over and over with students like myself. Philosophy is an organic part of my life, and I am happiest when it is alive in me.

I don’t think philosophy is first and foremost a theoretical subject or even a discipline. It is the part of us longing to create a better life in a world that makes more sense.

Philosophy is my love for the often overlooked or bypassed order in the world. Figuring something out can change the world—and so can realizing what matters and why. Often I’ve disagreed with my academic discipline. I trust it to make me skeptical. What keeps me thoughtful is people who are insightful in daily life and the possibility of the world making more sense, especially when I work with a group of people who are creative.
Zlatan and Amir — two Bosnian friends who made it through a war, 2007.
Kindness is my new idea — not mine as in “I own it”, but mine as in “I belong to it.” I’ve had two other ideas like this before. They probed the details of how war ends and home begins. As an undergraduate, I wrote on forgiveness, because I felt that the act founding human community is the act where we repair and move beyond a failure that hurt someone. Being forgiving became the virtue for interpersonal life and the heart.

Later, in graduate school, I began to write on healthy imperfection. Someone who is healthily imperfect brings his imperfections to light and works with the imperfections of others. That establishes trust. “Healthy imperfectionism” became the name for my outlook.

Kindness fits people who are healthily imperfect, and there can be no kindness without being forgiving. Home is made of imperfections that work together, and war is made by refusing to give an inch.

These are ideas that could feel alien in the Middle East and looking back to the geopolitical strategy of my country that marked the world into which I was born. Yet without some version of them, I doubt society anywhere would be sustainable. Humane realities exist relatively incognito in the fabric of everyday life, even in authoritarian states. In my country, they ease the relentlessness of competition, the lock of perfect images; the long, grinding shadow of colonialism, and the sad undertow of distant explosions in a country perpetually at war. We seldom acknowledge them — the explosions, the shadows, the imprisoning images, and the realities — fully.
My classrooms are usually in a semi-circle so that we can see each other’s faces and be people to each other. It depends on what the class wants. I rarely lecture. I’m just not suited to much besides conversation. I like comedy to be a part of the subtext, because we can connect around our imperfection. Teaching is a balance between relaxing the pressure of competition and refocusing interests once they pick up within the space of trust. People learn naturally, resisting only from distrust or tooling themselves in their own heads. Students come to class with insecurities and want to feel at home. What makes you feel at home?
From my family and friends, I’ve seen the centrality of giving talk for any formative relationship. By “formative”, I mean what humanizes us, for we—as Kierkegaard wrote—have to “form [our] heart[s].” Some relationships humanize us by forming our hearts, and while the most significant are intimate, there can be formative classroom relationships. Anywhere and everywhere we are, we are human, and it is possible to connect with most others in realness and fellowship. Giving talk (not “giving talk” or “giving talk” but “giving-talk”—talk that gives) is communication in its best sense. There is then a space between us, a ~ , as a friend of mine, Dan Scheinfeld, drew one night on the paper cover of a table at a restaurant in Chicago.
I want *humane reality* to be my principle of construction. As when a child builds a large structure on the floor, stretching from wall to wall and door to door on the strength of long, solid blocks—so I try to build my world in blocks of giving talk. I hope environments with giving talk form the societies of the future.
I grew up with talk happening around the dinner table. Sometimes, there were meta-arguments on meta-arguments or the fearsome, recurring volcano. Mostly, though, we had good talks. My mother endured a condition that went unnamed. She would often get overwhelmed and upset. My father did not know what to do and approached things intellectually. This wasn’t always the best way, but he was trying to be helpful. We lived in a world that did not understand, where we couldn’t be open without risking judgment. None of us knew what to do. The table anchored me.

It was round, white, modern, and had a single, round and thin, concave base. If my body tensed up, I could always look at the smooth and the round, touch the cool, white tininess. Ting. Ting.

And then on most nights, we had such interesting talks at the table.

I return to words. The feelings are undeveloped, but they circulate to the side, spreading over the words as the words dip into them. Every “I” a “You” injects in a rotating void of mental space trying to come to terms with the feelings as they soak through and exceed words.

I could tap my feet at the edge of the white, metal base rolling smoothly around just a foot in from the tabletop’s edge.
In my family, we cooked good food. So the table would fill with experiments and staples in cooking, there under the lamp suspended down from the ceiling.

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And the greeting cards would flutter in the windows of the winter storm, multi-layered with cutouts of Norman Rockwell sent from my paternal grandma, Miriam.

