

the wild in Kazakhstan

a professor writes to a student about depression



Prof. Ted

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Formatted to read on your phone.

Assel suggests listening to the file on Speechify.com.

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1. Open the file in Adobe Reader, free at adobe.com.
(Open it in the Desktop App, not your browser.)
2. Then, press Ctrl+P (or ⌘P on a Mac).
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4. You can then staple the printed stack in the middle and fold it in half.

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The Wild in Kazakhstan:

A Professor Writes to a Student about Depression

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The Wild in Kazakhstan

A Professor Writes to a Student about Depression

Prof. Ted

Self-published. Free to readers,
free of “increased marketability.”

A heart full of sorrow does not even know itself.

— Abai

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intro

Kazakhstan is a large, sparsely populated country, known for its oil, its ex-Soviet space center, Sci-Hub, and Borat. (Borat, it should be known, looks nothing like an ethnic Kazakh.) It also has the world's 3rd highest suicide rate for the 15-19 age group.* So, when a student Assel (not her real name) asked for advice about depression, the heaviness of the moment was not lost.

I felt grossly unqualified, but I couldn't really refer her elsewhere. The university has psychological services, yet they are overbooked and a student is lucky to land one appointment per semester. Therapy is available off campus, but the rates are beyond a typical Kazakhstani, even more so for a student. I was one of the only resources she could grab onto, though the term 'resource' is used loosely, obviously. (N.B., she was not taking classes from me at the time.)

What follows is a deliberately compact group of emails, mostly unedited, sent between July and October 2025. The emails describe conceptual reframings and practices that have been most helpful to me and are being made public (with Assel's consent) in case they help others. The non-sectarian approach at least gives them a broad reach. Clinical psychologists may say that I lack the right credentials. But I know how to speak honestly. And philosophical reframing is what I do. I am also grateful to several clinicians for their feedback on earlier drafts. So—just maybe—these pages can address a

need that standard resources do not. Maybe a philosophy book can speak to those who feel uncomfortable around clinical psychologists. However, since not every step has been verified by medical research, the book almost certainly has flaws and should be read accordingly.

Also, one crucial topic is omitted: Trauma. Unfortunately, I simply lack the training to speak to this. Relatedly, depression is sometimes a *completely reasonable response* to horrible life-circumstances. If there is abuse, support services are available and can provide real answers, more than any book. Though I hope these pages might still offer you something. And you have my deepest, deepest sympathies. (This paragraph was revised more than any other, but words are inadequate.)

In general, the following is not meant to replace professional counseling or therapy, if the option exists. (I myself wouldn't be here without CBT and DBT.) Similarly, the book is not a way to bypass medications or other medical treatments. The emails omit reference to medication, but this was merely due to lack of access. When available in consultation with a qualified professional, they should at least be considered. (They too can be a matter of life-and-death.)

More broadly, the tips and tricks in this book are not necessarily a cure. I use them but still have depressive episodes. Yet they lessen frequency and intensity, sometimes rather significantly.

I sent Assel one email per week (except number 9, sent midweek) to give each time to percolate. I might suggest going at a similar pace, but hey, do what works best for you. Still, you've probably had the experience where you get some good advice—but then you sorta forget about it. (!) This shows that applying a new idea takes a bit of intention and attention. So if you find anything worthwhile ahead, you might do something to help make it stick. (Maybe write it down and keep it in your pocket or something, just a thought.)

Some may be surprised that climate change is not mentioned in the following. Yet it is often in the background. One might read with that in mind.

Huge thanks to the following for help with this material: Assylzat Amangeldi, Yermukhammed Bek, Aimee Brantseg, MBA, Pierre-Cédric Crouch, PhD, PMHNP-BC, CARN-AP, Gauhar Eltaibek, Sri Priansu Ghose, Sukvinder Grewal, NCPS, James Hutchinson, PhD, Akhat Kambabayev, Sofiya Kovel'skaya, Denise Michaud, George Mikellides, MD, PhD, Zivai Mutokonyi, BACP, Brodie Parent, MD, Kevin Parent, MD, Marc Parent, Maxine Parent, Michael G. Ryan, PhD, Mayia Talipova, Nurmakhan Tastaibek, Ryan Weatherford, PhD, LPC, Eric Wente, EdD, LPC, Aibar Yergazina, Azhar Yergazina, and especially Barbara Zabielski, MPH. Any remaining errors are solely my responsibility.

T.P.
Astana, Kazakhstan

stabilize

1. first things

Dear Assel,

I said I'd send some suggestions, but many things started to come to mind. However, I didn't want to overwhelm you...so the plan is to "ration" them out. (I put a weekly reminder on Google calendar.) This benefits me too; it will force me to say which ideas have been the most important. So, thank you for the opportunity.

First, you've already done the single most important thing. You reached out to someone. Be proud—that takes courage. Connection is vital and no one should face depression alone.

For me, another crucial strategy is what I mentioned yesterday. When I find myself getting upset about "big existential questions," I stop and ask what concrete events in my life have occurred recently. Usually, I wasn't so upset three days earlier. I then realize that something significant happened, something that caused sadness, disappointment, frustration. Experience has shown that dealing with *those* issues (emotionally or in practical terms) is better than getting upset by big questions that may be unanswerable.

Anyway. Before going further, I feel like I should qualify things. When I teach Buddhism, I start with the *Kālāma Sutta*, which is a key passage from the Buddhist scriptures.* The sutta teaches that when trying to figure out what life is all

about, don't rely on something external to yourself for the answers (tradition, religious authorities, your community, etc.). Rather, the answers have to be discovered on your own.

This is not just because independent, critical thinking is valuable. When you find an answer for yourself, it comes alive in you in a way that it wouldn't otherwise (e.g., if you were just reciting what some authority told you). The "living" nature of the answer can be as important as the answer itself.

So, when I send to you various ideas, the Buddha would encourage you not to accept them just because they come from an "elder." Rather, when you yourself realize "these things are true, these things are good, these things are beautiful," that is the point where you should embrace them.

(Paradoxically, that is also something you shouldn't just accept but rather come to discover yourself. Or so they say!)

Accordingly, I am sending you ideas not because I want you to accept them outright, but because they have helped me, and I hope they might help you too. But if they don't resonate, that is ok! I wouldn't want you to accept something that doesn't "come alive" in you.

Until next week,
Ted

P.S. Freewriting on new ideas is one way to see if they fit. This isn't meant to be "homework," but some find it helpful.

2. nihilism

Dear Assel,

Depression makes the “big existential questions” hard to avoid. I mentioned that time is better spent elsewhere; regardless, there’s one thought here that benefitted me. Suppose first—if only for discussion’s sake—that there’s no God, no afterlife, no nothing. Then, it seems like nothing we do ultimately matters. I actually lived inside this worldview for 20 years. But one idea that made it possible was this:

If nothing really matters, then it doesn’t really matter that nothing really matters.

