Chapter x

From LIH

Subtraction

I built the Hut primarily to replace my tipi, but this … structure made from sandbags, made with my own two hands was becoming much more than a space for quiet meditation. The Hut was a sanctuary, a refuge. It was **a place where I could listen to an - inner voice - saying you do not have to follow the same path as other people. It is okay to be different.**

At the core of my thinking was an idea that was in sharp contrast to what seemed to be the norm of the culture surrounding me. **Subtracting things rather than accumulating things.**

What do you want in life? What do you think will make you happy? Maybe these are the wrong questions to ask. Perhaps better questions might be - what do you not want in life? What does not make you happy?

When I applied the same logic to what would make me happy, it seemed **easier to remove or subtract the things I did not want in life, than to seek something I did want in life.**

And so began a practice of subtraction in my life. The more time I spent down by the lake, often sitting beneath a pile of sand (the Hut), the more drawn I was to living simply which fell in line with the concept of subtracting things in my life.

I wanted simplicity in possessions, meals, transportation, finances, entertainment, relaxation, and even my thoughts and desires. I wanted to remove anything that was not necessary, that I did not want, or that made me unhappy.

I stopped allowing what others did for “happiness” to influence my choices. **I stopped looking for new things that might make me happy and began subtracting existing things in my life that I knew did not make me happy.**

Practicing subtraction in my life seemed “right” somehow. At some deep inner level I sensed it was creating a new direction in my life for the better. Mentally and emotionally I felt stronger and more satisfied.

I began to listen to an inward voice that reflected complete self honesty (often painful to hear) that was both accurate and simple, based on experience and sound reason. That still small voice within (as I prefer to call it), not only helped me know right from wrong, but also helped me to know what I truly wanted (or in this case, did not want) in life. But to hear the still small voice within, required silence and listening.

Things I Don't Know

I enjoy reading books and nonfiction articles. Most of what I read is science related and often on topics sharing the latest research in physics, chemistry, biology, genetics, psychology, or computer algorithms.

I never want to stop learning. I do not like the idea of not learning. While I love researching and exploring the internet or reading current nonfiction books, **I fully acknowledge there are far more things I still don't know than things that I do know.**

Sitting by the lake, I am often caught up in thinking about biology and about the DNA of mosquitoes, dragonflies, pine trees, and turtles. **The code for life is all around, as are the mysteries of life. There is so much we still don't know.** My curiosity about some of those mysteries fuels the drive to read and learn more.

Here **the practice of subtraction has brought balance in my life between the desire to learn and the need to be still and listen.** Mysteries about life will outlive us. And while I enjoy learning, I do not want it to consume me or to take up all of my time. It is okay to admit there are some things I don't know.

All living things have their own set of internal instructions. A bird knows how to be a bird just as a germinated plant seed knows how to orient itself toward the sun to grow. **Even though I do not know much about the instructions on how to be a human being, I can still be one**, just as a cat can be a cat without

actually knowing how that happens. I tell myself it's okay (if not even beneficial) to not know (or try to know) some things.

I love reading and learning and if not careful, I could spend much or most of my time researching the enormous volumes of information on the internet. But there is a limit to the number of hours in a day.

The practice of subtraction led me to a place where I learned to monitor (and thus reduce) time spent reading (and researching). That allowed me to find time for simple, quiet, observations in nature, and exploring my own internal instructions on how to be and what it means to be … a human being.

I have found sitting in nature and being silent allows me to better hear that still small voice and gather a sense of what direction to take (sometimes without fully understanding the direction).

Things I Do Know

When I began the practice of subtraction, I found myself removing speculation about things (including ideas) I was not certain of. I wanted to let go and remove all notions that "might" be true and only hold on to those I "knew" to be true. Once the dust settled from the wrecking ball from that laborious process, I was left with 3 firm rules for life, that have stood the test of time for me:

1. **Primum non nocere (first do no harm).**

2. **Suum Cuique (to each his own)**
3. **Do not do unto others what you do not want done to yourself.**

I've read Michael Shermer's "The Moral Arc" and Steven Pinker's "The Better Angels of Our Nature". They both offer compelling evidence that - these are the best of times. I fully agree there has never been a better time to be a human being. Many people think and say just the opposite. It is easy to long for the "good 'ole days" and fond memories while forgetting the many hardships the average person faced compared to today. We can get so wrapped up in the few negatives of modern living that we are blinded to the overwhelming positives.