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In that circle of blizzarded light, we’d talk about the day, its meaning, politics, art, books, music, family, worries, ties, hopes, vents, schools, works, and more. I’d stake the search for meaning and truth—the coming to light of things.

Sometimes, I’d be blue. Sometimes Mom would be, too. Outside, the streets were soft and impossible in the grace of death.

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What makes a “philosopher?”

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The streets filled up with barely a rut that could thread them. Cars drifted sideways at the corner and the mote of snow colled in. In me, praising my family in a protected fragment the other side of which was anxiety, did I idealize love because I found only fragments of sense? What good was idealizing? But I also felt a great deal of love. It was confusing.

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THE IDEAS START
How have you found sense in your life? How have you loved? What words do you have for “wisdom”?

The conversations I had with my parents settled in my peculiar mind. They were complex. Usually about interesting topics both intellectual and emotional, they could also become unstable and scary. As a result, I am hyper-attuned and show elements of what I call “Attention Surplus Condition”—ASC.

For the most part, I am sunny and loving. But sometimes I have very little tolerance for things. When fear settles into the body, it lives there as unease. You forget it. Then some memory is stirred—and the anxiety swells up. But you don’t know why.

When life is stable and I feel safe, I am intuitive, full of life, popping with connections, excited by the day. There is a calm center to my mind and things fall beautifully into place. Then I am somewhere—here, in fact.

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I married my fear. I found a situation to break me.

I overcame it when I had no self-respecting choice but to give up. My fear surfaced as shadow morality.

Divorce.

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As I’ve grown, I love with less immediacy and more understanding. I see what another can do, what I am capable of too. I disengage.

Today, I want to be thoughtful and to take distance on what is chaotic, so that I can respond well and co-create humane reality through it.

There are many voices. Listen.

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Grandma Miriam used to say of my dad that he took a long time to grow up. Slowness runs in my family, the underside of the sparkling, quick surface.

Words cycle until the feelings are freed through them.

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**Alé’s scarf, Douro River, Summer 2006.**
When I was little, my family lived in Aurora, New York. Aurora is a small town by Cayuga Lake. There are hills rolling down to the lake, a boat dock and glassy water. We lived in an old house renting half of the second floor. The house was named after its architect of some note.

Mandel House had angles. Its stairwell was lit by one translucent white curtain of a window. The stairway was broad, dark wood with a square banister to hold onto. The apartment bent around in a C: first the living room; then a long, thin kitchen to the right, next my parents’ bedroom, a hallway to the right, and finally my room.

In my room was a stump for hanging nails, a balance beam six inches from the floor and a tire-swing hanging from the ceiling. Imagine the world.

The playground in my room was mostly the invention of my mom, who drew from her work in early childhood
education to give me the best environment possible. That environment let me feel okay as the person I am when I am creating or experimenting. It let me try things out at my own pace. The troubles for me entered when I felt that I had to please people whom I sensed were either self-centered or bullies. I had trouble picking my battles. On my own, I was content. The environment was a block of kindness.

Later when I studied early childhood education, I learned that you can’t overestimate the effect of early environments on children’s possibilities. We didn’t have much money when I was little, but my mom went to the lumberyard and asked for buckets of wood pieces that were waste from the production process. As a result, I had a vast collection of building blocks that I used to create cities on the floor of my room large and intricate enough that I could not leave my room except by jumping from the bed to the nightstand to the door. I referred back to this experience of building cities when I wrote the introduction to my dissertation twenty-eight years later.

I think we should build a society that accommodates our varying abilities and which gives us time, space and understanding to acknowledge our own vibrant reality. This would be humane: a space where each is allowed to be her own kind. Call that “kindness.”

Today, children grow into a world that wants them to perform according to models that micro-manage each part of their productivity and success. Perfectionism becomes anathema to humanity. I am arguing for an imperfect space.

Pascal wondered whether we are angels or beasts (leave to the side that beasts are never demonic). We have this sublime ability to love each other in deed and in creative form—to make institutions that are humane. Yet we have not created a society that accommodates uniqueness.
What was most important is that I was loved unconditionally as a child. Trauma is a source of philosophy, especially in Plato, but I believe the memory of love is more important. Without it, I would not be building this block structure along which you are running, trying with your eyes, hearing with your ears.

How will you use it?

My mom, Esther, came from a working class, Slovak family. Isn’t her name like quiet rain? A family like that sticks together, can be both fiery and humble, and has strong religious and moral views—although not necessarily reactionary ones. A family like that also does not have language for its darkness. There were generations of darkness in that family. I see it in my mother’s sisters
with ripples I identify in my cousins as well. We never talk about it. The silence continues, but I have observed how everyone in the family has made choices throughout their lives to cycle free parts of their lives. We move in half steps.

