

## PREFACE

# ONE HUNDRED DAYS IN DENMARK

One hundred days in Denmark. This is what occupies the gap of time between my college graduation and my tenure as a graduate student at the London School of Economics. This book is a shared exercise of my hundred day philosophical introspection.

For this exercise, I envision for myself a return to the practice of philosophy that Pierre Hadot characterized as that of the philosophical method during Antiquity. That is, to practice philosophy as a spiritual exercise – transforming my perception, and thus, my being as I practice it.<sup>1</sup>

I am writing this preface on May 13th, 2024. My life is changing on June 3rd which is in twenty one days. It is also worth mentioning that I *chose* to change my life; it is not something that I was forced into, *per se*. This “big choice” was to move to Denmark for the summer. While it does not sound life-changing on its face, booking the one-way ticket alone was an application of my agency that I have not experienced in a while. Moreover, I thought about the impact of my *choice* in deciding to go to Denmark because, you see, I have been forced into

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Hadot, “Philosophy as a Way of Life.” (1995)

change before. In moments of being forced into change – especially changes that impose long periods of unwanted difference – I have felt like my opportunities to exercise my agency were superficial.

In these long hauls of suppressed agency, instead of being a leading actor in my story of self-determination, I felt like a reacting apparatus that could not anticipate what would come next, taking unforeseen hits and being only able to proceed after-the-fact. Needless to say, being able to act on my intent to change my life for the better and book a one-way ticket to Denmark before continuing my studies in philosophy in London was a needed step on the way to re-claiming my actions that are in-line with self-determination.

You are probably wondering what this big forced change was. From my writing, it seems to have really shook me and I have not even mentioned the nature of the catalyst's specifics yet. Why? Well, for one, it is good to begin a book with the motivations for its conception. And to be honest, I did not want my motivation for this book to be marred by the nastiness of the forced change I experienced. Furthermore, I wanted the first page of this book to have something other than the name of this catalyst on it because it is not just unique to my story. It is something that many individuals have experienced and

to share who we are beyond our experience of it is fulfilling to the wholeness of our persons.

Now it seems right to share the name of my experience. The catalyst for my forced change was cancer and it forced changes that I am grateful for, still upset about, and deeply reflective regarding. For the rest of this preface, I am going to tell a story – one that has inspired this book – and share my hopes and dreams for my shared exercise of philosophical introspection that will be spanning across the 100 days of my summer.

This preface is largely the story of why I believe my life was *worth* changing.

When I was first diagnosed with cancer, my doctor told me to buy a lottery card because he had only twice seen a prognosis as positive as mine in his career. While luck had positively struck my diagnosis and treatment journeys, when my one month remission date passed five days ago, I could not help but recognize a persisting deep sadness. The sadness I identified seemed to not have shaken since becoming cancer free in April. And, it continues to bleed into this week as I reflect on my undergraduate years.

This Saturday, I will walk across the graduation stage at the University of Pennsylvania's Franklin Field to

receive my diploma. The 2024 commencement speaker is Dr. Siddhartha Mukherjee, a famous oncologist and author. It is quite a coincidence that he will give the commencement address for Penn the year I beat cancer and graduated from Penn all within two months. Anticipating the contents of his speech, I am sure he will share some experiences with his patients.

I think there is a two-fold explanation of my sadness. For one, it is very hard to think about others who have struggled with illness and were not able to see through to an end without it when you are fully aware of your luck in being able to do just that. Thus, I feel like one root of my sadness is just in that – the arbitrariness of my luck.

Many people never fully comprehend how much love so many others have for them during their lifetime. Further, many people will never know how many others are positively affected by their existence and work in their communities. I am fortunate to now know how loved I am by many. Throughout my entire journey – from first symptoms to complete remission – I experienced more love from my community than I knew existed for me. The pride expressed by my friends and family when I beat cancer is truly inexpressible in words.

There are individuals who do not have the same luck as I had in my experience. Sometimes a patient's journey is

just as supported as mine, with friends' steadfast encouragement, but there is not a chance for a big celebration at the end. I am no more deserving of a positive prognosis than any other patient. Yet, here I am, experiencing a second chance at health surrounded by a loving circle. This second chance alone makes my life worth changing on my own terms for the better.

