Chapter 7
Heidegger on Creativity: From Boredom to Re-engagement with the World

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Experimental psychologists have discussed whether boredom can help us become more creative. At first blush, this would seem to be rather unlikely. When we are bored, we are disengaged; we cannot be bothered and nothing seems worthwhile; we have no interest in the world around us. Such a condition, surely, is not conducive to creativity (Haager et al. 2018). Yet some psychologists disagree (Gasper and Middlewood 2014). Boredom, they explain, breaks down entrenched routines and thought-patterns and provides us with an opportunity to think again and anew. Respondents in "approach-oriented states" such as boredom engage in more "associative thought" than those in "avoidance-oriented affective states." This is how boredom comes to encourage "the quest for meaning and exploration" (Gasper and Middlewood 2014, pp. 53–55).

How we come down on this issue depends on what we take boredom to be. This is where the case made by experimental psychologists looks weak. Whether they are defending the creativity-thesis or rejecting it, they all have a shallow understanding of what boredom is and how it works. In their rush to quantify and to measure, they have not paid sufficient attention to the way boredom *feels*. Boredom is not a thing after all, but rather one of the many ways in which we may find ourselves in the world. How one finds oneself in the world is difficult to measure. What we need is a far better grasp of the phenomenology involved. And if this is the task, whom better to rely on than Martin Heidegger? Heidegger discussed boredom at some considerable length in a series of lectures given in Freiburg in the winter of 1929/1930 and subsequently published as *Fundamental concepts of metaphysics* (2001, pp. 78–167). In these lectures, he discussed creativity too, or rather what he referred to as "authenticity." Although authenticity is not the same thing as creativity, a connection between the two concepts is not difficult to

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J. Ros Velasco (ed.), *Boredom Is in Your Mind*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-26395-9_7

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establish. To live an authentic life is to live a creative life, a life which we have made for ourselves and which is lived on our own terms.

But Heidegger was a conservative thinker who took a dim view of individualism, and he was skeptical regarding romantic notions of self-assertion (Davis 2007; Ringmar 2017). As human beings, he pointed out, we always find ourselves in situations that others have created and over which we have little or no power. We are 'thrown' into the world and always live together with, and in relation to, other people. We are always hanging out with *das Man*, as it were, and we always do, say and think what this Mr. Everyman does, says, and thinks (Heidegger 1962, pp. 163–168). The problem for Heidegger is how an authentic life is possible under such conditions. Clearly, it cannot simply be a matter of breaking free of social constraints since any conception of freedom itself will be historically, culturally, and socially determined. Yet Heidegger did believe that there may be moments when we have the opportunity to reassess our lives. These are extreme moments when the world temporarily stops making sense. Heidegger found one such moment in anxiety, and he discussed that in *Being and time* (1962, pp. 228–235). The other such moment is boredom, and that is what he discusses in *Fundamental concepts of metaphysics*.

As always, however, Heidegger makes no concessions to established terminology, and he has little respect for empirical science (2001, pp. 88–92). This means that any engagement between his work and that of experimental psychologists requires what we could think of as an act of translation. In this chapter, we will contribute to this task by looking for an independent set of terms by which a translation can take place. While invoking Heidegger, we will try our best not to be entranced by his language. Boredom, we will say, is the affective state in which we find ourselves once our attention no longer is entrained. It is when the attention flags that we get bored. Once this has happened, the question is how to re-engage with the world. Creativity, from this point of view, is a matter of the terms on which such re-engagement takes place. Eventually, we want to tell a new, more authentic, story about our plans, our lives, and ourselves.

Two Forms of Entrainment

As long as we pay attention to something we are not bored (James 1884; Ringmar 2016a). From the Latin *ad-* meaning 'to' and *tendere* meaning 'to stretch,' to attend to something is 'to give heed to' or 'to direct one's mind or energies toward' something. Yet as we know, paying proper attention to something is difficult under the best of circumstances and often we cannot do it for more than a few seconds at a time. Paying attention is far easier if we are presented with some form of a *Gestalt*; that is, a pattern, a figure, or a structure of some kind. First, our attention is captured by the overall pattern of the *Gestalt*, then our attention is maintained as its individual components gradually come to be revealed. We pay attention since we want to see, hear, or feel what is about to happen. The technical term is 'entrainment'

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(Krueger 2014). We are entrained as our attention is captured, held, and carried along by the *Gestalt.* Boredom, from this point of view, occurs when entrainment fails. There is suddenly nothing that captures our attention, holds it and carries it along. We are bored since there is nothing to which we can pay attention.

