
Everything Is Never Enough
SNEAK PEEK
UNCORRECTED PROOF
Ecclesiastes' Surprising Path to Resilient Happiness
BOBBY JAMIESON

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WATERBROOK

A WaterBrook Trade Paperback Original

Trade Paperback ISBN 978-0-593-60131-0
Ebook ISBN 978-0-593-60132-7

The Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file with the Library of Congress.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

waterbrookmultnomah.com

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1
ScoutAutomatedPrintCode

Book design by Jo Anne Metsch

For details on special quantity discounts for bulk purchases, contact specialmarketscms@penguinrandomhouse.com.

To Drew Bratcher, for showing me the fence,
and to Matt McCullough,
for telling me to swing for it.

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PREFACE

Shouldn't You Be Happier?

Shouldn't you be happier? If you're reading this book, you can read. Just two hundred years ago, only 12 percent of people in the world could read.

If you're reading this book, you have enough time to spare from prolonging your own and others' survival to do something as biologically unessential as scanning your eyes over thousands of little marks on paper.

If you're reading this book, you or someone you know had enough disposable income to buy this book—or maybe a library let you walk away with it for free, for a time. That you hold this book in your hands is a modest sign of wealth, whether your own or your community's.

If you kept counting, I'm sure you could tally many more, and more significant, blessings, privileges, pleasures, and possibilities. Seen in light of the circumstances of many around the world, and certainly in light of history, you have it pretty good. Better than many. Better, probably, than your grandparents. As historian of happiness Darrin McMahon puts it, "Those who

enjoy bemoaning their fate must acknowledge that on average they can do so for far longer and in far greater comfort than ever before."

And yet. Given all that you have, all that you know, all that you can do, and all the options you can choose from, do you feel like these advantages should do more for your well-being than they do? Does it feel like you should be happy, you want to be happy, and you try to be happy, but somehow you can't?

One way to be unhappy is to lack what you most want. Another is to get all you could possibly want and discover that everything is never enough.

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Happiness sometimes seems as hard to define as it is to experience. But when people talk about happiness, they usually mean one of two things—or both.

First, there is happiness in an objective sense: Happiness is whatever it means for life to have value and meaning and purpose and coherence. According to this objective sense, which has deep roots in ancient philosophy, to be happy is to live a good life. In this view, happiness is human flourishing.

Second, there is happiness in a subjective sense: To be happy is to enjoy your life, whether in part or in whole, for a moment or over decades. To be happy is to feel good. Modern discussions of happiness typically give priority to this subjective sense.

The first perspective sees happiness as a form of health: What health is to the body, happiness is to the soul. The second treats happiness as a mood. The same external conditions might not produce the same response in everyone.

The subtitle has tipped you off that this book is about happiness. Throughout, when I speak of happiness, I mean to in-

clude both senses, but the first is primary. While enjoyment is an ingredient in a good life, it is also, and more basically, a by-product, like heat from fire. One of happiness's many paradoxes is that you don't get happy by aiming at happiness but by leading a life worth living. So the question "How can I be happy?" opens downward onto a deeper one: "What makes life worth living?" To see happiness accurately, you have to see through it to deeper-down bedrock.

Because of happiness's see-through character, because it depends on and derives from bigger and better realities, this book will say surprisingly little about happiness directly. But, indirectly, every word aims to help you not only understand happiness but become happy.

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You want to be happy. In one way or another, everything you do is motivated by the desire to be happy. You might not think that you brush your teeth in order to be happy, but if you'd be less happy with cavities and fillings, my point stands.

This book wrestles with the biblical book of Ecclesiastes, an ancient work of philosophy written by someone who relentlessly sought to observe, understand, and especially experience everything that could possibly lead to lasting happiness. Ecclesiastes tells the story of someone who saw it all, got it all, experienced it all, and in the end found fault with it all. Like Bono, despite all these "alls," the author of Ecclesiastes still didn't find what he was looking for. In fact, he found that having it all won't make you happy. He found that everything is never enough.

Ecclesiastes is surprisingly unreligious—even irreligious. Much of Ecclesiastes observes and evaluates life: success and

failure, fulfillment and disappointment, desire met and unmet. God is nowhere to be found throughout much of Ecclesiastes, and he hardly shows up in the first part of this book. Anyone with eyes can agree with what the author of Ecclesiastes sees in his survey of life under the sun. Much of what he sees are problems that have no easy or obvious solutions. Yet he does turn, frequently, from happiness's problems to its solutions, from its lack to its ever-flowing sources. My hope is that, regardless of your stance on religion or God or the Bible, you'll find the author of Ecclesiastes' diagnoses of this world's problems, and your problems, so compelling that you'll approach his answers with an open mind.