I found this liberating. There didn’t need to be a problem if my life didn’t have a “meaning.” It was up to me to decide—and I decided it wasn’t a problem.

(BTW, the point is not original to me... the earliest, clear expression I can find is near the end of a Thomas Nagel essay.* But while the idea is important, I would not necessarily recommend Nagel to you.)

These days, the thought is no longer central to my outlook. Yet I wanted to mention it sooner rather than later, since it may have saved my life, and most folks will recognize it as reasonable (if they are able to grant for discussion’s sake the bit about no God, no heaven, etc...) Of course, people may

have follow-up questions, but my guess is that these questions usually won't be direct challenges.

Best,
Ted

3. vocation

People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning of life...what we're really seeking...is an experience of being alive. — Joseph Campbell

Dear Assel,

Even if you're ok with life not having a “meaning”, you may still find yourself unmotivated. Once the mental block about “nothing matters” is lifted, that often frees up a natural flow of energy. But not necessarily. In that case, what do you do?

The problem is to find inspiration, something that naturally engages you. This is one place where a therapist can help—but as a back-up plan, you might have a look at Tony Robbins. Barbie [my wife] and I are not exactly keen on the whole “motivational speaker” scene, but this guy is worth trying. Barbie has an audiobook on an old phone you can borrow.* The program may well help uncover what moves you and a vision for your life that draws you in.

Initially, you may be skeptical. After all, if there was a life that you could feel passionate about, wouldn't it be obvious?

Weirdly, the answer is *No*. Many people give up on the life they want before even trying. I'm not saying that you should “follow your dreams” no matter what. Sometimes, dreams come at too high a price. But some may be well within reach—who knows? (It's at least possible to get lucky.) Besides, if the

alternative is a dreary, uninspired existence—or worse—then why not give it a shot? You’re still young...and remember that it’s *normal* for people these days to change careers multiple times. (On their deathbeds, people often regret living too much according to what others wanted, not according to what they wanted.* There’s no universal rule that says you must choose wealth over meaning, or stability over inspiration. Though the reverse rule doesn’t exist either.)

If you want a shortcut to clarity, you might try this video on [how to know your life’s purpose](#).[†] Actually, the video might not reveal your once-and-for-all reason for being. But it can be informative of something.

When you have a sense of vocation and you acquire the opportunity to serve that vocation, worries about the universe fall away. That is a good thing. Your mission is not to find the purpose of the universe in order to live life well. The goal is to live well, which includes not getting too caught up in what the universe’s purposes might be.

Until next time,
Ted

P.S. You might think it is “bourgeois” to expect a line of work that is fulfilling. After all, some people don’t have the opportunities to pursue big dreams; they are lucky to get a job of some sort. But I wouldn’t presume that your life-calling requires landing some big-time job. For many people, it is staying at home to raise children—for others, their vocation is

what they do outside of work. Also, some fulfilling careers are open to many people. I highly recommend the film *Jesus' Son*, about a man in recovery who finds redemption and meaning at his job in a nursing home.

4. at work

Work without love is [a kind of] slavery. — Mother Teresa

Dear Assel,

I have had 3 major depressive episodes. At 16, it was angst about how people seemed fake and egoistic, and how the world is ugly. At 26, it was more about a lack of meaning. At 31, the problem was less abstract...

Briefly: My waking hours were dominated by work, and work is (by definition?!) a hardship. I didn't see how life made sense when it was so tied to work—which is necessary to survive—in order to do more work? I felt the absurdity even though I had pursued my “dream” to study philosophy.

At the time, I think I was especially overworked and underappreciated. Like other times, the thought that “life is absurd” was really just catastrophizing a concrete situation. (I don't mean to minimize or invalidate myself—the diagnosis is meant to be helpful.)

Anyway. The real answer would be to avoid being overworked and underappreciated...and to realize that work does not have to be work. Quite the opposite: Work can be a regular source of stimulation and even pleasure! It can also fill your life with purpose. (Again, I'm not just referring to big-time careers—cf. *Jesus' Son*.)

Even if you're not overworked/underappreciated, sometimes you still need an assist. So you might also take a look at this website on [motivation strategies](#).^{*} I myself return to the site to reignite the spark.

Here's a bonus tip. The next time you are procrastinating, and you think "I don't feel like doing anything," just try it: Don't play computer games, don't scroll on your phone, don't start listening to music—just sit in one spot and do nothing. For me, it takes less than 10 minutes. I get so antsy that I jump at the chance to start doing work. (!)

The trick helps with the hardest part, which is just getting started. Once you are moving, it's not as hard as you anticipated. Rather, work becomes enjoyable if you can get into the state of "flow" (see the book by Csikszentmihalyi[†]). Indeed, writing these emails could be seen as work, as it requires energy, but it is also very rewarding! (Although of course, I need rest on a regular basis: Even if playing basketball is fun, you can't do it all day.) Think also of all the volunteer work that goes into building and rebuilding Wikipedia. Like basketball players, volunteers do the "work" for its intrinsic rewards. Work, when it comes from this mindset, is not a hindrance to your life—it is an enhancement.

Until next time,

Ted

5. taking care

Nutrition, place, climate, recreation... are inconceivably more important than everything one has taken to be important... All problems... have been falsified through and through... because one learned to despise little things, which means the basic concerns of life itself.

— Friedrich Nietzsche

Dear Assel,

Taking care of yourself is also a wiser use of your time, vs. struggling with big questions. Rest and adequate sleep are key, and if you can, get tested for sleep apnea. (Treatment for apnea *immediately* and *profoundly* improved my mood and energy, though it was not a total cure.) Yet try to distinguish rest from “bed rot.” Depression often confuses the two.

It is also easy to fall into addiction. Mine was alcohol. If you are stuck thinking that nothing much matters, then it doesn’t much matter if you get drunk again. If you are currently thinking this way, I won’t dissuade you by saying it’s a mistake. It is a mistake but let me try to say something more.

Alcohol or narcotics is a brilliant short-term solution. (Bertrand Russell once called drunkenness “temporary suicide.”*) That’s why it’s easy to get hooked. But it is not sustainable. You know this already—still, sometimes a person doesn’t really know it until s/he experiences it first-hand. Yet that is the hard way, and I hope you can avoid it.

Addiction also happens because you can easily minimize how much of a problem you have, until it's too late. It creeps up on you—and at some point, you are regularly sabotaging your job or relationships or other things. Also, *be careful*. Getting drunk/drugged can cause spontaneous attempts at suicide.

Even when you know you have a problem, there's a good chance you'll need to fail a few times before quitting sticks.* This isn't to discourage you—on the contrary, it is meant as reassurance if you ever relapse. The fallbacks are often just part of the recovery process. For what it's worth, I wanted to testify that life is better without drugs and alcohol than otherwise. I have been dry now for over 10 years.

