Written: 2006.01.31

By way of preface.

   The first email I sent you was long, and had many attachments. The last
email I sent you was long as well, and this one will be too. But I'm not
apologetic towards you for sending them. I send them first of all because
I suspect you may be interested in reading them. And as for their length,
I figure that you are mature enough and disciplined enough in your time
management to simply put the email aside for later if you are busy and
don't have the time to read all of it.

   I only say this because some people get "turned off" when someone
"bombards" them early in a relationship with a lot of information.
Personally, I get turned on by having the choice to look at information
about a person, and I can always choose not to look.

   But if you are turned off, then I'm not sorry, and it's your loss. :)

(End of Preface.)

* * *

   This email has a bit more of a serious subject, but it is --or at least
has been-- an important one to me: death.

   Though I have been extremely successful up til now in training myself
out of my fears --for instance, the fear that other people will
misunderstand or hate me-- , the two fears I have not been able to quelch
are of bugs, and of death. I'm not too worried about the former, but the
latter has been at times paralyzing. At least depressing. Very
uncharacteristic for me.

   I'm quite convinced that death is not something humans can really
understand. This is because it seems that humans are fairly hard-wired to
think in terms of stability and continuity. Look around you: you see
tables, chairs, maybe an electric kettle.

   But why do you see those things as things? Even if someone starts
moving it around the room, you see them as wholes, as fixed things. You
have to, of course, because you couldn't live your life if chairs
disappeared all the time, or turned into mercury or something.

   There have even been experiments suggesting that the preference for
continuity starts at an early age: They rotate a toy airplane towards a
baby sitting in a chair, and if they stop the rotation abruptly, the child

reaches not for where the plane is, but where it would be had it continued.

It is this preference for continuity that allows us to form concepts, and to have an understanding of the world. Because the things we perceive are almost 100% continuous --maybe this is one reason babies cry when their parents walk away for a few seconds-- , it is no surprise that people --who for the most part conflate their perceptions with truths about the world-- start to believe very sincerely that there are these universal facts floating around the place, and that their perceptions just "get at" those facts. After seeing so many stable things, it's hard to think about things in any other way. But of course our concern should not be preserving our possibly bad habits, but finding new habits that suit us better.

And so we come to death. As we grow up, we act less like babies: When our parents walk out of our frame of vision for a moment, we understand that they are just in the other room, and we don't cry. If we fly across the country, we understand that they are somewhere else, and that we could see them again if we just flew back. We can imagine them, imagine talking to them, imagine them continuing "as they are" .   But all this understanding amounts to nothing more than a trained way of thinking about things. It doesn't necessarily reflect reality, it's just been a very useful way to live our lives. How could we live if we always thought that when people walk out of our frame of vision they might disappear forever?

Death is the most severe discontinuity people ever have to face. I've never seen a rolling ball suddenly disappear. And if I were to see a plane in the sky suddenly change directions, my heart would skip a beat. And so you can see how unnatural it is for a person to just cease to exist forever. This is something we never have to deal with. And so how do we deal with it? Well, for most people, the same way we deal with people walking out of our frame of vision, or taking a trip across the country: we imagine them. We create the continuity for them that they can no longer contribute to. My grandfather died a few months ago, and the other day when I was playing the Arpeggione, I found myself thinking that he would like to hear it. When my parents heard it, they thought the same thing. As different as we all are, this continuity is part of the human condition.

Death has been frightening to me as far back as my freshman year of college, so about 6 years or so. When I would think about the fact that someday I will have to let go, and I would cease to be able to play music, hear it, think about it, learn, create, be with my friends and family, FOREVER, I would get this sinking feeling in my chest, a terrible terrible feeling. I could never force myself to stop thinking about it; I'd have to just wait for my brain to work itself out of a rut.

Well, I recently got so sick of occasionally feeling this way --maybe 4
times a year?-- , that I decided that I should design a way to feel
better. I started thinking in a direction, but didn't continue, and then
last night worked out some of those thoughts, tentatively, in a
conversation with my close friend Sarah . (Although in this part it
wasn't a conversation, but asking her to listen to these ideas.) Attached
is a transcript.

    (I imagine you may wonder after reading parts of this what my
relationship is with Sarah. And this seems a good point to touch on some
of the "relationship themes" by clarifying: My relationship with her is
the sort of relationship I have with every other individual in the world.
That is, our relationship is defined by the things we enjoy in common, and
by the degree to which we can trust each other. It so happens that in many
ways, Sarah is quite far up in this spectrum: We have incredible
compatibility in all of our interests, she is a terrific companion. We are
involved sexually, and we have seriously contemplated starting a family
together. Hopefully it will not surprise you that while knowing her there
have been at most three other people in my life who share these qualities!
Wanting to have babies with several people is socially odd by current
societal standards, but there is nothing odd about it at all: it is a
natural consequence of having learned to value people for who they are.)

* * *

Jeremy: So, during that professor's retirement ceremony on Friday, I
started thinking about death again.
Jeremy: It was terrible.
Jeremy: I felt awful.