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Ecclesiastes was written well over two thousand years ago and is arguably the Bible's only work of philosophy. Its primary author and protagonist is identified not by name but by title, "Qohelet." (Pronounced like "Go yell it.") We know little about Qohelet. In the book's first chapter, he tells us that he is a son of David and was king in Jerusalem, but that may be a dramatic persona rather than a historical claim.

The Hebrew word *qohelet* names an activity. The word is somewhat obscure, but it likely refers to gathering, presiding at, or instructing an assembly. Qohelet is a teacher, someone who made a living speaking publicly; many translations and commentators call him "the Teacher" or "the Preacher." The sociologist Richard Sennett observes, "The good teacher imparts a satisfying explanation; the great teacher . . . unsettles, bequeaths disquiet, invites argument." Through years of studying and teaching Ecclesiastes, I have found Qohelet to be both a good teacher and a great teacher. I hope you will too. But I

have to warn you, Qohelet does far more unsettling than satisfying. He disquiets more than he quiets.

Ecclesiastes is a strange book. It sets contradictory statements side by side without warning or framing. Its literary structure defies tidy analysis. It makes stunning, sweeping claims: Qohelet has seen it all, devoured it all, considered it all, and now he declares his verdict on it all. This little book has a huge scope and confronts huge questions. Does life have a meaning? What is the good life? How can I be happy? Those questions are all ways of getting at the main point of Ecclesiastes, which is also the main point of this book.

Because Ecclesiastes is such a strange book, your reading of this book will be greatly enriched by reading Ecclesiastes. I would encourage you to read the whole thing several times as you read this book. It may be weird, but at least it's short. To orient you to the book as a whole, and to what Qohelet is doing throughout, here are five metaphors to keep in mind.

First, Ecclesiastes is a quest. Qohelet sought to discover and analyze everything that people do. He amassed wisdom as if it were a fortune. He examined by experience a dizzying array of pleasures "till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life." In brief, and cliché as it might sound all these centuries later, Qohelet went on a quest for the meaning of life. In the book's first two chapters, Qohelet set himself an experiment: to experience and evaluate all possible sources of satisfaction and significance. More broadly, throughout the book's first six chapters, Qohelet carries out a program of observation and evaluation. In addition to many sources of pleasure, he assesses work, money, possessions, status, and power. This questing mode lasts for roughly half the book; after the sixth chapter, the balance shifts from mostly observation to more instruction. And at the end of the

seventh chapter, Qohelet reflects on his whole journey, accenting its disappointments. Since Ecclesiastes is a quest, in this book we will retrace Qohelet's steps and walk them with him. The switchbacks and sore ankles and blisters are all part of the point.

Second, Ecclesiastes is a question. There are far more questions than answers in this book. The first half of the book is driven by the question, "What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?" The question that closes the book's first half, and names one of the chief goals of Qohelet's quest, concerns not gain but good: "Who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow?" A series of "who" questions haunts the book:

> Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth?
>
> Who can bring someone to see what will happen after their life?
>
> Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked?
>
> That which has been is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out?

In other words: Who knows what happens to you after you die? Who knows what happens to the world after you die? Can you fix what's wrong with this world? Who knows the deep causes and consequences of everything?

Better a good question than a bad answer. Qohelet's questions prod like a finger in the ribs to wake you up when you overslept your alarm.

Third, Qohelet is a stand-up comic. Not literally, of course.

But Qohelet's way of investigating the world and his style of speaking are strikingly similar to modern comedians who are often called "observational," such as Jerry Seinfeld. Every observational comic squints to bring part of life's picture into sharper view. Each adopts a certain point of view; they speak from a certain persona. Their goal is to reveal the truth from surprising angles. They sneak up and catch you off guard in order to wound from behind. Stand-up comics traffic in hyperbole. They don't pause for footnotes or qualifications. They tell the truth, but not the whole truth, and both you and they know it. They draw caricatures so that the truth beneath pops out. For instance, consider Jerry Seinfeld's description of being a father.

When I say I love being a parent,

I certainly don't mean to give you the impression that I am in any way effective at it.

I tell my kids to do things.

But they say, "No."

And so I have been reduced to threats, fear and intimidation.

I have become a small-time mob boss around my house.

I figure out what they like, and then I threaten to hurt those things.

"I notice you're becoming quite fond of that little stuffed Curious George

that sits in the corner of your room.