There are basically two ways in which our attention can be entrained. We pay attention with our minds but also with our bodies. More than anything, our minds are entrained by means of narrative structures. We are entrained as we follow a story and interpret the events and persons which it contains. We pay attention since we want to know how the book, the play, or the movie will end. But there are also narrative-like structures—such as music—which function in a similar fashion. Music too has a plot of sorts—musical themes are introduced and developed—and we keep on listening since we want to know where the music will take us. Narratives, and quasi-narratives such as music, are human creations. By means of the structure of the plot, the world comes to be organized in a certain fashion. Or perhaps we could say that the narratives allow us to create our own world, a virtual reality which we join as a consequence of our entrainment.

But we are also entrained by the world in an immediate, and unmediated, fashion. By means of our bodies, we pay direct attention to the situations in which we find ourselves. Literally, thousands of minuscule pieces of information have to be gathered and processed in order for us to even be able to walk across the floor. Here too *Gestalts* are important. Our bodies react to smells, to light, and to a vertical orientation, and they love to give into the temptations of rhythms. It is a matter of the shapes and surfaces of things, the position of our bodies in space, body coordination and the interaction between our body and the bodies of others. This information is usually not explicitly recognized by consciousness, and instead, our bodies find their place in the world by themselves. It all happens behind our backs, as it were.

Habits are crucial in explaining such automatic behavior. As a result of the habits we have developed, we rarely have to think about what we are doing. Instead, when a certain situation arises, we simply act. It is as though a situation was calling out to us, and we respond to the call by acting in a more or less automatic fashion. The path in the forest wants us to walk on it; the newly made bed wants us to lay down; the house of worship asks us to pray. In an instant, our bodies have attuned themselves to the mood of the situation in which they find themselves. This is how we suddenly find ourselves walking, laying down, and praying.

Since our bodies too are entrained, it is not surprising that our way of paying attention is reflected in our poise, gait, and general demeanor. In effect, our entrainment *is* our bodily poise, gait, and general demeanor. As a result, the state of our entrainment is often perfectly obvious to outsiders. “You are in a chipper/pesky/somber mood today,” someone might remark, and it is only once they tell us that we come to realize how we feel. Boredom too is revealed through bodily postures. When we are bored our head may suddenly become so heavy we must rest it in our hands; ‘I’m so bored,’ we say with a yawn as we flop ourselves down on a sofa. Yet in general, the body is not as easily bored as our minds. Our bodies can follow the same repetitive rhythm for hours. Our bodies, if left to themselves, would go on dancing until they were worn out.

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Being and Time

These two forms of entrainment—the narrative and the embodied—function quite differently. Most obviously, paying attention to a narrative is to pay attention to the world at a remove. To follow a narrative is to experience the world vicariously. Here, the experiences and emotions are not our own but instead those of the protagonists of the story. This is a secondary form of entrainment, as it were, which relies on our ability to engage with a representation of the world as seen at a distance. When the body is entrained, by contrast, we experience the world directly. We ourselves are present in a certain situation, not just presented with a representation of it.

The two forms of entrainment result in two quite distinct phenomenological experiences. Notice, for example, what happens to time. A narrative has a time of its own. Reading the book we take time off from our ordinary lives and enter time as configured by the story. As a result, time may slow down, skip, turn back on itself, or go around in loops. But time is reconfigured in direct, embodied, and entrainment too. When our bodies are perfectly attuned to the situations in which they find themselves, we may lose our sense of time (Csíkszentmihályi 2008). Time is suspended, and we cannot tell if a minute has passed or perhaps an eternity. Likewise, when boredom strikes, our understanding of time is transformed. Time which used to be so light has suddenly become unbearably heavy. Time is like quicksand or like treacle. Once our feet are stuck in it, we cannot move. Or perhaps it is we who have become like quicksand or treacle. Once time has become stuck in us, it cannot move.