Sarah: oh no

Jeremy: You know the sort of cyclic ruts you get into.
Jeremy: So, being the person I am, studying the discipline of thought and
all, I decided I should start thinking about a solution to this problem.

Jeremy: (By the way, when I think about death, I mainly think about music,
math, you, and my brother.)
Jeremy: (Thought you'd like to know.)

Sarah: (thank you)

Jeremy: Anyway, I didn't complete the thought, but I started along these
lines:
Jeremy: One of the most crucial ideas I think I've gone by in my life is
that, as Harry Browne puts it, truth is not something that exists, but a

means to an end.
Jeremy: There is no reason to accept a concept of absolute truth, it just gets in the way. As you put it, truth can only be good for what it can do for you.
Jeremy: Say if that knowledge of "facts" helps you to live your life, be a carpenter, whatever.
Jeremy: And really, it's not "facts" that you know, but it's a model of the way the world works, that works well enough to suit your needs.
Jeremy: So we come to death... what I keep worrying about is that someday I'll die, that my brain will stop, that I won't be able to learn more math, play or listen to more music, be with you, or my brother, or my parents.
Jeremy: I can imagine at the last minute letting go, and feeling utter desperation.

Sarah: I feel the same way, as you know

Jeremy: Yes, I definitely do.
Jeremy: Well, what I started thinking is, what compels me to have this belief?
Jeremy: I might as well believe that I go to heaven.
Jeremy: So that I should abandon the notion that death will end my life, and just forget about death entirely.
Jeremy: Basically treat it as if it doesn't exist.
Jeremy: And the fact is: it doesn't. Death is not a human thing.
Jeremy: We try to imagine death by understanding it in terms of human ideas --most notably: loss-- , but obviously once you're dead, human ideas no longer apply.
Jeremy: So I try to now think that, it's possible I might "die" , but I have no idea what that entails.

Sarah: that's what i'm scared of- not existing but not knowing that i'm not existing

Jeremy: What do you mean "existing" ?
Jeremy: That's a meaningless word.
Jeremy: You don't need to know that I exist. You just have to enjoy your interactions with me.
Jeremy: The only thing you CAN focus on is your life, because that is all you have to work with.
Jeremy: You don't know what "really" exists. You don't know what death is, and you don't have to fear it, any more than you have to fear being hit by a car every time you cross the street.
Jeremy: You can ask questions like: "But what if death really IS the end?" .
Jeremy: But those are silly questions. There are math professors who say things like: "Functions are REALLY sets." .

Jeremy: But there's nothing that a function REALLY is. There are lots of ways of imagining functions. The only thing that's important is what DEFINES a function. How you satisfy that definition is irrelevant. Mathematicians are being overspecific.
Jeremy: Physics is wonderful, but when physicists start to say that the world is "really" made up of atoms, that's a mental slip.
Jeremy: The "reality" of the situation --if that is even a thing!-- is irrelevant. As humans, all we have to work with are our ideas, our models of the world.
Jeremy: Maybe when I die, I will cease to exist, as I know it. Or maybe, as I near death, my brain will perceive time as going slower and slower, so that I will be conscious forever.
Jeremy: "Forever" , as I perceive time.

Sarah: right
Sarah: as we did discuss- forever is not a human concept

Jeremy: Who knows? It's irrelevant, because it doesn't pertain to life as I know it now, and that's all I have control over.
Jeremy: Forever is a human concept, I think. It's discontinuity that is not human.
Jeremy: That's why you hurt when I'm away.
Jeremy: Why people grieve when people die.
Jeremy: I'm trying to somehow train myself to think of death as unknown. And if it is unknown, then I will stop being concerned about it.
Jeremy: Wean myself off the belief --and it is a belief, an article of faith-- , that death will mean the end of life as I know it.
Jeremy: That's not to say I believe that this life will continue forever.
Jeremy: But just that it is unknowable, and developing a theory about it could not possibly help me live my life now.
Jeremy: Except that: I value what I have now, and death being something possibly different from what I have now, I value my life, and will strive to keep it.
Jeremy: If you die in my lifetime, that will be a loss I will have to deal with, but that is no different than any other way I might lose you.
Jeremy: You might just refuse to talk to me or see me again. It would have the same effect.

Sarah: right

Jeremy: I would be devastated if you were the only thing close to me in my life, and you died.
Jeremy: I would be devastated if you were the only thing close to me in my life, and you decided never to speak to me again.
Jeremy: Which just means that for my own emotional well-being I will try to surround myself with many things that make me happy.

Jeremy: It's a nice way to think about things... we can ignore death, without devaluing life.

Sarah: right
Sarah: that is nice
Sarah: I like that

Jeremy: So I still would love if advances in medicine prolonged life.
Jeremy: Because I like this life, and I'm not about to trade it for something unknown!
Jeremy: Any more than I would willingly move away from all my friends, etc.
Jeremy: Stop doing math.
Jeremy: Start doing psychology.
Jeremy: Does that analogy make sense?

Sarah: yes it does

Jeremy: And I'm ready to embrace what I have, as much as I can.

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