It would certainly be a shame if something were to suddenly happen to him.

He sits so close to the stairwell.

And with you being at nursery school all day.

He seems so vulnerable.

I was just looking at the box he came in,

and I think I noticed the word 'flammable.'"

Fourth, Qohelet is a philosopher at a party. Everyone else is trying to have the kind of good time that allows them, however briefly, to forget their problems, their failures, and their mortality. Qohelet wanders over, sits down next to you, stares in your eyes, and says, "Death comes to us all." Qohelet is the ultimate buzzkill. His questions and provocations and pronouncements are like a five-thousand-degree furnace that turns all superficial solutions to ash.

Fifth, Qohelet is a photographer. More specifically, Qohelet is like a photographer circling a globe and taking snapshots as he goes. Then he assembles the snapshots into a collage, but the order of the arrangement is tough to discern. You can make out the subject of each photo, but it's hard to tell how they fit together. Each photo shows you a picture, but none of them is the whole picture, and it's hard to assemble the big picture from the little pictures.

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Each of those five metaphors helps us grasp something of what Qohelet is doing. But we need to consider one more, which will help us see how his wildly divergent thoughts fit together into a coherent whole. This image will help us fit the whole book of Ecclesiastes into a structure we can navigate without getting lost.

Namely, Ecclesiastes is like the view from a three-story building. You and Qohelet enter the building on the ground floor. This is where he stays for most of the book. Looking out from a floor-to-ceiling window, Qohelet's far-seeing eyes take in the whole of human life from its own level. He weighs the mer-

its of work, sex, food and drink, wealth, power, and many other possible sources of meaning and satisfaction. He finds them all wanting and pronounces them all "absurd"—*hevel* is the Hebrew keyword. (It rhymes with *level.*) Qohelet sounds embittered and defeated, even depressed. At one point he tells us that he hates his life, and that he gave his heart up to despair.

But at several points in the book—seven, to be precise—Qohelet climbs up a set of stairs to the second story. From up here, he surveys the same territory, considering many of the same subjects—work, wealth, food and drink—and he pronounces them good. He sees rich opportunities for enjoyment and tells us to get busy enjoying them with statements such as, "There is nothing better," "What I have seen to be good and fitting," "And I commend joy," "Go, eat your bread with joy," and "So if a person lives many years, let him rejoice in them all." In these seven passages, Qohelet surveys the same territory but sees something astonishingly different. He sees the same subjects yet comes to the opposite conclusion. Here on the second floor he says that everything is a gift. What accounts for the radical difference between the view from the first floor and the view from the second? We'll get to that.

But first, we need to go with Qohelet to the third floor. He comes here only a few times, gives no warning before he does, and never stays long. To get to the third floor, we enter an elevator. Qohelet pushes a button, and the elevator rises fast and long. When you emerge and approach the window, the view is striking and strikingly different. Qohelet only stays long enough to point out two crucial reference points: one, fear God because, two, he is going to judge all that you do and all that everyone ever does.

Accounting for the contradiction between what Qohelet concludes on the first and second floors is the key challenge in

interpreting the whole book. And, in my view, the key to solving that puzzle is to consider the vantage point Qohelet sees from. While on the ground floor, Qohelet investigates through observation, experience, and reflection. He is constantly telling us what he saw, what he turned to consider next, what he inwardly mused on, and what he concluded from it all. To put it in the language of epistemology (the branch of philosophy that considers how we know what we know), we can say that on the ground floor, Qohelet operates empirically. He gathers evidence from his senses, adds to it by personal experience, and draws conclusions based on what he sees and does and suffers. What he knows, down on the ground floor, is what anyone can know who is willing to look long and hard enough. What Qohelet tells us from the first floor is the truth, but it is not the whole truth.

On the second floor, Qohelet also tells us what he saw or perceived. But in the seven second-floor passages, what Qohelet means by "saw" is not so much "observed" as "concluded." He is not observing surfaces but discerning depths. He concludes that life is good, that life is a gift, and that the threads that compose the fabric of our lives are each themselves gifts. The key difference between the first floor and the second floor is that, on the second floor, Qohelet brings God to bear. Specifically, he considers all of life through the lens of its being created by God and sustained by God. For Qohelet, to say that life is a gift is not a vague, wishful metaphor but the strict and sober truth. Because life comes from God's hand, and all the good things in life do too, both life itself and its million small good things are gifts. Seeing that and living accordingly makes the crucial difference between despair and delight.