The Bendiks are a social, tight-knit family. There is a spark of independence throughout. Grandpa Bendik insisted that it is all right to dance in the Slovak meeting hall with a partner other than your spouse: who are you to know what goes on in another’s mind? He also thought it was all right for my mom to go to New York City to sing and to act when this was seen as almost sacrilegious in their community.

Like her dad, my mom had music in her bones, and she was a singer before she went into early childhood education. Highly intuitive, she can sense a person with foresight that is remarkable, and she is known to light up rooms when she enters them on social occasions. Esther reflects her surroundings — like the crystal bowl of water in which she floated bougainvilleas for a time.

They grew up on a farm in rural, southern Ohio — not far from West Virginia. Grandpa Bendik worked in the coal mines, having had to leave school before ninth grade to help support his siblings. They were all formally uneducated and relied on their Lutheran church to provide a framework. My mother was the first of anyone in her extended family to go to college. She won a scholarship. When I imagine how far she had to walk to develop a sense of her inner landscape, I understand her better. The world emerges from half-light on green, lush hills with interiorly scored mountains.

At a certain point, my mom left the theater. She wanted to have a child. She became involved in low-income early childhood education with African-Americans. She became aware of psychology and joined women’s consciousness raising groups. She turned from expression to development, from pleasing others to trying to grow. How did motherhood help her?
When my mom decided she wanted a child, she gave a great deal of thought to it. She wanted to create a world for me that unworked the constraints she had felt. If she’d had a language for her darkness, I believe that she would have unworked that as well. History isn’t an idea. It takes time, and only the perfect see time as an enemy.

Often when I am teaching or writing, I try to relay the core realization that I felt through my parents’ care. That memory comes largely from the environment my parents provided for me and which was a central intention of my mother. We have dynamics within ourselves that can counteract dynamics outside ourselves.

Giving my mother a kiss on her hair at my parents’ 40th wedding anniversary, 2004.
Students from Sharjah—themselves from numerous countries—at the Harvard Model United Nations, February 2007. Caught at times between the material excess of the U.A.E. and traditions that deny their autonomy, I wanted them to have a life of possibility like the one my grandfather wanted for my mother and my mother for me.
I have not told you about my father, Dave, whose name I carry as my middle name.

Animals love him. Dogs quickly sense his body language, non-threatening and relaxed. Cats decide that their independence can hang out with him. He used to send me letters marked with stickers of insects and had a tree frog tattooed on his upper arm when he was sixty-five. Without his being an environmentalist of any kind, there is a kind of Earth ecology spreading out along his being as if he had never left the origin of species. A mid-twentieth-century, Cleveland intellectual, this one.

He has often been my friend, going together to movies or to the bagel store before school, hanging out over coffee, taking a drive up to Gold Country in the Sierra Nevada Mountains to enjoy the day reading, talking, playing music and goofing off. I remember one time we had a great conversation by a lake with fresh, cool water far back in the mountains. The conversation was about all the people who deserved Nobel prizes in literature but never got them — our bad grammar.

When I was married, I helped raise a boy, Isaiah. Careful not to confuse his relation with his dad, I loved him as “pop” — Isaiah’s name for me. My dad loved him too — my dad had also been a stepson. He wrote The Many Strange Adventures of Isaiah Egg and the Sockman detective stories for Isaiah — complete with scanned pictures of socks and videos of sock hand puppets. He led Isaiah through the complicated Master Detective’s license with Sockman that involved shadowing me around the house without my knowing it and learning code with a decoder ring from the 1950s.

When I think about these things, I want to hug my dad.
Before he shaved off his beard, after having finished his portrayal of Mr. Green in the play of the same name, Dad did “the mountain man,” 2007.

Yes, him.
I think of Isaiah, too, who thankfully has a loyal dad who loves him. Isaiah is a part of me that I keep protected and quiet. I rarely talk about him.

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Perhaps because my dad had to develop a strong will to interact with his single mother, he assumes that others will be as strong-willed as he is. His own father left when he was young. He turned to books.

This self-protection contributed to the dynamics of my family growing up. I grew up with the feeling of a larger-than-life-size task that, if only I could conceptualize and figure it out, would clarify the situation in which we lived and make everything well.

I want to have a tattoo on my inside forearms where the skin lies gentle. On the left it will say, “It is there,” and on the right it will say, “but we lack understanding.”