The other source of my persisting discomfort about the whole experience is that it has made me feel like I do not really know myself. Weeks after beating cancer, I feel like a better version of myself. But, I also feel like a version of myself that I have never met – or at least, have not been connected to in a long while.

I had been feeling unwell for years, and every day I would wake up thinking that was normal. And, I would persist through the days operating within the bounds of a limited version of myself.

And, I was unaware that I was living my life constrained and knew only a limited version of myself. My consistent state of unwellness was depriving me of something I did not know existed. Moreover, I was making important calls about various elements of my life on an incomplete basis of knowledge. Without knowing the true nature of myself and my lived experience, I formed preferences and opinions that shaped my

material conditions that were non ideal for my healthy self.

Thus, this new norm of waking up and feeling fantastic has made me reflect on who I really am. I reflect on opinions and preferences I held while I was sick and they do really seem adaptive – formed under an incomplete information set about my life. So, in theory, I am now free to form new habits and desires based on the self I now know: my self in essentially full health.

When I turn to inquire my old way of life in an effort to revisit the old and form an informed new disposition about the world, I keep thinking of two particular questions. How do I feel like a stranger in my own being? And, is this really how life is?

The answer to the first question is quite straightforward when you look at my life. When I was feeling unwell, I used to tell my mom “I want to go home.” I would utter this statement sitting right in front of the fireplace in our house of ten years in the Boston suburbs. That comment was never about the building I resided in or the people surrounding me. That comment was subconsciously aimed at the fact that I did not feel as though I was accompanied by my real, authentic self. Once cured, I have never even derived a thought like that. I am home wherever my greatest loves are. We can work out what

exactly those ‘greatest loves’ are by the end of this 100 day exercise.

Now let us consider the answer to the second question. For my own sake, I hope this *is* how life really is supposed to be. I was really shaken by this experience – more so the aftermath of it.

I was talking with my farmor about this book before I began writing it.<sup>2</sup> I told her that I was interested in using my time in Denmark as the basis for an introspective exploration, one that would perhaps reveal some philosophical theory about change and trust. I told her I was not sure what the relationship was between change and trust yet, but I hoped to find it.

She laughed and said that simply time and life experience revealed to her the link between the two. She further explained that every day, there is a shift. This shift is slight, but it is what reinforces our trust in what was, what is, and what will be.

That really made me think. It was very interesting to me that an unbound ‘change’ throughout our lived experience is what she believes helps us maintain our

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<sup>2</sup> “Farmor” means father’s mother in Danish. I will be using the term throughout this book to refer to my grandmother Lizbeth.

trust in ourselves, others, and the physical world around us.

As I ruminated further on the nature of this link, it started to make more sense to me. Every day, I trust in the sun to set. It set yesterday, last Friday, a million years before that, and today. So, I trust in it to set tomorrow. If it did not, a drastic end to something as fundamental as the sun setting would be world-crushing. The sun has never not set (unless you live above the Arctic Circle, then there are a few months during which the sun does not set). While there is that constant reliability of the sun being “in” the sky in some capacity, the time at which the sun rises and sets changes slightly every day. During the summers in the Northern hemisphere, the sun sets later and later every day. No one is concerned there that the sun will not set. The slight difference between the days reinforces a trust that is based on an expected and consistent variability.

This is only an example of a slight natural change that we experience and still remain trusting through. The time of the sunset is a difference between the days that are forced by the physical world. Other differences between the days we experience can be forced or self-initiated.

To serve as a reinforcement of our trust, forced changes, like the sunset, do not have a negative difference regarding trust in our lives. These forced changes can be as small as a brand you use daily re-visualizing their marketing materials or as big as a downpour that has been on the forecast on a day you were hoping to do some sightseeing. While the latter forced change seems to negatively impact you, it does not destroy your trust in the meteorological systems that have long existed on earth. Rather, it reinforces the fact that various weathers exist and happen sometimes week-to-week, as normal.

Self-initiated slight changes do not warrant as much of a discussion. These differences could be a new diet or the new curtains you decided to put up on the windows of your house. While these are chosen changes, they still reinforce your trust in the fact that much of your experience is in your control and these chosen differences will stay as long as you wish.