Qohelet's discussions from the first floor and the second floor fill up the bulk of the book. They function like parallel

tracks. Neither one cancels the other or erases the other. Even though all things are absurd, all things are gifts. That all things are gifts does not make them any less absurd. These two key themes—all is hevel, all is gift—are like two magnetic poles with opposite charges. The two stories are distinct but not separate. If you collapse either into the other, you distort Qohelet's message. And the brief visits to the third floor, for their part, extend and intensify the view from the second floor. If God is the creator of all, then he is also the judge of all, and in addition to receiving his gifts with gladness, you should obey him with reverence.

Another way to account for the difference between the first floor and the second floor is to consider two key points from the Bible's account of the origin and fate of the whole universe in the first four chapters of the book of Genesis. Genesis 1 and 2 teach that this world is the good creation of a glad and generous God. Genesis 3 and 4 teach that through humanity's disobedience to God's command, we were plunged into ruin and misery, the whole created order was cursed along with us, and human society has been disintegrating in various disheartening ways ever since. This world is good but fallen, beautiful but broken, a gift but absurd. From the ground floor, Qohelet looks at all of life through the lens of Genesis 3 and 4. From the middle floor, he looks at all of life through the still-relevant lens of Genesis 1 and 2.

For most of the book, Qohelet looks out the ground-floor window. At regular intervals, forming seven transition points in the book's structure, he climbs up to the second floor. So, the book toggles between the first two stories with occasional furtive forays to the skyscraping third story.

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No matter what minute you're living in, Ecclesiastes has an uncanny way of seeming up-to-the-minute. For long years now, people who view themselves as "modern" have been surprised by how modern Ecclesiastes sounds. Ecclesiastes is like one of those creepy paintings where the eyes follow you across the room. Somehow, whatever strange and sad places the modern world pushes you into, you find Qohelet there waiting for you. How did he know that I'd feel so empty the day after my birthday? How could he have guessed that getting a perfect new job would only leave me feeling more stressed and anxious?

The modern world is the world Qohelet surveys and censures, only more so. What Qohelet considers when he studies his largely agrarian, perhaps rapidly urbanizing, ancient Near Eastern society is not merely a socioeconomic condition but the human condition. Modernity accelerates and intensifies certain aspects of the human condition, but it is still the human condition that modernity is accelerating and intensifying. Wherever we go, there we are.

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To uncover ways in which Ecclesiastes speaks precisely to our moment, I have enlisted the help of expert critics of modernity, especially sociologists, and especially Hartmut Rosa. In Qohelet's quest for the meaning of life, he evaluates not merely individual experience but the way the world works: how power corrupts, how incentives skew perverse, how good intentions backfire. Qohelet's observational program has much in common with the research agenda of modern sociology. Although not all sociologists would agree, Hartmut Rosa says, "In my

view, sociology is born out of the diffuse but probably universal basic human perception that 'something is wrong here.'" Qohelet's research agenda springs from the same source.

Who is Hartmut Rosa, and why have I given him a prominent place as a dialogue partner? Rosa is a German sociologist whose career began with a study of the political thought of Charles Taylor. He has spent decades not only diagnosing the ills of late modernity but developing what he calls "a sociology of the good life." Rosa argues that late modernity is defined by the phenomenon of "social acceleration": Both individuals and institutions have to constantly strain, strive, gain, grow, and reinvest capital, not in order to get ahead but in order not to fall behind. As we will see throughout the book's first part, Rosa's thick description of current economic structures and rhythms of life uncovers many causes of the angst, alienation, and absurdity that the modern world multiplies. Rosa provides striking insight into the modern strains of the human ills that Qohelet diagnoses. Rosa's and Qohelet's judgments of what's wrong with the (modern) world sound in haunting harmony.

Not only that, but Rosa has articulated a positive vision of the good life, against the backdrop of modernity's acceleration and alienation, which he calls "resonance." As we will see in this book's second part, especially in chapter 19, Rosa's "resonance," well, resonates with Qohelet's summons to enjoy present gifts. Throughout this book, I gratefully draw on Rosa's insights, along with those of other sociologists and cultural theorists such as Richard Sennett and Byung-Chul Han. And, at the end of the book's second part, I suggest ways that Ecclesiastes' diagnosis and prescription dig deeper and see farther than Rosa does.

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What is true of Ecclesiastes is true of this book too: You have to let it hurt you before it will heal you. Ecclesiastes demolishes before it rebuilds; so does this book. Ecclesiastes spends more time demolishing than rebuilding; so does this book. A doctor can only begin their healing work once they've diagnosed you, and the diagnosis often alarms. A friend who's going to try to help you restore a broken relationship has to first point out the mess you've made but haven't yet seen the full scope of.