My best advice for quitting: Take it one day at a time. This is a cliché for a reason. But because it is clichéd, it is easy to miss what it means.† For me, it meant that when I started craving a drink, I would tell myself “Not today. Maybe tomorrow I'll have a few, maybe I'll go all out. But not today.” You keep this up until sobriety becomes the norm. But you have to really mean it when you say “Maybe tomorrow.” You can't deceive yourself into not drinking. The idea instead is that it's much easier to quit for one day than *forever*...

When I was (attempting) quitting alcohol, I also began running. (Regular exercise can be as effective as the usual antidepressants, at least for mild-to-moderate depression.‡) When people start an exercise routine, the *most common* mistake is that they push themselves too hard. They quickly come to hate it and quit. And then it's even harder to restart.

Fortunately, I knew this—and for my first weeks, I ran (very slowly!) for less than a city block. You get so much credit for getting out there that you don’t need to do more. If you start easy like that, you’ll naturally up your game once you’re ready.

Actually, you don’t even need “exercise”—movement is what’s key. Recently, I learned that dancing to music 5 minutes a day has a huge impact.* Also, a daily 10-minute walk gives you the same kind of benefits.† (Plus, if you schedule walks with a friend, you’ll get a dose of connection too.)

Being active is good also because you want more than one thing going on in your life. One of my therapists compared it to keeping several ping-pong balls afloat in an airstream. If one falls to the floor, you still have other things to keep your mood up, so to speak. Journal, play guitar, play cards at the coffee shop, adopt a dog (2 is better). This also prevents you from getting too attached to any one thing.

I’d also count as “self-care” being in good relationships. A good LTR makes a world of difference.‡ For me, quitting alcohol and running were necessary steps to being ready for that. But there are no easy rules here, and I’m the last person to ask about how to play the dating game.

Until next time,
Ted

P.S. Be generous with the self-compassion, dammit.

6. allowing

Dear Assel,

Another thing that Barbie and I both recommend is dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT). It was developed for people with borderline personality disorder—yet since it's about emotional regulation, it is very relevant to mood disorders too. It is best to have a therapist as a coach, but let me refer you the DBT “skills training manual” which you can read through yourself.*

- Linehan, Marsha (1993). *Skills Training Manual for Treating Borderline Personality Disorder*. Guilford Press.

A central idea from DBT is simply to *accept* negative emotions when they arise. Don't ignore them, don't resist them, just observe them with interest. Of course, it is not good to revel in negativity. But one major source of suffering is our *resistance* to negative emotions. If you can release such resistance and just let the emotions play out, this lessens their intensity and gives them the space to be processed.

The trick is not to resist resistance. (!) One surprisingly quick and effective technique is to find labels for the emotions you are experiencing. This “word search” puts your brain in a state where you are not wallowing, yet you are still attending to the feeling (hence, not trying to avoid it).

On a similar theme, DBT suggests allowing conflicting ideas to be at home in your mind. This may seem odd but let me explain. Sometimes you're pulled in different directions by opposing ideas, and it's not a happy place. I tend to *cogitate vigorously* to solve the tension, to figure out which idea is true and which is not. Instead, DBT recommends allowing both ideas to exist because they are both true, or at least have very important truths in them. Your mind will naturally use what it needs, with less stress involved.

Here are some examples of pairs that seem contradictory, but actually have more truth in them jointly than individually:

1. Barbie is the love of my life—and the pain in my ass. (She says the same about me.)
2. Work is work—and it is the path to fulfillment and self-actualization.
3. Self-care practices are a hassle, and they make life better.
4. People are morally deficient and worthy of love.
5. Life is both horrendous and beautiful at the exact same time.

Because I'm a philosophy professor, I want to sort out the contradictions until it is fully transparent where the truth lies. But in light of DBT, I try to do that only if I find it enjoyable and interesting for its own sake—not if I *need* to find a solution.

Until next time,
Ted

value

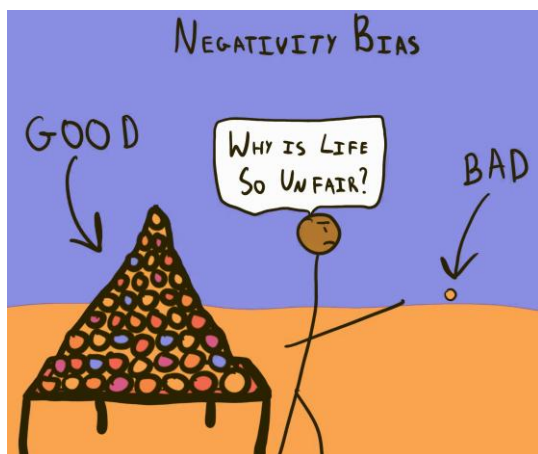
7. debiasing

Dear Assel,

I still haven't talked about the most important idea regarding depression... My first few emails were meant to stop any "negativity hemorrhaging" that may be occurring. But as for long-term solutions, I feel like I first need to "prepare the way," by removing obstacles that might interfere. This and the next email are preparing the way, though hopefully they are still helpful in their own right.

Depression often persuades you that you are *now* perceiving the world correctly, in the midst of your depressed state. To be completely honest, anguish is sometimes an entirely reasonable reaction, and depression can allow you to see some things more clearly. But it can also make you less clear on other things. One well-documented cognitive distortion is where you feel like things will never be different from how they are now.* When in fact, your life in 5 years will be quite different from your life at 26.

My experience is that depression also increases a bias that everyone has to some degree. It's known as the "negativity bias," and it's described well at [this website](#).† I think the first picture on the site captures the essential thing:



versusthemachines / The Decision Lab

I also find the evolutionary explanation illuminating. There's little adaptive advantage in noticing when things are just fine. The real advantage is in focusing on problems (the negative). The site also notes how negativity can be maladaptive, but the overall benefits still make it a trait that is selected for.

One thing I like to do is catch the bias in myself. For example: Does it seem like you always choose the slow lane in the grocery store? It's because when you choose the fast lane, you zoom through and don't even notice. Yet if you're stuck in the slow lane, you're watching other lines go faster, dwelling on how that sucks. The problem commands your attention in a way that non-problems do not. That's true more broadly: Problems command attention, non-problems do not—and so your job, your relationship, your entire life, seem thoroughly problematic. But that is a biased perspective, even if it is evolutionarily advantageous.

Consciousness is a complainer—it is an adaptation designed to focus on problems in a changing environment. It has helped us survive but at an emotional cost.