The slight differences we observe day-to-day bring variance to our lives. This observable variance is good too, because it enables us to employ moveable boundaries of our trust. We are more willing to “bend with the wind” when we are familiar with staying steadfast in our trust through slight changes. We are able to be more comfortable with variance when we base a reaction to change off the observation that simply, every

day is different. That, I posit, is why we are inclined to choose a different ice cream one Sunday during summer – because you know you will have your usual ice cream flavor another summer day. If every day was exactly the same, we would be static in our choices and would consistently display preference paralysis. Without slight changes everyday, we would be so uncomfortable with change that we would no longer trust ourselves to choose a shift.

Constant day-to-day variance only increases our trust while it is slight. A drastic shift from one day to the next has the capacity to uproot the trust we hold in everything. When a drastic event causes some forced change, it can be almost as life-altering to the experiencer as the consequence of the sun not rising or setting.

Hearing that you have cancer is life-altering in many ways. It is a scary experience not only for the diagnosed individual, but also for their family and community. Some people choose to separate from you once they hear the news in order to protect themselves from the pain of watching you experience it. Others will become closer to you than ever. The drastic change of personal relationships was something I personally experienced and learning how to navigate those changes has positively added to my knowledge base. These events

affected my perception of trust in friends for the rest of my life and for that I am thankful. Outside of those forced changes, upon recovery, there are many other drastic changes that I had to deal with – namely, changing my lifestyle to one characterized decidedly by calmness and my diet to be gluten free.

That time of my life also initiated significant chosen changes. I chose to study philosophy formally for at least another year as a Thouron Scholar at the London School of Economics instead of enrolling in law school. I chose to book a one-way ticket to Denmark to reconnect with my heritage and have the opportunity to write this book. I likely would not be in this position if it was not for the forced changes my health had imposed throughout the last year. I am grateful for how my future is taking shape.

Being a senior in the last month of college means that I have found myself with a lot of time. Most of this time I use for long walks into Philadelphia's Center City followed by a long sit on my sorority house's porch while I eat lunch. These porch sits are when I have found the outlet to think deeply about the events that marked the start of the big changes in my life. Thinking about the affect these changes have had on me has helped me realize the power of meditating on past lived experiences. To meditate, for me, is to break down an

experience and understanding from various pertinent philosophical systems. For instance, if there is an interaction involving knowledge-transfer, I would analyze the experience using my comprehension of and interests in epistemology. If there is an interaction that required a moral consult of some kind, I would turn to ethics.

My past philosophical introspections proved to demonstrate a renewed appreciation for philosophy. Having had the opportunity to turn introspectively and philosophize about the meaning of recent events and the latest phase of my life has surely helped me become equipped to face the next big change life has in store for me to experience.

If philosophically meditating on our being in the world by focusing on methodically understanding particular parts of our lives can help us be more prepared in the future for life's drastic variances, then learning how to do this could prove to be empowering. Practicing this skill every day can reground ourselves and our commitment to enthusiastic and intentional self-determination.

After meditating on my experience and the love I felt from those around me throughout it and realizing I gained an empowering skill, I realized the potential for

my future. I owe it to myself to take back my agency. My life is worth changing because of how much potential there is for my happiness when I actively exercise my agency.

I started this book with the recognition of worth because that is where the ambition for intentional change begins. Oftentimes, when we are faced with a hard decision, we ask ourselves (and sometimes our company) whether the decision is “worth it.” Transforming one’s being and conception of one’s self in relation to others and the world around her is no easy task. This kind of transformation takes a sustained investment and effort into doing philosophy as a way of life – finding deep meaning in quotidian instances and routines.

As with any difficult journey, at some point during the journey, we will be prompted to ask the familiar question of whether it is worth it. We could say we are “better than that” since we know the benefits of looking into our selves in order to better connect with our being and the world surrounding us. But, at the end of the journey, you will ask the same question, just in a more mature form – *was it worth it?*

That question is not just relegated to the realm of pursuits of self-(re)discovery. That question is asked by authorities to criminals who are facing time for a

transgression. It is asked by many singles who reflect on their past relationships. It is asked after runners complete their first marathon. Sometimes the answer is an affirmative and unequivocal “yes” and other times a “no.”