Ecclesiastes tries to convince you that many of this world's most common promises are false friends and you should break up with them. As one scholar comments about the bleak poetry of T. S. Eliot, "The statement of a terrible truth has a kind of healing power."

A sad truth stated starkly is like a flood that washes away all of and only what deserves to be destroyed. In the words of Franz Kafka, "If the book we're reading doesn't wake us up with a blow on the head, what are we reading it for? . . . But we need the books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply. . . . A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us."

Why? Because, although we labor to forget it, this world is irretrievably broken.

GROUND FLOOR

Absurd

"A Memory of the World Unbroken"

Michael Chabon, "Wes Anderson's Worlds"

The world is so big, so complicated, so replete with marvels and surprises that it takes years for most people to begin to notice that it is, also, irretrievably broken. We call this period of research "childhood."

There follows a program of renewed inquiry, often involuntary, into the nature and effects of mortality, entropy, heartbreak, violence, failure, cowardice, duplicity, cruelty, and grief; the researcher learns their histories, and their bitter lessons, by heart. Along the way, he or she discovers that the world has been broken for as long as anyone can remember and struggles to reconcile this fact with the ache of cosmic nostalgia that arises, from time to time, in the researcher's heart: an intimation of vanished glory, of lost wholeness, a memory of the world unbroken. We call the moment at which this ache first arises "adolescence." The feeling haunts people all their lives.

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The most we can hope to accomplish with our handful of salvaged bits—the bittersweet harvest of observation and experience—is to build a little world of our own.

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"For my next trick," says Joseph Cornell, or Vladimir Nabokov, or Wes Anderson, "I have put the world into a box." And when he opens the box, you see something dark and glittering, an orderly mess of shards, refuse, bits of junk and feather and butterfly wing, tokens and totems of memory, maps of exile, documentation of loss. And you say, leaning in, "The world!"

1

Hevel (I): Uncontrollable

"For my next trick," says Qohelet, "I have put the world into a book." And when you open the book, you see something dark and glittering, an orderly mess. Tokens and totems of memory you thought you had erased. Documentation of loss you have not yet suffered.

Will you lean in or look away? Will you meet Qohelet's stare?

Qohelet's book is the bittersweet harvest of observation and experience. He stakes his credibility on the breadth of his program of inquiry into the nature and effects of mortality, entropy, heartbreak, violence, and failure. Our researcher learned all their bitter lessons by heart. He says, "I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. . . . I have seen everything that is done under the sun." Later he reiterates, "I turned my heart to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and the scheme of things, and to know the wickedness of folly and the foolishness that is madness." Twenty-seven times he tells us that he saw; the objects of his

sight include "everything," "all the oppressions that are done under the sun," that "the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong," and that "folly is set in many high places."

Qohelet does not merely observe the full sweep of human life; he passes judgment on it, most often with a single word: *hevel.* This one-word verdict opens the book and closes its body, bracketing the whole. This word punctuates Qohelet's reflections as a tolling refrain. The problem is that the book's most important word is also its most difficult to translate. You might recognize the King James Version's rendering of the opening thesis, "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity."

The most concrete sense of hevel is "breath, air, vapor." Because exhaled breath is weightless and apt to vanish, other Old Testament writers often use hevel metaphorically, to characterize something as insubstantial, ineffective, or worthless. For ancient Israel, a political alliance with Egypt would be hevel, offering empty help. When a sage contrasts female piety and beauty, the latter is hevel because it is superficial and fleeting. The theological reasonings of Job's friends are hevel because they miss their mark. Human life is hevel since, like breath, it quickly disappears. A new car is hevel since the moment you drive it off the lot it starts losing value. Beauty is hevel since age never subtracts wrinkles; it only adds them.

Ecclesiastes uses hevel in all these senses and more. And throughout the book Qohelet custom molds hevel. He presses the word into a new shape, rendering it a fitting term of art to deliver his pitiless verdict on all of life. You could translate Qohelet's opening thesis in half a dozen ways, each granting some purchase on his point, none exhausting it:

"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly mean-

ingless! Everything is meaningless."

Perfectly pointless, says the Teacher, perfectly pointless. Everything is pointless.

"Absolute futility," says the Teacher. "Absolute futility. Everything is futile."

"Utterly enigmatic," says Qohelet, "utterly enigmatic, everything is enigmatic."

