

12. A Partner in Infinity's Dance

By nature, men are nearly alike; by practice, they get to be wide apart.

– Confucius

I began this book with the aim of solving a puzzle. I knew from observing the lives of my parents and others that a genuine religious practice — a practice that is pursued with enthusiasm and diligence, a practice integrated into everyday life — makes life better. Yet I was (and still am) sure there are no supernatural interventions in the world. If the benefits of religious practice didn't have supernatural causes, they must have a natural ones. What were they? Did they have secular sources?

Finding these answers that you have been reading was a very enjoyable process of discovery. I hope you agree with me that the benefits are there for the taking, and that it is possible to build a fulfilling life practice from secular elements.

Building a life of wholeness is neither quick nor simple. Alas, I have found no reason to think that a genuine secular practice is any less time-consuming than a genuine religious one. You need just as much enthusiasm and diligence, and your beliefs need to be integrated just as thoroughly into everyday life.

Here's one way to approach it. A religious person with a minimal practice must spend at least three hours per week attending services, praying, and doing congregational work. That seems to me the least one could do and still claim to be "practicing" a religion.

Very well, let's take three hours a week as the minimum time cost for a secular life practice, also. You can devote more time to it, but you couldn't devote much less without losing any feeling of having "a practice."

Block out a few sessions in your week's plan, each between 30 and 90 minutes, and make up your mind that you will devote those blocks of time to activities you have mindfully chosen as life-enhancing. (You might make a ritual of starting and ending each block!)

What sort of things will you do in these blocks of time? You could allocate 90 minutes a week to any of the areas we've looked at:

- In any of a dozen ways, knitting yourself more firmly into human society, connecting to more people and improving your relations with the people you already know.
- Starting or improving a meditation practice.
- With your intimate partner, making an inventory of the rituals in your life, deciding which to shed and which to retain or revivify.
- Inventing and carrying out new, constructive, meaningful rituals for yourself and your family.
- Seeking out new faces for your own, or your child's, gallery of heroes (not overlooking ordinary people and unpopular types of excellence, like persistence or kindness).
- Thinking through your ethical stance and working out ways of integrating it in your life — or contemplatively reviewing the week to see where you fell short of your own ethical standards, and considering how to atone or improve.
- Arranging your affairs; and designing and preparing a memorial legacy.
- Improving your odds of feeling happy, in small ways (developing the habit of appreciating of small pleasures) and great ones (simplifying your life).
- Working at being debt-free; atoning for old crimes; practicing detachment; and forgiving old grudges.

And I am sure that your own creative imagination can run far ahead of mine using only the hints and pointers in the preceding pages. If

it doesn't, read some of the books listed under "Recommended Books" on page 231.

Whichever of the many routes to a richer life practice you follow, you will choose it, not because you "ought to" in some abstract sense, but because you find it deeply satisfying to take deliberate, mindful control of your life — making yourself a skillful, jubilant partner in Infinity's great line-dance.

Whatever you choose to do, I hope that you will

Live long and prosper.

– Traditional Vulcan farewell