Notice also what happens to our sense of self. When we are fully entrained by a narrative, we appropriate the point of view of its protagonists. We identify with the characters and feel what they feel, want what they want, do what they do (De Graaf et al. 2012). We lose ourselves in the story, and we suddenly find ourselves as someone else. Embodied entrainment results in a similar loss of self. This, at least, is what rock climbers say, professional dancers, concert violinists, and yoga practitioners. As long as we are entrained by the activity, we may never find ourselves again. Somehow or another we have lost ourselves in the interaction between our bodies and the world. Come to think of it, this is not surprising. The body, as a body, has no sense of self, and when we become all body, the self is reduced to an unnecessary assumption.

Perhaps we need to spell out what this does *not* mean. The fact that the two forms of entrainment are distinct does not mean that minds can be separated from bodies. No Cartesian dualism is implied. And often enough the two forms of entrainment take place in synchrony with each other. Thus, a narrative attunement often requires a bodily attunement. For example: when we read a book or watch a play, we understand the plot not merely by means of our explicit interpretations but also by embodied means. The story may give us goosebumps or a queasy feeling in our stomachs. These, moreover, are not incidental reactions, but preconditions for our understanding of the plot (Thiele 2006, pp. 252–257; Rokotnitz 2017).

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Similarly, our minds will often call upon our bodies. When we hear a piece of music, our minds may recognize it as a certain tune, but it is our bodies that get up, and stay, on the dance floor. Conversely, even fully embodied forms of entrainment require a form of proto-narrativity (Fisher 2010). Unless we are able to retain the memory of a previous part of a pattern, and form a premonition of a future part, the present part will fail to make sense. Always slightly ahead of itself, the body reaches out for the next thing that is coming up. This is the embodied sensation that all stories require. We can follow a story since our bodies know what it is like to move ahead.

Boredom 1: The Train Station

This is how Heidegger describes the scene:

> We are sitting, for example, in the tasteless station of some lonely minor railway. It is four hours until the next train arrives. The district is uninspiring. We do have a book in our rucksack, though—shall we read? No. Or think through a problem, some question? We are unable to. We read the timetables or study the table giving the various distances from this station to other places we are not otherwise acquainted with at all. We look at the clock—only a quarter of an hour has gone by. Then we go out onto the local road. We walk up and down, just to have something to do. But it is no use. Then we count the trees along the road, look at our watch again—exactly five minutes since we last looked at it. Fed up with walking back and forth, we sit down on a stone, draw all kinds of figures in the sand, and in so doing catch ourselves looking at our watch yet again—half an hour—and so on. (2001, p. 93)

A common complaint in the nineteenth century was that train journeys happened far too quickly. Whizzing past the lives of others at speeds of up to 40 km per hour, the passengers had no chance to engage with what they saw. Trains, conservative critics feared, encouraged their passengers to treat the lives of others as superficial, and quickly passing, amusements. Heidegger shared this critique of modernity and movement, but this is not his concern here. On the contrary, he is annoyed since he cannot get to where he is going fast enough.

But what exactly is the source of his annoyance? There are many ways to be in a train station after all which do not result in boredom. We might work there, for example, or treat it as a place to keep warm or as a venue for conducting illicit business. Or we might simply go there to watch trains go by. But Heidegger is on his way somewhere and this makes it into a completely different kind of train station for him. He was on a train, engaged in a steady forward movement; his body was entrained by the train, as it were. There is an explicit story here, of a departure and an anticipated arrival, but there is also a proto-story with which his body had engaged. His body was already ahead of itself and the mood in which he now finds himself is determined by this fact. The story has temporarily been suspended and time, as a result, has become unbearably heavy.

Faced with this situation, his body temporarily takes charge. Heidegger's body is trying to be helpful. Quite by itself, it is looking for *Gestalt*s which might engage

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him. Thus his eyes direct him first to a timetable on the wall, then to a clock; his legs start walking up and down the road outside of the train station; his hand picks up a stick and starts drawing patterns in the sand. Yet none of the *Gestalt*s which his body discovers in this way is engaging enough to catch his conscious attention. He is too annoyed to be entrained. He even rejects the book in his rucksack which would have provided an easy, conveniently narrated, escape. He is not interested; all he wants is for his journey to continue.