"**There's a right and a wrong and you ought to know the difference**". That is in line with Jonathan Haidt's book "The Righteous Mind" where he argues morality is not found in reason, but from instinct and innate sources. No doubt there are clear moral dilemmas that are challenging and can be viewed from opposite perspectives, but at a basic level most people do not need to be told it is wrong to steal from others. **Deep inside, they … know it is wrong.**

I have read Henry David Thoreau's "Walden" (something of a manual for self reliance) many times. One of the ways he evaluates the cost of something is to ask **how many hours of work will it require to pay for it?** This remains a good litmus test for me today, when making decisions on what to purchase (or not to purchase). I

avoid buying things that require many hours of work to purchase.

Every memory I have of my mother is a memory of her laughing or smiling. She helped me to learn to not take things too seriously as well as to be able to laugh at myself. She has been a tremendous influence in my life (I will not go into how she treats everyone with love and respect and is one of the kindest people you would ever want to meet). **One of the things I do know is the value of laughter.**

I also know the value of freedom. I've regularly visited and written to prison inmates for many, many years. I think one of the hardest things to endure in life (other than maybe extremely poor health and constant pain) has to be long term incarceration.

Many times I am in Harmony and I think about those who do not have the freedom to enjoy living as they choose. To be locked away day after day, year after year robs a person not only of time, but also their dignity. I always try to keep my letters and visits on a positive note because so much of their existence is surrounded by feelings of defeat and loneliness. Sadly there are some people who are not incarcerated but are still in a prison of sorts because of addictions, relationships, finances, circumstances, or self imposed restrictions.

If you are chained by the economic slavery of massive debt can you really call yourself free?

Financial freedom translates into lifestyle freedoms. To choose lifestyles we cannot afford means we must go into debt. **No matter what you might want to do, if you are restricted by financial debt, you are not completely free.**

Good health, a good quality of life, and spending time with family are at the top of my priority list, but none of those things can really be fully achieved without freedom. I am talking about much more than political and financial freedom. Freedom and honesty in my thinking and opinions are also important to me.

One of the hardest things for me to do over the years has been to be as honest with myself as possible. It is very easy to be influenced by other people or things I read or watch. Our brains have a way of spinning things that can be downright deceptive. If I do not keep my skeptical guard up, I easily fall into beliefs, choices, and opinions that come from sources I cannot always trust (sometimes including my own default way I look at things and people).

If left on autopilot, we are prone to be influenced by many of these biases without realizing they could be wrong (often providing our minds with inaccurate information). **It can take a lot of hard introspective work, to honestly examine my biases, current beliefs, opinions, choices, and habits. A good dose of skepticism is helpful, along with disciplined, critical thinking skills. Ultimately, it is my love for freedom that motivates me to be as brutally honest**

with myself as possible. I want to break any chains that keep me from being free, and being as true to myself as possible.

Perhaps the **one thing that I do know is - the importance of listening to the still small voice within.**

That voice always reflects my 3 rules of life. It is usually the voice of reason, love, experience, encouragement, inspiration, or understanding. I know that voice from hearing it over and over through the years. I do not always grasp the meaning of some of the promptings, but I have learned to trust the still small voice even without fully knowing the meaning.

There is no doubt, one of the things I do know (for me) is - I need to find quiet time each day to settle my mind and be still and listen for both daily guidance and long term direction.

There are only so many hours in a day. **How we spend our time is even more important than how we spend our money.**

I know that time is to be treasured, spent wisely, and not wasted. Time can easily and quickly be wasted, if we are not honest and true to ourselves.