What to do? Fortunately, we also have the adaptive traits of *learning* and *adjusting* in light of what we learn. So, knowing about the negativity bias, we can condition or train ourselves to be less negative. A big one for me is practicing gratitude. The wallpaper from my laptop serves as a reminder:

To-Do List:

1. Gratitude. Recognize that you are surrounded by wealth.
2. Other stuff.

Barbie hates the word ‘wealth’ and prefers ‘abundance’. I like ‘abundance’ too, but when you’re depressed, it’s often easier just to notice the material wealth around you. Think of the careful construction of your mattress, the luxury of indoor heating, the access to a variety of foods. Also, most everyone on the planet has a smart phone—how different that is from the Middle Ages!

Even so: Beware of “grati-guilt.” Don’t feel *bad* about what you have that others lack... It’s a sign of a good heart, but the feeling itself doesn’t help anyone. It only prevents you from fully embracing or enjoying the good things you have, meaning that part of their value is lost. But don’t feel guilty about feeling guilty either!

My Dad is actually the master of gratitude. I am copying below a prayer that he wrote which I find compelling, even though I may not share his Christian orientation. Besides encouraging gratitude, it reminds us that we are not alone in the world (contrary to what depression tells you). The prayer is entitled "Others"...

Dear God,

*Thank you for all that you have given me but especially
thank you for others.*

Others gave me birth, nurtured, and protected me.

Others gave me and my children an education.

Others came to my aid when I was sick.

*Others have made the clothing on my body and raised
and delivered the food for me and my loved ones.*

Others have given their lives to protect me.

*Others have built my home and provided energy to make
it comfortable.*

*Others have given the gift of music, dance, story, and art
bringing to consciousness the great beauty you have
given to our lives.*

*Others have brought me to Christ and will comfort me
and my family when I die.*

*Others have been kind to me. Help me to be kind to others.
Amen.*

Until next time,
Ted

8. anti-utilitarian

Nietzsche's critique of modern [life]...deserve[s] serious consideration: ever more people seem to realize that their pleasures do not add up to their happiness. — Walter Kaufmann

Dear Assel,

I fear that this email will be overly “intellectual.” But sometimes you need to put the intellect in its place, to allow the emotions to breathe.

“Utilitarian calculations” are when you judge something as good or bad, based on how much positive or negative experiences the thing will cause. For example, suppose you are deciding whether to get pregnant. You might judge that to be good or bad, based on how much positive and negative experiences will result. Having a child may bring a lot of positive experiences—you would have someone to nurture and care for, which gives your life a kind of purpose, and you can also take pleasure in watching the child grow up and develop. But it will bring negative experiences too. At first, you lose a lot of sleep caring for a crying baby, and you lose sleep in subsequent years too, worrying about their safety and well-being.

Anyway, the utilitarian calculation would be that having a child will be good/bad, based solely on the amount of positive

experience it would bring, after subtracting all the negative experiences (or something like that).

Such calculations can be helpful during the decision-making process. But even when you estimate accurately the amounts of pleasure and pain, the final verdict can still be totally unclear. (I recommend [this TED talk](#) by Ruth Chang, which reveals how such calculations can be *radically* unclear and decisions have to be made in an entirely different way.*)

There are other problems. There is an ego-centric tendency to give more weight to one's *own* experiences versus, e.g., the child's. But I want to focus on the assumption that pleasure/pain (for oneself or for anyone else) solely determines what is good or bad. In many cases, this idea might get you the right answer—but sometimes, it significantly misrepresents the value of things. Since the assumption often seems undeniable in a depressed state, I want to caution you about how it can mislead.

Daniel Haybron, a contemporary writer, identifies one crucial limitation:

The most obvious problem with existing hedonistic theories is that they are too inclusive: all sorts of shallow, fleeting pleasures are made to count towards happiness... I enjoy, get pleasure from, a cheeseburger, yet I am patently not happier *thereby*... [Such] pleasures don't reach "deeply" enough... They just don't *get* to us; they flit through consciousness and that's the end of it.[†]

I am vegetarian, but his cheeseburger example is super compelling: A burst of dopamine is one thing, but happiness is another. And a dopamine burst is often *irrelevant* to how happy you are.

The point goes beyond day-to-day things like eating a burger. It extends to things like having a child, being in a relationship, living your life in general. I invite you to think of your heroes, people who (in your opinion) have lived the best sort of life. My guess is that these will not be people who have had the most pleasure and suffered the least. In fact, they are likely to be people who have suffered to an unusual degree. One of my heroes is Nelson Mandela—who was unjustly imprisoned from age 44 to 71. It is hard to imagine having that much of your life deleted. I'm sure the suffering was enormous. And yet, his life is one of the most valuable lives I can think of.

(Was Mandela's life valuable *to him*? It might have been irrational from his perspective to persist in terrible conditions for 27 years... Here is a DBT reply, and the idea is one I will discuss further in later emails: The choice to live may have been both hedonistically irrational and inescapably, tremendously valuable, even from his point of view.)

The limits of utilitarianism are important to recognize. In a depressed state, it is common to make the “utilitarian calculation” that you will experience more suffering than anything else, and that continuing to live therefore has negative value. However, you yourself might sense the negativity bias in this. (Recall the slow lane in the grocery

store.) Also, the utilitarian premise greatly oversimplifies value in this case. It is not as if your life would become valuable if you could just eat candy all the time and never get fat. OK, that might be pretty cool, but as Haybron might say, your life would not become worth living *thereby*. (Conversely, Mandela's suffering for the greater good *adds* meaning to his life, although this is not meant to romanticize suffering.)

Don't get me wrong: Some things are good precisely because they make you feel better. That's the idea with self-care. Yet my point is that in *some* crucial cases, value is not determined simply by pleasure or pain.

So, what determines the value of things in general? I don't have an answer to that. I just wanted to caution you about the utilitarian answer—it is sometimes a cognitive distortion abetted by depression, and a harmful one.*

If you are in a depressed state right now, my words may not resonate. In fact, it is a dangerous moment when the intellect ponders the worth of living. If this triggers suicidal ideation, professionals need to be involved. In an emergency, dial 150 for the KZ hotline. Also, if you can't get seen at the Health and Wellness center, book an appointment with [redacted]. Hopefully, I am just being a worrywart, but you'll forgive me if I am being cautious.

Also, FYI, the next email introduces a totally different angle.

Ted

experience alive

9. biophilia

This seems to me to be one of my most essential steps and advances: I have learned to distinguish the cause of acting from the cause of acting in a particular way... The first kind of cause is a quantum of dammed-up energy that is waiting to be used up somehow, for something, while the second kind is, compared to this energy, something quite insignificant... a little accident in accordance with which this quantum “discharges” itself...a match versus a ton of powder. — Nietzsche

Dear Assel,

I want to start approaching the most important idea that has helped me with depression. But I will need more than one email to explain it.