I anticipate that the answer to that question after our shared exercise of philosophical introspective will be a “yes.” This is because if our lives are worth changing, then it is worth – at any cost – to take an active part in fostering that needed positive change. If our lives are worth changing, that means that there is some unmet need in your life as it is. Even without a perfect conception of what that unmet need is, you can start on the reflective and analytic journey.

You need not know what you need to get out of a journey before embarking on it. That freedom to explore is the beauty of philosophy for me. I know that I need to take the charge for change into my own hands because I feel like I have been going through the motions of life like an apparatus that is only built to react for too long. I am unsure of what I am looking to find out about myself through philosophical introspection, though.

I am confident that my 100 day quest will empower me with new knowledge about myself, my place in the world, and my relationship to others. This confidence

comes from my eagerness to do philosophy as they practiced it in ancient times. Again, as Hadot iterates in his many works, in late Antiquity, philosophy was not merely a subject; it was a way of life.

That sounds strange to us today. After all, philosophy is an academic discipline that some students choose or are forced to study in college in the name of developing their “critical thinking capacities.” What many of us currently think philosophy is, in our modern conception, is actually the *discourse* of philosophy. Lately, we tend to equate philosophy with philosophical systems. In the history of philosophy, scholars have articulated comprehensive systems of thought and methods of reasoning. These great achievements have become what many people view as the entire discipline. While these systems and methods are incredibly important for the advancement of the love of wisdom (*philosophia*), we are forgetting an important concept. We fail to remember that our love of wisdom can be cultivated without an articulation of a comprehensive and formal system tied to a discourse community in philosophy.

That being said, systems do great work in allowing philosophers to call to mind the whole of a philosophical way of living. Philosophical doctrines serve to guide the articulation of a philosophical way of life. We are thus encouraged to tap into that built-up literature and

discourse community in order to do philosophy for ourselves. Led by our intuitions that are shaped from the principles resulting from philosophical exchange, we can embark on a transformation of our life. Philosophy is about that transformation. The core of *philosophia* is a love of wisdom that enables one to transform their being in the world. In this way, philosophy is a *metanoia conversio* – a conversion of mind beyond the boundaries of our self-limited mental constructs. This aim is an ongoing process and one that requires an active mind toward the principles that are guiding us.

Doing philosophy as they did in ancient times and aiming for this conversion offers us three things, according to Hadot in his 1995 book “Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault.” He says that philosophy promises us freedom, therapy, and an increased cosmological consciousness. I think that those promises are enough to anticipate that the answer to the question of worth for our journey of philosophical introspection will be affirmative.

The critical component to doing philosophy as a way of life is to pay attention. Sustained attention is an art, and it is necessary in our endeavors, particularly. To meditate deeply on regular events is to recognize what is of any value to us, in our pursuit to know ourselves, others, and the world better in these repeated interactions. We are

most fully what we are when we are paying attention. So, to investigate deeply into ourselves, we ought to pay attention to and be present in what it is we are doing.

In this preface, I have talked about my motivations in writing this book, discussed what it is about my life that led me to embark on a long journey of consistent philosophical introspection, and shared what it is about that method that might be useful for you. I wish to end this preface by sharing why I am sharing the entirety of my journey publicly.

I am currently twenty-two years old and I have just finished my undergraduate education in philosophy. Philosophy is my greatest passion of all and I love sharing it with others. I have also just gone through a phase of my life marked by illness, disappointment, and loss. But that is just it: I got through it.

Philosophy served an important role in restoring my personhood. It aided me in reclaiming my agency, reshaping my value systems based on that past experience, and enabled me to see a future where even if I was faced with the same challenges, I knew I could turn to the discipline for proper navigation. Philosophical discourse is an incredibly special tool for humans and doing philosophy as a way of life with the discourse

framework as a background is the appropriate way to incorporate it into our lived experience.

I hope that you find inspiration in my journey; and my aim is for you – by the end of this book – to be equipped to use philosophical introspection to transform your own life.

Skål to the next hundred days in Denmark!

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