"Complete hot air!," says Qohelet, "Complete hot air! It's all hot air!"

Utterly absurd, said Qohelet, utterly absurd. All is absurd.

Meaningless, pointless, futile, enigmatic, hot air, absurd. We will meet all these nuances and others in the following chapters, as Qohelet delivers blow after blow to our sense of what's worth living for. Here in this chapter, we will treat one aspect of hevel as a key that opens the door to the house Qohelet is building. Life is hevel because, in a sense far more fundamental than you want to admit, life is uncontrollable.

Can you control the wind? Or a pea-soup fog? Or your breath after you exhale?

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We had to drive at a walking pace. The headlights were little help. My friend Nick half jogged in front of the car, his shadow against the fog marking a road I couldn't see. In a car that could safely travel at seventy miles per hour, on a twisting mountain road above Santa Barbara that could accommodate thirty, we were making three. A fog so solid it might have been a billion-cubic-inch pillow filled the air.

Four friends, my brother, and I had just begun a hundred-mile trip back to downtown Los Angeles. At our speed, even

traversing the asphalt on hands and knees might have been better for morale. Since there was only one way off the mountain, we couldn't go around the fog. Since the fog was so thick, we couldn't see through it. And we had zero chance of controlling it.

What do you try to control? What happens when you can't?

According to sociologist Hartmut Rosa, the central drive of modernity is to "make the world engineerable, predictable, available, accessible, disposable . . . in all its aspects." In a word, controllable. We want to control everything, down to the temperature of the room I'm in as I write and the one you're in as you read. Rosa states, "The history of our modern relationship to the world is a history of conquering and dominating the night with electric light, the sky with airplanes, the seas with ships, the body with medicine." The compounding discoveries of science serve mastery. We want to know so that we can control.

We especially want to control life itself, to tame the intolerable unpredictability of how it begins and ends. Why has euthanasia gained so much popular support and legal sanction in the West in recent decades? Because certain suffering of uncertain depth and length conflicts with the dream and demand of control. And we employ a range of complex, expensive technologies in the hope of creating new lives that enter our lives only when career plans permit. In America alone, ten million women daily dose sterility to "control" birth. As Rosa observes, through these technologically aided efforts, "modern society has found ways to make children more 'accessible.' " Just when we want children to exist, we beckon them; otherwise, we keep them from entering the world and scrambling our schedules. Rosa comments, "Childlessness or having an abundance of children is no longer a 'fate' given to us as a kind of task or chal-

lenge to which we must listen and respond in terms of how we live our lives; it is instead either a plan or a mistake."

More and more of modern life is lived under this clinical light of control: Life is no longer a challenge that summons but a job whose success proclaims a plan well executed or whose failure means someone is at fault. Whenever disaster occurs, like a hurricane demolishing a city, investigations are opened so that we can find someone to blame. Rosa notes, "We seek out guilty or responsible parties wherever accidents and misfortunes occur, on the assumption that the conditions that produced them were 'essentially' controllable. *Someone must be responsible for this.*"

As a result of this dominant desire to dominate, "for late modern human beings, the world has simply become a point of aggression. Everything that appears to us must be known, mastered, conquered, made useful." A fact that escapes explanation, a force that won't be tamed, a reality that can't be utilized or optimized—modern persons encounter each not as a given but as an affront. Because the world resolutely resists our efforts to control it, we experience the world as hostile. Painfully often, the world does not do what you want; instead, it does the very thing you hate, spawning tornadoes, recessions, wars, cancer. From this hostility between self and world comes what Albert Camus has called "the absurd": "He feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world." The world has always resisted our efforts to control it, but the more you expect to be able to control, the more you will resent the uncontrollable. The more dominant you expect to be, the more the world's resistance will rankle.

When we try to control the world, resistance is not its only response; it also goes silent. The bitter paradox of control is

that "it is only in encountering the *uncontrollable* that we really experience the world. Only then do we feel touched, moved, alive. A world that is fully known, in which everything has been planned and mastered, would be a dead world." In the most meaningful experiences, something in you resonates with something or someone in the world. The wire connecting you and the world starts to hum. A masterful sunrise; a series-winning shot; a look that says all you need to hear; hearing, live, the opening chords of your favorite song: None of these would cause the skin on the back of your neck to tingle if they lacked the uncontrollable. You can't control the sun, the shot, the look, the song. If you could, their meaning would splatter then disappear, like water from a burst balloon. Yet, as Rosa argues, the driving urge of modernity is to control it all, to render the world "a series of objects that we have to know, attain, conquer, master, or exploit. And precisely because of this, 'life' . . . always seems to elude us. This in turn leads to anxiety, frustration, anger, and even despair."

