

Letters to Toby



Inspirational letters to a young baby from people who strive to make the world a better place.

Edited by Ciaran McHale

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This book is available from www.CiaranMcHale.com in various formats, including HTML, PDF and the Canthology “source code”.

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Introduction

There are two kinds of power: (1) power *over* people; and (2) power *to help* people. It is easy to think of examples of the first kind of power, and mainstream society encourages people to seek out that kind of power. Of course, power *over* people is a scarce resource and it has a tendency to corrupt: hence the slogan, “Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely”.

In contrast, the second kind of power—*to help* people—is in abundant supply: almost every individual in the world has the power to help others, often in small ways, and occasionally in bigger ways. Unfortunately, the power to help people is often overlooked. This is a great shame, because some of the most inspiring people in history have been those who have used their power to help others to great effect: for example, Florence Nightingale, Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.

Part-way through this book project, another example of the power to help people made headlines. In 2007, a horse-riding accident had left Claire Lomas paralysed from the chest down. In 2012, a robotic suit enabled her to walk, very slowly, with crutches. So she entered the London City Marathon to raise money for research into spinal injuries. It took her 16 days to complete the 26.2 mile course. That’s a average walking speed of about 1.6 miles (2.6 KM) *per day*. Her unusual journey was reported in the news, touched the hearts of many, and, so far, has raised close to £200,000 for charity.¹ If somebody who is paralysed from the chest down can do something so impressive to help others, then it emphasises that *we all* have the power to help others.

We want our children to grow up knowing that, regardless of how rich or poor they are, and no matter what obstacles they might face in life, they have the power to help others, and for them to be inspired to use that power. So, when our first child, Toby, was born, we asked well-wishers to not send us materialistic gifts, but rather to write Toby a letter explaining how they use their power to make the world a better place—by helping people, animals or the environment.

This anthology is a collection of the letters we have received so far. The request for letters to Toby does not have a deadline. If you read this anthology and decide that you

¹www.google.co.uk/search?as_q=Claire+Lomas+marathon

would like to write a letter, then please do so, and email your letter, with a subject line of “Letter to Toby”, to ciaran_mchale@yahoo.co.uk or biancamchale@yahoo.co.uk. We will update this anthology from time to time, to include additional letters we receive.

Ciaran and Bianca McHale

27 May 2012

Angie Griffiss

Bournemouth: 28 February 2012

1 People Power

Dear Toby,

I only know your Mum and Dad through an internet forum, but when I read about your birth and the lovely idea they had to write a book for you, I had to contribute.

We are Angie and Luke, and we have two children right now, both girls; Grace, who is three and Jude who was born just six weeks before you.

If you want to know a little about us, Angie is a full-time mum and former youth worker, Luke is a theologian (and former youth worker too!) and we are planning to home educate Grace and Jude. We are in the process of converting to Reform Judaism. We live in a terraced two bedroom rented house in Bournemouth and co-sleep with both our girls right now in a huge superking sized bed built by Angie's father. When the time is right we hope that the girls will co-sleep together.

People power is an amazing force (for good and bad) and I hope that the most positive way in which we as parents will change the world is to bring up our children to value others and the environment in which we live.

There are, however, a number of other things we consciously do to try and make the world a better place. We're really grateful to your mum and dad for encouraging us to remember that we do these things and they do make a real difference.

We stop to help. A lot of people will tell you that it is dangerous to help strangers, or that people are just trying to scam you. That's not our experience. We have found that everyone we have stopped to help has appreciated it and hasn't taken advantage of us, however "down-and-out" society perceives them to be. Of course, we take sensible precautions, but it makes a difference to the whole world to care for someone who is struggling in the hope that they too will "pay it forward" (great film, by the way—pester your parents to let you watch it some day!).

We grow stuff. We only have a small garden, but we are filling it with fruit and veg in the hope that we can cut down on how far our food travels. We also think that it's great

for our little ones to get their hands dirty and really understand where their food comes from.

We don't buy new plastic. Sometimes it seems impossible to buy things which aren't made of plastic, but where it is essential for us to have a plastic product we buy it second-hand so as to minimise the effect on the environment. We don't buy any plastic toys at all, even second hand ones, as some plastics leech toxins and we don't want to expose them to our children.