Let's start with the biological perspective, with the obvious truth that you are a biological organism, shaped by your evolution to be a survivor in your environment. In a previous email, I mentioned how consciousness is an adaptation for detecting problems in a threatening world, how this explains negativity bias, and how practicing gratitude is a corrective. But it also helps to know that your problem-obsessed mind is only a small part of the organism that you are. Granted, it is a very important part—but your prefrontal cortex is just one part of your brain, and there's so much more to you than that.

I'm not just referring to your arms or legs. I'm talking about the entire aggregate of bioenergy running through the body.

That aggregate of energy has a natural, forward momentum. Actually, I want to put things in stronger terms. At a deep level, you are animated by a force that wants to survive and thrive, that wants to win. Your conscious mind is usually unaware of this; it is more focused on the problems in front of you. But the complaining mind itself is animated by an energy aimed at surviving and thriving, even when it is sending you signals that your life is full of problems.

One could call this force “biophilia,” the love of life. I used to be totally mystified how some people claimed to “love life,” as if life were free of its tragedies and moral horrors. They seemed not very bright or self-deceiving (or both), although I envied them. Now I would say: Way, way down in your biological fibers, you too value life, you *unavoidably* value it, whether your conscious mind realizes this or not. How powerful that force is, to overcome all the objections to this life!

You may be thinking: “nice idea, but it is wildly at odds with what I’m feeling...” As always, I do not want to pressure you to think a specific way. But just consider that it is *possible* that there’s more under the hood than you realize. (The next emails will suggest ways to investigate further.)

Let me close with a parable from the *Lotus Sutra*.^{*} (I don’t have it in front of me, so I’m going to reconstruct what I remember.) Rod and Todd were childhood friends, both born into wealth. But as they grew up, life took them down different paths, and they lost touch. Rod went on to have a lovely

family, successful career, and so forth. Todd was shunned by his relatives, and fell into destitution, surviving on scraps for years. One day when Todd was begging on the streets, Rod happened to walk by. He stopped and, recognizing his friend, turned to him with surprise and compassion, asking how he had ended up in this state. Todd told him a sad story, caused by youthful indiscretion and bad luck. When Todd had finished, Rod stammered:

“I don’t understand. Did you forget?”

“Forget what?” replied Todd.

“When we were teenagers,” Rod said, “I wanted to make sure that you would never end up like this. So, I took a needle and thread and sewed a priceless jewel into the seam of your overcoat, so that you would always have enough to protect you from need. You don’t remember?”

Slowly, Todd opened his old, tattered coat and felt around the seam. There was the jewel, hidden all this time.

More to come,

Ted

10. finding it

Intelligence makes clear to us the interrelation of means and ends. But mere thinking cannot give us a sense of the ultimate and fundamental ends. — Albert Einstein

Dear Assel,

As an academic, I am hardly one to criticize the intellect. But a large reason for chronic depression has been identifying too much with the conscious, complaining mind.

The Einstein quote is spot on. You can't grasp the value of things from pure, disinterested neutrality. *Beyond* the intellect is where you experience joy, love, inspiration, will, peace, beauty.* In saying this, I am not trying to foist an optimistic “calculation” for why life is worth living—I am rather testifying that you can *feel* the value of living, in spite of any calculations, outside of any calculations.

A prime directive has been intellectual honesty—that's why “love of life” once seemed foolish. But I have stopped pretending that intellection is my basic mode of being, as if I were some kind of robot. Sure, the intellect can stop you from going off the rails, but living from biological vitality is (ironically) more honest, more true to what you are.

Accordingly, it has helped me to bring this energy increasingly into awareness, to convince the intellect that it is real and that it is powerful.

Consider this: Why do people do things they don't want to do? Filling out government forms is a good example. A natural reply is "well, even though you don't want to do it, you have a stronger desire to fulfill your duties, avoid penalties, etc." Yet in a way, that rings hollow. The *only* desire I feel is to cut and run. And I am not feeling anxious about getting punished or something. That's because I know I will finish eventually, even though it is nothing but onerous. But there lies the puzzle: What is making me do it, especially if I am not actively anxious about consequences?

My dissertation advisor, Bill Lycan, distinguishes "desire proper" from other "pro-attitudes."* Properly speaking, my desire is not to do paperwork—yet I still do it because of a more basic pro-attitude. That pro-attitude is thus STRONGER but HIDDEN. You can see the connection with my previous email.

Another example from William James:[†] You have had the experience where you wake up early on a cold morning, and you really don't want to get up. The bed is warm and snug, the feeling of sleep is still with you, and dealing with the day is unappealing. But: You suddenly find that you *have* gotten up. It happened despite yourself. There you are, standing in the cold instead of burrowing into the blankets. Weird right?

It's the non-conscious, forward momentum. The fact that there is this propulsive force is important to see when you have depression. The distinction between desire proper and other pro-attitudes helps me see it clearly.

Seeing can also amplify it, creating a positive feedback loop. But because it mostly lives outside awareness, it's not as if you can grab a burst of energy whenever you want. Yet there can be a profound effect on consciousness. It's like a whiff of blueberry pie when you enter a coffee shop. It may be very faint yet, instantly, it dramatically changes your world. OH! BLUEBERRY PIE! Or, it is often like a good song in your head. The song isn't "real" and yet it is, and it can make everything feel better, more at ease, even if not utterly orgasmic.

Until next week,
Ted

11. needs practice

Dear Assel,

The advice is to identify less with the calculating, complaining mind. Re-identify with the total aggregate of bioenergy. The intellect will still be there whenever you need it.

Knowing this is one thing, but making it real is another. My depression is like being bad at math. I can do math well enough if I practice regularly. Otherwise, I go back to bumbling. Similarly, I fall into depression unless I intentionally put myself in a different mindset. Dancing, walking, running are totally great for this. Also, my Mom taught me that you sometimes wake up with a good song in your head. Holding onto that song helps start your day well.

But I wanted to mention other practices from non-Western philosophies. Like all self-care, these practices are not necessarily convenient. I've skipped often. But each time, I relearn that they make life better. I now take it "one day at a time."

Lots of people advertise "mindfulness" as a way to disengage the ruminating mind. The term is now a buzzword, and so I dislike using it, but many of the practices *are* beneficial... Attending to the present moment, for example, can instantly bring relief (though it doesn't work for a tragic moment!). In class, I sometimes invite students to pause for 30 seconds and

notice that *right here and right now*, things are pretty good. Even if someone is dealing with a bad breakup outside of class, the moment still contains peace—and even a hint of positivity. (Go ahead, try it.)

Several other mindfulness practices are covered in the DBT skills manual I mentioned earlier. Also, take a look at Thich Nhat Hanh. Just the way he writes is super calming.*

Besides quieting the intellect, the idea also is to reconnect with a natural bioenergy that is always present, underneath all the thoughts. For me, yoga practices have been essential here, especially those from the older, Vedic tradition. (In lieu of body postures, the focus is on breathing exercises, visualizations, and meditation.)