This is the beginning of Heidegger's account of boredom. Much as the situation annoys him, the experience is eye-opening. Heidegger has come up against nothing less than temporality itself. A train station experience is what all of our lives would be like if we were not entrained by all those patterns to which we normally pay attention. Train station experiences are exactly the kinds of experiences that we usually try our best to avoid. We are afraid of boredom since we are afraid of a life without entrainment; we are afraid of boredom since we are afraid of a life deprived of meaning. And yet, this kind of boredom is easily overcome. The suspension of entrainment is only temporary after all. As soon as our respective trains pull into our respective train stations, we all scramble to get on. Our stories continue and we are no longer bored. The trains take us away from all metaphysical queries.

Boredom 2: The Dinner Party

This is Heidegger's description:

> We have been invited out somewhere for the evening. We do not need to go along. Still, we have been tense all day, and we have time in the evening. So we go along. There we find the usual food and the usual table conversation, everything is not only very tasty, but tasteful as well. Afterward people sit together having a lively discussion, as they say, perhaps listening to music, having a chat, and things are witty and amusing. And already it is time to leave. The ladies assure us, not merely when leaving, but downstairs and outside too as we gather to leave, that it really was very nice, or that it was terribly charming. Indeed. There is nothing at all to be found that might have been boring about this evening, neither the conversation, nor the people, nor the rooms. Thus we come home quite satisfied. We cast a quick glance at the work we interrupted that evening, make a rough assessment of things and look ahead to the next day—and then it comes: I was bored after all this evening, on the occasion of this invitation. (2001, p. 109)

It is at first difficult to see how this could count as an example of boredom. On the contrary, the dinner party was not boring at all. It was a good night out and Heidegger enjoyed himself. And the reason he did, judging by his description, was more than anything that various social habits took charge of the situation. Everything was as expected and as it should be; the conversation flowed easily, each person adding their bits to the unfolding sequence; there was even music. Entrained in this way, Heidegger lost a sense of time and a sense of self. Time just flew and he forgot himself.

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When he returned home, however, another set of entrenched habits kicked in. When he entered his study, he took a quick look at his desk. This movement of his body called up a story—the narrative which Heidegger tells himself about his life. This story informs him of the things that really matter to him and instructs him regarding how he should spend his time. This is the story which has "Martin Heidegger," the world-leading philosopher, as its main protagonist. It is in terms of this narrative that the dinner party was boring. It was boring since it was a waste of time, and it was a waste of time since the evening is impossible to fit into time as organized by his autobiography. In terms of that story, the evening out was nothing but a pointless digression. It was one of those darlings which movie directors are advised to leave on the floor of the cutting room.

Differently put, it is his autobiographical narrative that saves him. Much as the train that rescued him from the boring train station, the story he tells himself about 'Martin Heidegger' rescues him from the boring evening out. Or, to be more precise, the autobiographical narrative first determines that the evening was boring and then proceeds to rescue him from the boredom it has induced. But this also means that he experiences the boredom only at a remove. The boredom is not something that he actually feels. The boredom appears only in retrospect, once the story of his life has picked him up again and carried him away.

Boredom 3: Profound Boredom

When it comes to profound boredom, Heidegger provides no description of a scene. As he explains, there is no scene to describe. Profound boredom can overcome us anywhere and anytime—even when walking "through the streets of a large city on a Sunday afternoon" (Heidegger 2001, p. 135). What we are bored by here is nothing in particular, instead, it is life itself which becomes unbearable. "It makes everything of equally great or equally little worth… It takes us back to the point where all and everything appears indifferent to us" (Heidegger 2001, p. 137). In profound boredom, it is life itself which drags; life is the *Langeweile*, the "long while," which we cannot fill with any conceivable content. When confronting profound boredom, time loses its sense of direction and our identities begin to unravel.