We only buy fair-trade clothes or clothes from charity shops. So many high street clothes are made by small children in poor countries. We are not prepared to dress our children in clothes which cost the education, childhood and sometimes even the lives of other children. That's why our commitment to clothes buying goes beyond second hand. If we can afford to buy fair-trade we do, but in practise those clothes are often out of our budget. Instead we "redeem" clothes from charity shops—if we bought second-hand from places like eBay, the original store would profit, and so would the seller, and the money the seller makes from the sale would probably go back into the high street shops, perpetuating the problem. By buying from charity shops, at least a portion of the original cost goes back into helping to solve problems like poverty.

* * * * *

We are, by no means, perfect. There are lots of areas we know we need to change. We eat meat—free range or organic only, but still meat nevertheless. We own a car—we have matching knee injuries which mean we are unable to cycle, and public transport in our rural area is just not good enough to rely on. We watch too much TV and also use the Internet too much. I hope though, that our positive influences at least match our negative ones—we passionately want a fairer, happier, healthier world.

Live well, little one, and believe that those things you do really do change the world.

Love,

Angie, Luke, Grace and Jude

2 A Challenge I've Set Myself

Dear Toby,

I've embarked on a little project this March—it's a challenge I've set myself, which is to see if it's possible to feed myself on just one pound per day for the whole month.

There's a lot more to it than just saving money (which currently actually isn't much of an issue for me). Some bad food and drink habits are simply not affordable at one pound per day, so I'll have to drop those habits.

Driving to the other side of town to save a few pennies is obviously cheating. As such, as part of the challenge, I'll have to be walking quite a bit more. I might allow myself to gain some "non-cheating" miles by car pooling with a colleague who lives nearby.

To eat for just one pound per day, I'll obviously need to be more concious than usual about waste and about nutrition. I'll need to make a concious effort to eat well, and will need to be cooking from scratch a lot.

In short, I'll be doing a lot of things that seemed to be the norm just a few generations ago.

As I go along, I'll be keeping a diary¹ and try to show how I made that one pound per day stretch far enough to feed me. Hopefully that diary will end up containing knowledge useful to others, and inspire them to give a bit more thought to what they spend—not just because of the money, but because of the bigger picture.

Best,

Marc

¹<http://onepoundperday.wordpress.com/table-of-contents/>

Lucy AitkenRead
London: 2 March 2012

3 Oxfam, Protest Marches and *The Green Parent*

Dear Toby,

I am a friend of your mummy. I met her through the Internet—a wonderful forum called *The Green Parent*.¹ I have only met your mummy a few times face to face but I think she is brilliant! I love the way your mum and dad are so deliberate, through all the tiny and big things, about making this earth that bit more wonderful. You will have such an adventure with parents who are true change makers!

I have a little girl called Ramona, she is 16 months old and is very lovely. Maybe one day you two might be pals. Maybe you might meet one day on a big protest march through the streets of London, calling for our leaders to make more just and fair decisions! Who knows? Ramona and I love going on these protests as we really believe in making sure our leaders do the right thing.

I work for Oxfam half the week, while my husband looks after Ramona. In this job I help people to think about our global brothers and sisters—family across the world who we have never met, but who we have an impact on through the way we live.

Welcome to the world, little man! I hope your journey is one that bursts with hope!

Love,

Lucy and Ramona AitkenRead

¹www.thegreenparent.co.uk/forums/

4 Some Things Are More Important than Earning Lots of Money

Dear Toby,

I know your parents through True Food Co-op,¹ which is somewhere lots of people use their power in big and small ways to make the world a better place.

I gave up a well-paid job to work for True Food because it is something that I believe in, and that is more important than earning lots of money. As well as my paid work, I am a volunteer member of the management committee. Every week I write an email that is sent to all the True Food members. This is an important way I use my power to help people as it encourages all the members to feel part of True Food and gives them information about how they can get more involved and use their own power to help.

Another group I am involved in is an amateur drama group called Progress Theatre.² I think this is also a way of using my power to help as people working together to produce something creative definitely makes the world a better place.

Something I try to do in whatever groups I am involved in is to assume that everyone is trying to do their best. If people disagree with me, even if they upset me, I say to myself that they are doing what they think is right. Even if we are doing amazing things I think if we are aggressive and fall out with people in the process, then we are not really making the world a better place.

I'm sure you will grow up to have lots of skills and use your power wisely.