None of this needs to be viewed as “spiritual.” Really. You can instead just see them as routines involving imaginative exercises that are effective in shifting mood. Here’s a simple thought experiment to show how it works. Imagine holding a wedge of freshly-cut lemon. Imagine that you bring it to your mouth and *bite hard*—so that the juice squirts all over in your mouth. Just that thought will likely cause a rush of saliva. The imagination can thus have a real, *physiological* effect, besides a psychological one. Visualization in yoga harnesses this power of the imagination for beneficial effects.

The following, short meditation from Eckhart Tolle illustrates this well.†

Close your eyes and see yourself surrounded by light or immersed in a luminous substance — a sea of consciousness.

Then breathe in that light. Feel that luminous substance filling up your body and making it luminous also.

The light spreads from your chest into your arms down into your hands to the very tips of your fingers. And it spreads into your legs, down to your feet, and to the very tips of your toes. Focus on the luminous feeling that now permeates you.

You are now in your body.

Other meditative practices have been helpful also.* Vipassana meditation is worth trying, and Kavita Maharaj has an excellent [instructional video](#).[§] Caution: Vipassana is not always soothing—it sometimes uncover unpleasant emotions. Yet my experience is that this is ultimately healing.

BTW, when students want to try meditation, I offer this handout for guidance: http://tparent.net/Meditation_advice.pdf. But I am no guru. The advice represents the stage I'm at—yet don't let it stop you from going beyond that.

Namaste,
Ted

12. [nameless]

Dear Assel,

What follows is unorganized...it was lifted from journals and originally not meant to be shared. I wanted to capture the big picture in this last email, but I'm not able to say it better than when I was trying to teach myself.

This life has much suffering (the Buddha). The intellect may ask...why bother? The answer is not some rationally expressible proposition; the answer is not an "answer." If it were, it might not hit you at the time as satisfying—that alone shows the problem is ultimately not intellectual.

It's confusing since the intellect is what flags problems. It's like a smart phone in your head—alerts appear with loud sounds and bright lights, upsetting your natural calm. The phone itself becomes the problem, but you can silence it... Return to the breath. That is where you find peace, and deeper still, an affirmation of life.

Recognize that inspiration and motivation come despite frustration and wasted effort, and regardless of the ultimate fate or meaning of the universe. (Rumination

drags you down.) It takes much less to be motivated than you think. A soccer match is mostly frustration and wasted effort, but people are motivated to play for its own sake—indeed, they enjoy it.

A counter-intuitive fact: Only in the midst of challenges can you truly thrive. Yet it is not just by pursuing your own interests—you must be dedicated to the team to get the most out of soccer. (Flow is activity in an egoless state.) We are naturally social animals, and sociality is a source of motivation. But the approach to all this cannot be self-serving; that undermines the whole structure.*

Since engaging with problems is work, you mistakenly conclude that the best world would be free of problems. But you are a creature forged by evolutionary forces to be a problem-engager. (Unending leisure is hell—see *Reversal of Fortune* [1990 movie]) Besides, your life is mostly NOT suffering. Your day-to-day existence is normally humdrum (neutral), or a mix of good/bad—or flow!

And during a storm, to feel the solidity of your own shoulders is a lifeline. They are good, strong shoulders. They exert a constant power that remains true to your most core desire—that deep down, you *want* to win.

A key goal is to move past the addictive mindset, where life is measured only by pleasure and lack of pain. Instead: Express purpose, express love. Loving parents do not demand payback; they expect the child just to take. And yet they give regardless, freely, gladly. (Youtube videos of parents holding their newborns for the first time.)

Grace—when love of life surges even when suffering dominates, where love of life is clearest. It's like love for a cognitively disabled child. You know very well of the "problems" with her life. Love flows out of you in spite of that...it surges even more.

This kind of love is anti-rational—it gives while willfully refusing to count the cost. "To have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health..." That means: Love even at an indefinitely high price, even if your spouse becomes paralyzed and requires your constant care. Forgiveness 70 × 7. But it is not a discipline—the effort is in *withholding* love (why breaking up is hard, even when necessary). It is the nature of the biological order; it is a wildness embracing the entire planet.



NASA, “Blue Marble” (Eastern Hemisphere)

I shall now ruin the moment and qualify that, if life and love are sacred, they are not the only such things. Safety. Basic dignity. Your vocation. Yes, it can be hard to decide between conflicting values, but I wanted to discourage the simplistic idea that love trumps all.

This now exhausts what little insight I have. I hope something in these emails has helped. I’m not a professional psychologist

which should be kept in mind. And I am not the one to contact in a crisis, as I am spectacularly incompetent at that sort of thing. But if you ever want to talk, feel free to reach out. I'm just on the other side of your email.

My sincere and very best wishes,
Ted

closing reflection

Everything vibrates, aspires, abounding with richness.

— Abraham Isaac Kook

‘Love is the answer’ is often repeated, but what does it mean? This is not about romance. Usually, it concerns humanitarian love, as an antidote to war or other conflict. But there is another kind of love, termed ‘*agape*’ in Greek. The meaning is obscure, but it concerns a feeling of awe, of slight trembling, as when you behold something precious or stare into the limitlessness of the sky. It is the very opposite of despair, and in that sense, it can be an answer to despair.

Amazingly, it is a feeling that you can create in yourself, in a moment of quiet, unhurried calm—when you notice the pulsating life in your body or witness the living world around you. The feeling is magnified as you attend to it.

It can also move you to action. The feeling is then an answer to despair in a further sense. Despair is often fueled by the thought that “there’s no point.” But the awe-inspired feeling can motivate us to act even without an ultimate point in view.

Granted, if I plant a tree, normally I have some goal in mind. Yet the natural state of a living, breathing creature is *activity*. A fish swims just because of that, not because it aims at some ultimate end. Of course, we are more complicated than fish—our actions are goal-directed. But as in a game of soccer, you

can pursue *goal-directed activity for its own sake*, as an expression of your active nature. And it can be effortless, impelled by the awe-infused kind of love.

Despair will protest that action without an ultimate point is absurd; there must be some basic reason for acting at all. Yet recall Joseph Campbell: When people seek the meaning of life, “what we’re really seeking is an experience of being alive.”* The principal reason you seek an ultimate point is that you want something to inspire you, to affirm your engagement with the world. But you can touch that feeling now. It only takes a moment.

postscript

You do not become good by trying to be good, but by finding the goodness that is already within you and allowing that goodness to emerge.

— Eckhart Tolle

Ethics is not discussed much in the preceding. Right intention and right action are part of psychological health, but “morality” can be a turn-off, especially when depressed.

Understandably. Often, “morality” feels like people telling you what to do. Nobody is keen on that, and if you’re generally lacking inspiration, more so. But real morality is not an authoritarian loudspeaker. Real morality is an outpouring of *agape* from a hidden source, underneath all the thoughts. The intellect can be powerful in figuring out what to do. But the authentic desire to do right is prior.