What we are faced with here, differently put, is a state of total narrative collapse. All forms of narrative entrainment fail; there are no stories that can catch us, hold us, and carry us along. The stories are like broken tools that no longer can be used for their intended purposes. There is not even a biographical narrative and consequently no main protagonist and no sense of an individual self. This is why, according to Heidegger, we should talk about this condition as being boring "for one" rather than boring "for me" (Heidegger 2001, p. 141). In the absence of a narrative, time collapses too. Without a story, there is no way to separate the past from the present and the future. Time, in all its dimensions, folds into the present and ends up standing still. What we are left with is life reduced to bare-bone basics. It is as though the effects of all the drugs we have been taking for so long finally

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have worn off. What we have come up against, says Heidegger, is not this or that or the other thing, but instead Being itself.

This experience is unsettling, to say the least. One problem is that we have difficulties making sense of the encounter. The reason, simply put, is that Being has no *Gestalt*. Being is not an object and it does not look, sound, or smell like anything. The outrageous fact that we are alive is not itself an observable datum. As a result, Being is always going to be difficult to pay attention to. Instead, we are more likely to be overwhelmed by the encounter. When coming into the presence of Being, we become what Heidegger calls *gebannt*, "entranced"—a state of awe in which our minds freeze up, our knees go weak, and we lose our faculty of speech (2001, pp. 147–148). To be entranced is to be transfixed, rooted to the ground. Entrancement is thus the very opposite of entrainment. Being summons us, we could perhaps say, but we have no way of responding to its call.

Between Being and the Social

Heidegger's analysis here is similar to what he says about anxiety in *Being and time* (1962, pp. 228–235). Anxiety and profound boredom are both ways of liberating ourselves from the man-made meanings with which we normally surround ourselves. In both conditions, all attempts at narrative entrainment have failed, but embodied entrainment has failed too. In anxiety, we cannot focus on anything in the world around us; our attention-span reduced to zero, we flit from one thing to the other. And in boredom, as we saw, we are *gebannt,* transfixed. In neither condition are there any *Gestalt*s with the power to capture our attention, hold us and carry us along. We are pushed to the edge; we are staring into the abyss. Overcome with vertigo, we are sick to our stomachs.

The question is what happens next. According to Heidegger, we "flee" (Heidegger 1962, pp. 229–230). Once we realize that we are in the presence of Being, we start running in the opposite direction. And yet, given that Heidegger already has told us that profound boredom is an impersonal state and that we are rooted to the ground, we may wonder who it is who does the fleeing. The answer is that our bodies once again take charge. Much as in the previous cases of boredom, our bodies are trying to be helpful. It is as though when walking in a forest, we suddenly had come across a bear (James 1884, p. 190). At first, we are indeed transfixed by the encounter, but then—and without quite understanding how and why it happened—we suddenly find ourselves running. Our bodies react before our conscious minds are aware of what is going on. It is only once we already are running that we catch up with ourselves and only now that we suddenly become terrified.

This is at the same time, not just a random escape. Rather, our fleeing has a definite destination. More than anything, as Heidegger explains, we seek refuge in crowds. Given what we have experienced, the company of others is wonderfully comforting. Together with people who go about their ordinary lives in their ordinary fashion, we can put our encounter with Being out of our minds. In this way, a

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sense of normalcy is restored. Yet this re-engagement with the world will necessarily take place on terms which have been determined by other people (Heidegger 1962, pp. 163–168). We are eager to please and prepared to do just about anything to fit in. Hanging out with *das Man*—Mr. Everyman—we soon become *das Man* ourselves. This is a relief to be sure, but it is also our undoing. As perfectly socially determined, we are no longer the authors of our own lives.

The situation, in other words, is pretty bleak. On the one hand, there is our encounter with Being. And as Heidegger explains, this is always going to be an encounter with the inevitability our own deaths. Being is nothing if not being-towards-death (1962, pp. 279–311). On the other hand, we have the social, which it too presents us with a death of sorts, or at least with the end of the notion that we can live a life which is truly our own. It is between these two deaths that boredom has cleared a space—a tiny sliver of space between Being and the social—in which we still are fully alive. The only problem is that this is an unbearably uncomfortable location to be in and certainly no place where we can settle down and make a life for ourselves. Whenever we come too close to the bear, our bodies will start running.