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Anxiety, frustration, anger, and even despair. How many of those can you find in Qohelet's summary of his observational enterprise?

> And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is absurd and a striving after wind.
>
> What is crooked cannot be made straight,

and what is lacking cannot be counted.

I said in my heart, "I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge." And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind.

For in much wisdom is much vexation,
and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.

The world Qohelet surveyed is not our present control-obsessed regime. The ancient Near Eastern life he led was more obviously subject to powers no one dreamed of trying to control, like sun, wind, rain, disease, drought, and famine. Yet Qohelet is vexed by the world's uncontrollability. In addition to pronouncing everything hevel, he calls all human activity "a striving after wind," a chasing after what one can never capture. Striving after wind is trying to control the uncontrollable.

What Qohelet considers and catalogues is the human condition as it has been for as long as anyone can remember. The condition Rosa diagnoses is modern, but its roots are ancient. Modernity has intensified the possibilities and problems of control, but it did not create them. When we look through Qohelet's eyes, layers of familiar purpose and reassurance disappear, and we feel something akin to Camus's account of natural beauty:

At the heart of all beauty lies something inhuman, and these hills, the softness of the sky, the outline of these trees at this very minute lose the illusory meaning with which we had clothed them, henceforth more remote than a lost paradise.

> The primitive hostility of the world rises up to face us across millennia.

When Qohelet judges that "what is crooked cannot be made straight," he asserts that there are wrongs we lack the power to right. There are dislocations—of cause and effect, work and wealth, desire and payoff, power and justice—that we can't slip back into their proper sockets. There are wounds in the world that no human surgery can heal.

This is why Qohelet declares that more wisdom brings more vexation, irritation, and provocation. More knowledge means more sadness. Why doesn't more wisdom make you happier? Because wisdom is consciousness without control. In an uncontrollable world, wisdom tells you more about what's wrong without giving you any more ability to fix it. Knowledge is not always power. Sometimes knowledge can't even buy you a meal.

> Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all. For man does not know his time. Like fish that are taken in an evil net, and like birds that are caught in a snare, so the children of man are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them.

Qohelet's point is not that the fastest runner always loses but that the fastest runner doesn't always win. The same is true for the strong in a fight, and the smart in many situations, whether trying to make money or friends. Skill does not guarantee success. The fastest runner might trip; the best-qualified applicant might get passed over for someone's college friend's child. Fortune mocks. Despite your cherished illusion that you are the

master of your fate, you are subjugated to powers clear beyond your control: time and chance.

No matter how meticulously you prepare, you don't control whether you'll win the race or the fight. You don't control whether you'll land the contract or get the nod. But most of all, and worst of all, you don't control the time of your death. So often the time seems cruelly untimely. When is it timely for a bird to be snared? The modern West's control complex catechizes you to think of yourself as the captain of a vessel cutting a razor-straight course through life's succession of storms. But you're not the captain; you're not even on the boat. In the end, you're a fish in the ship's net.

Time and chance harass all. Annie Dillard sees it: "That it's rough out there and chancy is no surprise. Every live thing is a survivor on a kind of extended emergency bivouac." In Qohelet's survey of everything under the sun, he discovers a world that slips out from all our efforts to control it. Poet Amit Majmudar says, "Reality escapes hope the way wet soap slips the squeeze." A wise person dies a fool's death; a painfully prepared inheritance passes to an incompetent heir; the guilty are declared innocent, and the innocent guilty; a fortune disappears in one bad deal; someone gets everything they could want except the ability to enjoy it.

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To desire control is to grasp at guarantees. You want to be certain that the dollar you feed in will send a snack through the slot. You want a sure return on investment, a guaranteed payout. But this life is full of everything except guarantees. Accidents aplenty, unfair outcomes, chances just missed, disasters that no one saw coming.

You can't make that woman love you, or this child succeed, or that plan prosper. Striving for control is like constantly clenching your teeth, jaw, neck, and shoulders. The effort you spend hurts you and hinders your chances of success. Life demands that you bend, but grasping for control leaves you brittle.

The first step that sets an addict on the path to recovery is realizing they've lost control. Control itself is like a drug: It at once enhances your self-perception and diminishes your abilities. Give up control, and your eyes and head start to clear. Weight lifts off. You find more in yourself and your life to laugh at. You learn to focus not on what you can't do but on what you can. Letting go of control is like taking a deep gulp of air after you've held your breath too long. Happiness comes not from controlling your life but from realizing that everything you care about most is entangled with forces beyond your control.