You shouldn’t give me credit—I learned all this from Barbie. Don’t misunderstand: She is not a saint or a goody-goody. I think of her as Punk Rock Barbie. You gotta be punk rock to do what she does, which is go into the jails and talk to women about sex positivity, relationship skills, and reproductive wellness.* She is passionate about her work in Public Health; it is a wild, surging, love of life. My gushing is hopefully not making you retch. But I wanted to give you an example of someone who is profoundly ethical yet not “moralistic.” (I admit, living with someone passionate is not always easy. Yet

the best sort of life will not have the least hardship—same goes with marriage.)

Despair, which can be subtle, makes you forget: You are a wellspring of wild, surging, love. You have witnessed it. Or, if you're having trouble remembering, imagine seeing a child fall badly off a bike. There is zero hesitation—you don't ask yourself "why should I bother?"

Warning: You can end up looking like a fanatic. Helping an injured child is one thing, but breaking the plastic loops on every six-pack and grocery bag is another. *Agape* is not necessarily convenient. Yet these small acts of care become habitual—until what feels difficult is *not* breaking the loops. It is part of a healthy practice to *refuse* to see these acts as insignificant, which ultimately feeds into something energizing rather than taxing.

Einstein once said "morality in our actions can give beauty and dignity to life."* This may sound tinged with despair, insinuating that life is otherwise ugly. But Einstein's point is not defeatist; it is rather that you need not be defeated. You do your part, the good that you can do, and your life exhibits a radiance that it would otherwise lack. Don't go seeking an *argument* for this. We are talking about something fundamental, with more substance than any rational analysis superimposed on it.

On the grand scale, everyday acts of care are only slightly less consequential than anything else you do. It is a slippery slope

to regard them as “small.” At the exact same time, they are *not small at all*. (DBT.) In choosing them, you allow a natural outpouring of *agape*, and affirm that what you do matters, that your life and the lives of others matter, despite any arguments to the contrary. That is your level of devotion, that is reverence, that is humility, that is how the light gets in.

epilogue

Dear Ted,

As of today, 19 of July 2026, I can say that there were good and bad days. But not worse than before. It means that from the first talk we had a whole year has passed. Sometimes it feels like a few months, sometimes like it has been a couple of years. At that first talk, I was both grateful for your honesty and kind listening, yet I was a great deal skeptical. I felt like it wouldn't help. However, after your email this Friday, I thought "damn, actually I unconsciously did those things and it helped." I'm gonna be honest, I haven't done the whole lot, and it felt overwhelming to do the things you proposed in your emails, but some of them I picked up. Hardest of them all was to open the links, cuz depression is not the topic I usually feel like thinking about. And with my adhd, it felt impossible to engage in it. Emails too felt hard to read. What helped me was to copy the text, open a random text reader like Speechify and lie down and listen to them. Some of them I listened to twice, others were hard to listen to even once.

Looking back over the long year that passed, I can say that I started taking little steps, rather than overwhelming myself or criticizing myself for not achieving things I thought I should. I decided to make a 'spiritual retreat' for my own good. I quit my job that I hated, and took a part-time job that does not drain me. I won't say it does not make me self-conscious, but I try to take little steps and be kinder to myself. I used to bottle

my emotions, which, retrospectively, is a very bad way to deal with things. I try to have conversations and arguments with my friends and family in a healthy way. It is hard, but with the right people, in the end, it helps to feel better.

Lastly, I allowed myself to cry. It's still difficult, but I try. What is important to mention, in Kazakhstan, in Kazakh families, if kids cry, they are punished more. I remember several cases where I cried when guests were coming—and my mom said that I'll regret it if I don't smile when guests come. Another time—I went to cry in the bathroom, and my mom opened the door and yelled more at me. It sounds funny right now, but back then it felt like if I cry, I will regret doing so. However, I believe a lot of kids were in worse situations. I was never beaten, yet I wished that they did rather than being hurtful with words. I am grateful that my parents raised me to be a good and kind person and I understand that some things they did was because they were raised in a completely different world. They were part of a nation-wide culture of perfection—a soviet concept of perfection and a Kazakh concept of shame—where you always show a perfect picture of a good family.

Overall, I dedicated this year to just living, I'm not making big plans and decisions. I don't feel quite ready to start something, yet, I stopped feeling like ending it all.

Thank you Ted
With kind regards,
A.

endnotes

p. iv

Abai Qūnanbaiūly is Kazakhstan's national poet-philosopher. The quote is from his (1918). *Qara Sözder (The Book of Words)*. Chapter 5, line 1. The English translation here is more literal than what one sometimes sees.

p. vi

* Based on 2019 data from the World Health Organization: <https://data.who.int/indicators/i/Fo8B4FD/16BBF41>. I excluded some countries from consideration (e.g., Lesotho, Kiribati) since their data was flagged as low quality.

p. 2

* *Kālāma Sutta (Aṅguttara-nikāya, 3.65)*, translated by Soma Thera. <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/soma/wheel008.html>.

p. 4

* Thomas Nagel (1971). The absurd. *Journal of Philosophy* 68, p. 727. But Nagel may have been scooped by Nietzsche; see p. 318 of his (1901/1968). *The Will to Power*. Walter Kaufmann (trans.). Vintage Books.

p. 6

[Epigraph: Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers (1988). *The Power of Myth*. Doubleday, p. 1.]

* Tony Robbins (2000). *Get the Edge—Daily Magic: Your Ritual for Lasting Energy, Happiness, and Success*. Robbins Research Int'l / Guthy-Renker.

p. 7

* Bronnie Ware (2012). *Top Five Regrets of the Dying: A Life Transformed by the Dearly Departing*. Hay House, Inc.

† Adam Leipzig (2013). How to know your life's purpose in 5 minutes. *TEDxMalibu*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vVsXO9brK7M>.

p. 9

[Epigraph: Mother Teresa (1997). *No Greater Love*. Becky Benenate & Joseph Durepos (eds.). New World Library, p. 69.]

p. 10

* Stephen Altrogge (2023). Feeling unmotivated? Learn 8 strategies for when you're feeling stuck. *Freedom*. <https://freedom.to/blog/unmotivated-8-proven-strategies-for-when-youre-feeling-stuck/>.

† Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990). *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. Harper & Row.

p. 11

[Epigraph: Friedrich Nietzsche (1908/1989). *Ecce Homo*. Walter Kaufmann (trans.). Vintage Books, p. 256.]

* Bertrand Russell (1930). *The Conquest of Happiness*. George Allen & Unwin, p. 25.

p. 12

* Barbie adds that some medications (besides Antabuse) are very helpful in treating alcohol use disorder. See: <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2811435>.