Love,

Helen Wright

¹www.truefood.coop

²www.progresstheatre.co.uk

5 Become the Change You Want to See in the World

Dear Toby,

I am a friend of your parents. I contribute to making the world a better place in the following ways:

1. I bring up my two children, Jessie-Mae and Sam, in the most loving, kind, compassionate, patient and gentle way that I can. It is my hope that they will live by these same values and share these values with everyone they meet.
2. I work in the local True Food Co-op as a volunteer. I feel it's such a great resource to have, and everyone who works and volunteers there does such a good job so the community really benefits. It's good to contribute to something that benefits so many.
3. I read a lot, meditate, shun the television and try and learn as much as possible. As the saying goes, "if you want to see change in the world, then you yourself become that change", and that is what I try and do!

Lots of love to you all,

Charlie, Jessie-Mae and Sam

Derek Ryan Barncard
San Francisco: 15 March 2012

6 The Power of Music and Movement

Heya there Toby,

I'm connected to your parents through a mutual friend, with whom I am part of a dance community.

In this community and outside it, I use the power of music and movement to bring joy and peace to the hearts of many people. As a DJ and producer of dance music, I make it my mission to lift the spirits of the world and bring us all together in oneness.

“In Every Beat We Are Closer” is the slogan of another group to which I belong, and that is also my creed as a creator of music—to unite dancers in a celebration of life.

I hope that by the time you read this, you'll also be inspired to bring people together in love and light!

Cheers,

Derek

7 Nurturing Noble Qualities

Dear Toby,

Upon your birth, my partner Francesco and I contemplated about the miracle of life and the joys of parenthood. Most importantly, your birth also called to mind our enduring commitment to becoming parents ourselves, as we patiently await the birth of our baby boy in June.

As a first time mum, in the same way as your mummy Bianca, I have embarked on a journey to love our (yet unborn) children with the intention that they will be productive and loving members of society. The more I think about this point, I realise how crucial our lives, examples, thoughts and beliefs will influence our children in their future. This will not be short-term assistance or a loving gesture for another human being, but rather a lifelong journey to nurture all those noble qualities we, as humans, can engender. . . This will be our gift to our children.

Toby, your parents have expressed to me how much they love you and I don't doubt it for a second! Please always be open to speak to them (as I have done), as they will always have an open ear and a willing heart to suggest and/or guide you the best way they know how. Look at their life example and approach to life in general as a guide.

In short, we all look forward to see you thrive in life, apply your talents, love nature and make your mark as an active member of the society we live in. . .

All our love and best wishes,

Olivia Roman and Francesco Macchi

8 Using a Hobby to Make the World a Better Place

Dear Toby,

In various ways, I have been trying, on and off, to make the world a better place since I was a teenager. In this letter, I want to share with you some of the useful lessons I have learned, and show some examples of how I have applied them to my own life.

8.1 Lessons I have Learned

8.1.1 When There Is a Problem, There Is an Opportunity

I have met some people who say, “I would like to go into business for myself, but I cannot think of a product or service to sell”. Likewise, there are people who say, “I would like to do something to make the world a better place, but I can’t think what that something might be”. I have found that the following technique can help to overcome such inaction.

You should try playing a game that I call “When there is a problem, there is an opportunity”. I will illustrate this with an example. Let’s suppose you are travelling on the underground train service in London. Those trains can be extremely noisy, which you might consider to be a problem. So you try to think of different ways to solve that problem. From the top of my head, here are some:

- Perhaps if the wheels of the train were greased, that would reduce the horrible screeching sound they sometimes make.
- Perhaps improving the suspension of the train carriages would reduce noise levels.
- If some noise insulation material was put in the floor, walls and ceiling of the train carriages, then perhaps the carriages would be quieter.
- You could solve the problem for yourself (rather than for everyone on the train) by buying a pair of ear plugs.

You don't have to actually implement any of the ideas you come up with. Rather, the game is just intended to be a mental challenge. I urge you to you get into the habit of playing this game with yourself whenever you feel irritated or frustrated with something annoying. If you do that, then every once in a while—perhaps as often as once per week—you will think of a potential solution that: (1) seems effective and affordable; and (2) would be fun for you to implement. Those are the *opportunities* of the game. They might be small opportunities for you to help yourself, such as using earplugs when travelling on a noisy train. Or they might be bigger opportunities, for example, to start a business, or to make the world a better place.