My dad wants people to figure things out for themselves. This has good and bad sides. I developed an inner layer to my personality where fear settled, beneath which my personal dreams would circulate. I often felt that I was not really sharing who I am with people, because it was dangerous to do so. This was mostly in my head.

Yet one of the things that most mattered to me growing up is how my dad quietly, indirectly gave me support when I felt down—sending postcards about nothing, doing this every couple weeks when he knew I felt lost in my twenties, that identify-adrift time that also included grad school. The entrance of those messages into my hermetic world reminded me of the humanity outside myself.

My dad has been a straight shooter whenever I seek practical advice. I go to him and lay out the problem, and he helps me sort through it, honest about his limits and practical.

What from my father is in my understanding of kindness?
Being especially serious in an unguarded moment in Moscow ~ you know, it’s OK to be serious. This self-portrait is the picture of me to which I feel closest from my mid-30s. I think it shows what goes on underneath my social persona and the way I at bottom am registering some undercurrent of my world most of the time when I am awake. Maybe this is why sometimes I don’t fit in. Or maybe it is because I don’t fit in that I am this way underneath. I felt calm in this photo. Maybe what was surfacing was old — family-structural — searching. 2006.
When I was in high school, my dad averaged close to a book a day—also finding time to cook after work while talking with us in the kitchen. Philosophy, arcane history, science fiction, detective stories (especially those), popular science books, natural history, fiction, poetry, plays.... The only major gaps I see in his reading are Kant and Hegel, whom he read but who didn’t grip him. Diderot, Erasmus and Guicciardini are more his style.

I grew up wondering where my father was when he disappeared inside a book. What went on in his mind? How did he see the world? How did all these words connect up in his world? How many layers did he think in?

At the same time, my mother went deep into questions. When she read, she read slowly and deliberately. While my father took in books at stretches and drew connections between them, my mother looked out windows. If my dad showed me intellectual texture, my mom revealed the depth.

Here were people growing out of fairly uneducated families in the Great Depression. How did they live throughout the twentieth century and its cycles of difficult self-consciousness?

What I’m trying to say is that philosophy comes from families, too. There is a tendency to view philosophy as the outgrowth of raw intelligence, or rebellion, or as a sublime art that some initiates have learned how to practice. But I want you to understand how philosophy comes from home. The ideas start in the kitchen.
Ideas for living—the useful ones—are expressions of the facts that people are complex and that our complexity can become beautiful if given time, space, and challenges. The book of becoming is not always quiet, but sometimes becoming is the quietest thing, and our complexity is the most mundane unfolding, as the sea absorbs the sky and the sky absorbs the sea in their lapping, eddying movements.

In the kitchen, quiet, settled after school and long before night begins, with parents elsewhere and light coming in through the broad window by the side road, you might find yourself thinking unexpectedly, surprised by a sense of the world. This is the world’s childhood,
and it comes to you around the kitchen’s things, around the bowl of peaches, apples, and plums.

Here, it is complex—your family, some brokenness. Here, it is possible too: the mending out of the backdrop, the allowance, of love.

Dad and I clowning around during my visit to their home in Modesto, California, summer 2007. This is probably why I clown around in class. I loved it myself as a kid and found it lightened me up. Mom took this photo.
I want to end with some remarks about two near members of my nuclear family—my mom’s cousin, Ruth, and my emotional brother, Steve.

Aunt Ruth is kind and philosophical. Will people like her in the future support the drive of all living beings to live and to be free? Summer 2008.
Aunt Ruth is what I call “relatively incognito.” An everyday person in New York City, you wouldn’t normally find her in a tabloid—although in 2009, she made international news when her wallet was found in Central Park inside a tree that they were cutting down. It had been stolen 27 years previous during the New York City marathon she was cheering.

Without people like Ruth, the world would go to hell. She is a nurse, has a web of friends, and was active in her church. In 2001, when the airplanes became missiles fired into the World Trade Center, she was on a bus to go downtown to provide medical care.

When I would visit, we walked—often through Central Park or out to a restaurant—and talked about everything that mattered to us—just as I am doing with you now.

Before it closed, Ruth’s and my favorite place to go eat was a Hungarian restaurant with waitresses that looked like they would either insult you or offer you timeless wisdom. Here was a dinner table in New York City where we could talk about anything.

The educational psychologist Lev Vgotsky called a region where you can grow without focusing on it a “zone of proximal development.”