The problem, in other words, is that we no longer can rely on our bodies to help us out. Our bodies react instinctively, and once our bodies have given upon us, we are surely lost. And yet, says Heidegger, our bodies can be trained to act in a different way than their instincts dictate. By means of a lot of hard work, we can develop new habits that impose themselves on our existing habits and keep them in check. This implies something akin to a physical workout program (Ringmar 2017). We need to steel ourselves, as it were; force our bodies to stay put and take a stand. We must learn to stand up straight no matter what happens, head raised and eyes cocked, like a guard in a watchtower or a lookout in the mast of a ship. In this way, our first, fleeing, nature can be replaced by a second nature which refuses to budge.

Provided that our exercise program is successful, we may find that the mood of the situation suddenly changes. Heidegger invokes a religious language here. He talks about a switch, a *kairos*, like Saint Paul's conversion on the way to Damascus (Svendsen 2005, p. 124). Nothing in the situation has actually changed to be sure, but in a blink of the eye, there is nevertheless a complete change of moods. Suddenly, everything feels entirely different. In the middle of this great calamity, Heidegger explains, we experience a "sober anxiety" which gives rise to an "unshakable joy" (1962, p. 358). This is a strange reaction to be sure. Like the serene smile of the Buddha, it conveys the impression of a sudden realization of a great truth. Yet just what we have realized is of course far from obvious. What is clear, though, is that our bodies once again are in charge of the situation. Even once our first nature has failed us, our bodies have found a way of rescuing us.

Re-engagement with the World

Experimental psychologists, we said, have discussed whether boredom can help us become more creative. Our phenomenological investigation gives us reasons to think that this indeed might be the case. By paying attention to something, we

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become followers of the *Gestalt* that unfolds before us; we are captured, held, and carried along by the pattern. Yet a person who is captured and held is not free and a person who is carried along is not even able to walk by herself. Attention makes us into subjects of whatever it is that entrains us and a state of subjectivity is unlikely to be conducive to creativity. This is where boredom can come to our assistance. Boredom allows us to ignore the *Gestalt*; boredom releases us from captivity and gives us a break from entrainment (Chylińska 2015). Suddenly we are free, and freedom is a precondition for creativity.

According to Friedrich Nietzsche and his many followers, it is in this new-found freedom that we can begin to construct a new and more authentic self (1924, p. 283). We can come up with our own *Gestalt*s, Nietzcheans believe, and once we have come up with them, we can proceed to be entrained by them. Although not everyone is capable of such feats of self-entrainment, this is an option that is open to an elite of uniquely creative individuals. These are the Supermen and Superwomen who can capture and hold themselves and carry themselves along. For Heidegger, however, there can be no such easy solution. As soon as we take refuge in crowds, he points out, we can claim no superiority over others, and we have no powers of self-entrainment. There is no freedom in society, as it were, and Heidegger's philosophy is no liberation theology. The best we can hope for is that when we eventually re-engage with society, we can do so on terms that preserve at least some of the serenity which we came to experience. Our bodies preserve the memory of our encounter with Being and this body-memory distances us from the world. Our bodies never quite allow us to forget the outrageous fact that we now are alive and that we one day will die. This is why we maintain a slightly rigid posture even as we are hanging out with *das Man*; we belong to society to be sure, but our bodies never allow us to be perfectly comfortable there.

In this way, a creativity of sorts might be possible after all. Life continuously places us in situations where we face challenges and are forced to make choices (Dewey 1890, pp. 417–419; Joas 1997, pp. 148–167; Ringmar 2016b, pp. 80–82). Although we all find ourselves the members of crowds, our particular place in the crowd is nevertheless our own. And the choices we make, and the actions we embark on, are our own too even if their content is fully socially determined. Between death and the social, we are temporarily free and each situation we encounter, every choice, has the potential to remind us of that fact. We start our life unsure of who we are and where we want to go, but once the choices accumulate over the course of a lifetime a certain path will be traced. We walk into our life, as it were. What we can say in the end is that we knew what we were doing; we were alive, we were awake, and we chose the kind of life which turned out to be our own.

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