8.1.2 Use Your Hobby for a Good Cause

Most people have *something* that they are good at, and that they like doing on a regular basis. My advice is to figure out how to use that thing you love doing to benefit a cause you believe in. The singer Ani diFranco echoes this sentiment in her song *IQ* from her *Puddle Dive* album:

I sing sometimes for the war that I fight
'Cause every tool is a weapon—
If you hold it right.

Do you love gardening, sewing or cooking? Or something else? If so, search for a creative way you could use that hobby to benefit a good cause. If you love programming, then you might develop a software application or a website that could be used to help a good cause. If you can find a way to use your hobby to make the world a better place, then making the world a better place will not be a chore for you. Instead, it will be a pleasure.

8.1.3 Inconvenience is the Enemy of Good Intentions

If you cannot find a way to use a hobby to make the world a better place, then you may decide to use a non-hobby (and probably less enjoyable) activity instead to achieve the same goal. However, it is important to know that if you intend to do an activity on an ongoing basis, then you need to find a way to make it enjoyable, or at least ensure it is not inconvenient. For example, consider the following two people who want to maintain a reasonable level of fitness:

- John commutes to work by driving his car. Several evenings per week, he goes to a gym to exercise. Unfortunately, sometimes his planned visits to the gym clash with another activity he wants to do, so either he foregoes some of his regular exercise, or he feels resentful that keeping fit prevents him from doing other, more pleasurable things. Also, John is often tired when he comes home from work, so

finding the energy to go to the gym can feel like a chore. There is a good chance that, sooner or later, John will decide that going to the gym is too inconvenient, and he will stop doing so.

- Fred commutes to work by cycling. Fred’s daily cycling gives him enough of a workout that he does not need to do any other form of exercise (such as by going to a gym) to stay fit. As a result, Fred has more time to relax in the evenings. You might think that cycling would be slower than driving a car, but cyclists tend to not get slowed down much by traffic jams, so Fred finds that commuting by bicycle does not take much longer than commuting by car. As such, Fred does not feel that cycling to work is an inconvenience, so he is likely to continue cycling for many years.

In summary, John’s plan for exercise is somewhat inconvenient, so he is unlikely to stick with it. In contrast, Fred has found a convenient way to incorporate exercise into his daily routine, so he is likely to continue his regular exercise.

The same principle applies to any activity you intend to do to make the world a better place. If the activity is inconvenient or is not enjoyable, then you are likely to view it as a chore and stop doing it. For example:

- It is inconvenient (from a budgeting point of view) to make a large donation to a charity once per year. It is more convenient to set up a direct debit on your bank account so you can make a small donation once per month.
- If you want to volunteer some time for a community organisation, then a good approach is to do a few hours of volunteer work, say, every Wednesday evening, and ensure that during this time you will be working with other volunteers. That way, instead of viewing the volunteer work as a chore, you will make friends with the other volunteers and will view Wednesday evening as the time you get to see those friends.
- If you would like to support a protest march, but find such events to be tedious, then you could arrange to attend the march with a group of friends. That way, you can turn the protest march into an enjoyable day out.

8.1.4 The “Use It or Lose It” Principle

The expression “use it or lose it” is commonly used to refer to physical fitness. If you are fit, but you stop regular physical activity, then your level of fitness will decrease. The same principle also applies to many other things in life. For example, if you become competent at speaking a foreign language, or playing a sport or musical instrument, then you must continue practising, or else your skill level will gradually decrease. Research

suggests that the “use it or lose it” principle also applies to mental health: regularly exercising your mind appears to reduce the chances of a person going senile as they get older.

What many people don’t realise is that the “use it or lose it” principle also applies to making the world a better place. For example, in the 1950s and 1960s, black people in America made significant progress in their campaigning to end racial discrimination. One of the people who became famous because of his successful campaigning was Martin Luther King, Jr. Sadly, he was assassinated in 1968. Many years later, his widow, Coretta Scott King, wrote:

[We] need to remember that the struggle is a never-ending process. Freedom is never really won. That is what we have not taught young people, or older ones for that matter. You do not finally win a state of freedom that is protected forever. It doesn’t work that way.”¹

As you can see, when an oppressed minority successfully campaign to end (or, at least, reduce) their oppression, they cannot stop. Instead, they need to continue being vigilant; otherwise, they run the risk that the oppression will gradually return. Likewise, people who run a successful campaign to prevent environmental destruction of a local resource cannot stop once the campaign is complete: rather, they must continue to be on the lookout for future environmental threats.