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Of the maladies that still afflict us, perhaps the one that most cruelly mocks our pretensions of control is cancer. It is always an evil time when cancer's snare catches, but some times feel more evil than others. Kate Bowler is a historian of American religion at Duke Divinity School. In 2015, Bowler was thirty-five, married, and the mother of a young son when she was diagnosed with stage 4 stomach cancer. Among many other thefts, cancer stole from her any sense that she was in control. The obligation to make something of yourself may be the prime moral directive of modern society. But an aggressive cancer not only forbids you from making something of yourself; it also makes you into something you'd never choose to be.

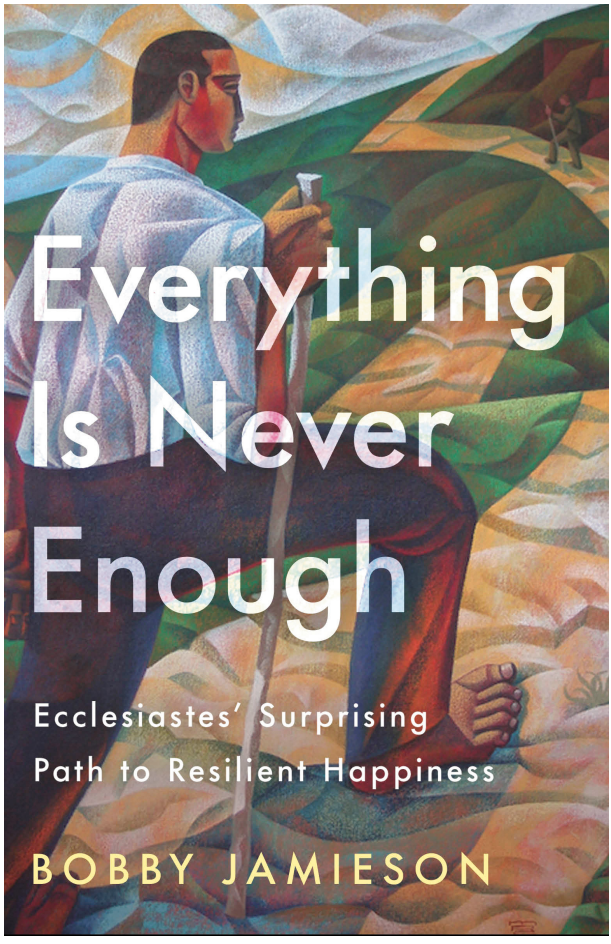
> I have a terrible premonition that at the end of this—once every stone is upturned and every drug tried—my family will have nothing left. I feel like an anvil dropped, crushing everything on its way down. I know it like I know the weight of my son's sleeping body in my arms. I will be the reason for the tall paper stacks of bills on the desk in the study, the second mortgage on my parents' aging home, the slope of their backs as they walk a little more heavily. They will carry my death in their checkbooks, vacations deferred, sleepless nights, and the silence of Sunday morning prayers when there is no daughter left to pray for. I am the death of their daughter. I am the death of his wife. I am the end of his mother. I am the life interrupted. Amen.

What are you to those you love most? What will you be to those who most love you?

Another way to state the "categorical imperative of late modernity" is this: "Always act in such a way that your share of the world is increased." The relentlessly repeated mantra of modern life is that the more of the world you bring within your effective influence, the better your life will be. Rosa calls this the "Triple-A Approach" to the good life: "The modern way of acting and being-in-the-world is geared towards making more and more of its qualities and quantities available, accessible and attainable." The life modernity molds us to live aims at making more and more of the world "knowable, calculable, disposable." To make more of the world available, accessible, and attainable is to bring it increasingly under the control of your mind and power. Rosa concludes, "In this way, the world is turned into a disposable place, with money, education and technology supplying the charms for incessantly increasing our reach and scope." More money, education, and technology each mean

more control. More control means more life. This has become the dominant principle in all our decision-making. But what happens when your share of the world collapses overnight? What question would you ask then? Bowler reflects,

> Control is a drug, and we are all hooked, whether or not we believe in the prosperity gospel's assurance that we can master the future with our words and attitudes. I can barely admit to myself that I have almost no choice but to surrender, but neither can those around me. I can hear it in my sister-in-law's voice as she tells me to keep fighting. I can see it in my academic friends. . . . "When did the symptoms start?" they ask. "Is this hereditary?" Buried in all their concern is the unspoken question: Do I have any control?



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