† Cf. Geoffrey Day in David Foster Wallace's (1996) *Infinite Jest*. Little, Brown, p. 270. The next email also echoes Day's attitude of gratitude on p. 271. (Thanks to Jim Hutchinson for the pointer.)

* Harvard Health Publishing (2021). Exercise is an all-natural treatment to fight depression. <https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/exercise-is-an-all-natural-treatment-to-fight-depression>.

p. 13

* Melissa Hogenboom (2026). The surprising benefits of a five-minute dance break. *BBC.com* <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20260717-the-surprising-benefits-of-a-five-minute-dance-break>.

[†] Jillian Wilson (2023). This is your body on a 10-minute walk. *HuffPost*. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/10-minute-walk-benefits-google_169405745e4b0fa125e7f489a.

^{*} But let's be realistic: In any LTR, things get hard, very hard, and you start questioning the whole thing. I now think this is normal—and to know that prevents a lot of anxiety. When you're that close to a person, living together for years, it's *easier* to hurt each other, and deeply. Thus, hard times and profound doubt are unavoidable. Barbie and I once went to couples therapy for 4 or 5 sessions, but that much was very helpful. In a good LTR, you can get through the hard times and become better people in the end. And the relationship becomes stronger, no b.s. There is a new trust, knowing that you can survive and come out better. But the point is that crisis occurs even in good cases, and it can be reassuring to know that.

p. 14

^{*} Linehan has published revised versions of this material, but the original version is more compact.

p. 17

^{*} The thought that “things will never get better” is often depression-induced overgeneralization. See: Jaime Herndon (2024). 12 examples of cognitive distortions and how to cope with them. *VeryWellHealth*. <http://verywellhealth.com/cognitive-distortions-5226061>.

[†] Dan Pilat, Sekoul Krastev, & Kira Warje (2021). The negativity bias. *The Decision Lab*. <https://thedecisionlab.com/biases/negativity-bias>. Image credit: versusthemachines / The Decision Lab. Used with permission.

p. 21

[Epigraph: Walter Kaufmann (1974). *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 4th edition. Princeton University Press, p. xvi.]

p. 22

^{*} Ruth Chang (2014). How to make hard choices. *TEDSalon New York*. https://www.ted.com/talks/ruth_chang_how_to_make_hard_choices.

[†] Daniel Haybron (2001). Happiness and pleasure. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 62, pp. 505-506.

p. 24

* Other limits of utilitarianism are seen in some versions of the famous trolley problem; see Philippa Foot (1967). The problem of abortion and the doctrine of double effect. *Oxford Review*: 5: 5-15.

p. 26

[Epigraph: Friedrich Nietzsche (1887/1974). *The Gay Science*. Walter Kaufmann (trans.). Vintage Books, p. 315.]

p. 27

* *The Lotus Sutra*, T. Kubo and A. Yuyama (trans.). https://www.bdk.or.jp/document/dgtl-dl/dBET_To262_LotusSutra_2007.pdf.

p. 29

* Eckhart Tolle (2010). *Practicing the Power of Now*. New World Library, p. 5.

p. 30

* William G. Lycan (2012). Desire considered as a propositional attitude. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 26: 201-215.

[†] William James (1890). *Principles of Psychology*, vol 2. Henry Holt & Co., p. 524.

p. 33

* For starters, try his (2001) *Essential Writings*. Orbis Books.

[†] Eckhart Tolle (2000). *The Power of Now*. New World Library, p. 125.

p. 34

* The serenity prayer is another such practice, though I might note a non-prayer version which just sets an intention in yourself. *May I sustain the serenity to accept what I can't change, the courage to change what I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.*

§ Kavita Maharaj (2009). Unveiling Vipassana meditation: A comprehensive guide to ancient wisdom. *Relax24*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WNmxxbqJMxI>. If you've never meditated before, you might start with her video on "simple" meditation: Kavita Maharaj (2009). Simple meditation for inner peace with Kavita Maharaj. *Relax24*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=scIvvDZDQzI>

p. 36

* This echoes the paradox of hedonism, as per Henry Sidgwick (1872). Pleasure and desire. *The Contemporary Review* 19: 667–669.

p. 40

[Epigraph: This is paraphrasing a longer passage from Kook (1938/1978). *Orot HaKodesh (Lights of Holiness)*. Ben-Zion Bokser (trans.). Paulist Press, p. 223. More literally, the passage reads "the richness of existence...abounding with meaning and the preciousness of vibrant life... And everything aspires, longs, yearns, according to a pattern that is adorned with...beauty"]

p. 41

* Campbell, *op. cit.*

p. 42

[Epigraph: Eckhart Tolle (2005). *A New Earth*. Penguin Books, p. 14.]

* For the record, Barbie has much lived experience in common with the people she serves. She enjoys more privileges now, but for much of her life this was not so.

p. 43

* From a letter of 13 Nov. 1950, quoted in Helen Dukas (ed.) (1981). *Albert Einstein, The Human Side*. Princeton University Press, p. 95.

cheat sheet

- Uncover the truth for yourself. Having said that...

stabilize

- Reach out.
- Avoid big existential questions; consider instead what has recently upset you.
- Annihilate nihilism.
- Admit your vocation.
- Discover work as rewarding.
- Self-care, FFS.
- Non-resistance (DBT).

value

- Understand negativity; practice gratitude.
- Reject strict utilitarianism.

experience alive

- Know that you are biophilia.
- Convince the intellect of this.
- Practice (positive music, yoga, etc.).
- Let goodness radiate from within.

The Wild in Kazakhstan is a compact guide to coping. It was crafted as emails to a depressed student in a former Soviet state, a place where psychological support is scarce and the suicide rate is high. This forced the guidance to be short and immediately usable—distilled to the essentials—designed for when someone can manage only a few pages. (The last page is also a “cheat sheet” to help keep the strategies handy.)

The voice is kind and grounded. Depression is approached humanely, as a medical condition but also a philosophical one. Along with a few practices, it suggests a few conceptual reframings plus reconnecting with “biophilia,” a natural biological vitality—and it does so without sentimentality or dogma. It will benefit students, young adults, and anyone else facing a dark time.



Author bio

Ted is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at Nazarbayev University (ranked 1st in Central Asia and the Caucasus). He earned his Ph.D. from UNC–Chapel Hill, and was previously on the faculty at Duke University, Vanderbilt University, and Virginia Tech. He is the author of *Self-Reflection for the Opaque Mind* (Routledge 2017) and publishes in some of the top journals in his field.

In recent years, he has worked more with students and colleagues navigating depression, informed by his work in philosophical psychology and 35 years of his own lived experience.

Front cover: Ustyurt Nature Reserve, Kazakhstan.

Photographer: Maksat Bisengaziev.

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Photo is cropped. The original is at bit.ly/3JHNYvi.