Visiting Ruth, I experienced the itinerary of people who seek independence.
Ibn Arabi quote, twelfth century: “I follow love’s caravan wherever it goes, because love is my religion and my faith.” Calligraphy by the Iraqi-French Hassan Massoudy. 2006. My one concern with the quote is something Immanuel Kant located six hundred years later: if love is the guide for our will and if by “love” we mean a desire, then the caravan follower is amoral. However, if by “love” we mean a sense of moral duty, then the caravan follower is worthy of being religious. The problem is that people today, I suspect, pick up Massoudy’s postcard in France and think, “Great! I will follow my heart’s desire!” But is the heart best characterized as a site of desire, paradoxical as it may sound to question that? I think we are neither in desire nor in duty primarily, but in relationship. And that is why love involves duties and also desires.
Questions: Dad and I at the Guggenheim, 1986.
In summer 2006, there was a clearing in my life. I lived and walked around Paris and rode the above ground metro as Edmond Jabès had done. My friend, Steve, had introduced me to this poet of overlapping voices.

As I walked and rode, shaking free years of graduate school and my first disciplinary job, I began to think about kindness.

I turned over ideas, composed short statements and many book outlines. Mostly the city was loose around me, writing quiet.

I no longer heard the judgmental voices of my discipline telling me to shut up if I wasn’t producing knowledge according to their schema. I trusted that people of independent mind will read a note written even on a napkin and see all the experience that goes into it. Relays are the building blocks of humanity.

I walked to hear voices around me. I had done this often. One of my favorite memories from college was of reading Derrida’s *Limited Inc.* — a book that I did not particularly enjoy — while walking around the old campus’s main quad where Derrida had taught and from where he had been fired.

Walking made the book fun. The tedium of open academic warfare was released into the air by the sounds coming from dorm rooms and feet on the walkways.
Picasso’s sculpture as an old man. Jeremy walked into this museum in summer 2006 in Paris.

1986, New Hartford, New York. Jeremy at fifteen rebelling against a conservative town, also being a typical teenager. Since his family tended to work things out, philosophy made sense to him.
One of the amazing things about us is that we can look at ourselves as another. I remember my dad explaining this to my class on Aristotle’s ethics at American University of Sharjah when he sat in sometime during the Spring of 2006. We can be just to ourselves. Aristotle didn’t say this exactly, but I agree. Looking at oneself allows one to try to be objective, and it also allows one to be more kind.

Being kind to yourself is a condition on being independent. When I was a graduate student, professors spoke as if kindness and independence conflicted, or they implied that independence was needed first. Typical to the stultifying academic environment in which they unconsciously lived, they denied the originality of kindness, its core role in an uncertain and stable human life.

After all, it’s hard to be free without feeling it’s alright to be yourself, and I don’t think that such a feeling is possible without kindness to self. The place where independence and kindness begin is in self-openness.

By being open with ourselves, we show kindness to ourselves in trusting our personal intelligence as a strength. Just so, we are in that self-relation independent.

It is funny, I say this and think about the many people with whom I have worked who are thoughtful and purposeful, disingenuous and aware. I think of each of us solitary in our worlds in a moment, creating the conditions of accountability by being kind to ourselves—and being kind to ourselves by being accountable to ourselves.

Kindness is neither hard nor soft. Made with integrity, it is forthright.

* * *
So during one evening in July 2006, I walked home from the Alésia metro station to the Cité Universitaire. The sky was deep blue-lavender fading to dark. Rousseau showed that to become who we are, we should get out of the house, not sit sunken in a room like Descartes. Ideas mixed with cities are alive. Philosophy comes from the neighborhood—the sounds of kitchens coming across courtyards in the evening air.

I think of Steve, birdsongs in his tree-crown of an afro, coming around the block. When I was twenty-one, he was the first person to suggest the connotations of the word “togetherness” to me. Mixing what I think are two memories together, I remember one night saying good-bye on the steps of his apartment and alluding to Emerson like we were mentioning someone nearby.

When I was twenty-one, I gave Steve my kitchen table. He took off its base and for years used its top as a low round, covered with African cloth. We read Plato there; Edmond Jabès too. Steve drummed on it—ting ting ting.
Still in the talk, we discussed justice in a café, surrounded by pigeons, people and traffic. Summer 2007.

Togetherness. Togetherness grows through conversation, provided that the conversation is open and that the people have loving integrity. Then the world in a certain light: the glow of sun-fall in the photo, not unlike Plato’s Good.

Be within it and range freely.
End of a walk in New York City, 82nd and Third, Summer 2007.