My point is this. If you want to make the world a better place by campaigning to end something bad, then you should not adopt an attitude of, “I will contribute to this good cause for a few months until we win a victory, and then retire”. As Coretta Scott King points out, many such victories are only temporary. By all means, take frequent breaks. But realise that your goal of making (and keeping) the world a better place will be much more attainable if you can (somehow) find the stamina to work towards that goal for the rest of your life. If you can use an enjoyable hobby in your work to make the world a better place, then you may find you are having so much fun that you will never run out of stamina.

8.2 My Contribution to Making the World a Better Place

It took me many years to figure out how I could contribute effectively to making the world a better place. When I was in university, I tried to do activist work for some good causes, but I wasn’t very good at it. By the time I left university, I was suffering from burnout, so I stopped engaging in activism, though I continued to help by donating money to good causes.

¹The quotation is from the preface in the 1993 edition of the book, *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.* by Coretta Scott King.

When I left university, I focussed on my career for about a decade: I worked in the consultancy and training department of a software company. In hindsight, focussing on my work turned out to be for the best, because it enabled me to develop some skills that, eventually, I realised I could use to help make the world a better place. What were those skills?

- One skill is programming. Many people don't think of programming as being a skill relevant to activism. However, being able to program makes it possible to write software that can enhance the productivity of people, including the productivity of activists.
- Another skill is the ability to learn something complex, and then find simpler ways to explain it to other people. One way activists can bring about change is to educate members of the public about an issue, so that the public can change their behaviour or pressurise politicians into making nationwide changes. The ability to explain complex issues in a simple way is a valuable skill for this form of activism.

Playing the “When there is a problem, there is an opportunity” game enabled me to identify some ways in which I could use the above skills to benefit good causes. I don't want to bore you with a list of all the projects I have worked on, so instead I will focus on just two.

8.2.1 The Skills You Need to Change the World Training Course

Unfortunately, many people who want to make the world a better place lack the skills required to bring about change. This is hardly surprising, since such skills are rarely taught in schools or universities.

“No one had ever suggested to me how to go about removing the evils of racial prejudice, and I had to learn by trial and error.”

— Nelson Mandela

Some of the skills needed for changing the world can be found in books. However, the useful information is fragmented across a great many books.

I decided to read lots of books that I thought might provide insights into how to effect change, and then write a training course that summarised what I had learned. Many of the books I read were biographies of activists and entrepreneurs, but I also read some books about business and behavioural psychology. Occasionally, I rented or bought DVDs that I thought might be relevant.

When I started this project, I estimated it would take me about six months (working on it in my spare time) to complete. Actually, it took me four years. When the course

was finished, I made it freely available from my website.² My intention is that a person who wants to make the world a better place, but who lacks some of the skills required to do so, can read the training course in, say, a day, to gain an overview of relevant skills, and then read some of the books in the annotated bibliography if they want more details about a particular topic.

8.2.2 Canthology

An *anthology* is a collection of literature, typically written by different authors. For example, a textbook used in an English literature course might be an anthology of poetry or short stories. The collection of letters you are currently reading is another example of an anthology.

From a typesetting point of view, an anthology is “just a book”, but with two additional complications. First the name of the author of each piece of work—and perhaps some information about the author, such as age, occupation or nationality—should appear near the chapter title. Second, the author’s name should appear in the table of contents alongside the title of the author’s chapter. Publishing companies employ professional typesetters who are able to handle such complexities in laying out the pages of a book. However, it is becoming increasingly common for authors to self-publish their work. Such authors may lack the skills required to typeset an anthology using a word processor. To bridge this skills gap, I decided to write an application called *Canthology*³—the name is an abbreviation of “create anthology”—that makes it simple to create a professional-looking anthology.

You may be wondering, “How is Canthology relevant to making the world a better place?” The answer is that non-fiction anthologies are often created as a way to educate people about a topic. For example:

- Activists for a particular issue might create an anthology of articles that explain their viewpoint. They could use this as a way to educate the public.
- Members of an oppressed minority might write an anthology of personal accounts. This could serve two purposes. First, to educate people in mainstream society about the minority group, and thus reduce prejudice. Second, to help isolated members of the minority group feel, “I am not the only one”.
- People who have recovered from a life-threatening illness or have been through a stressful time—perhaps divorce, bereavement, redundancy, or recovery from an addiction—might write an anthology of personal accounts. This could provide inspiration and useful advice for others who find themselves in a similar situation.

²www.ciaranmchale.com/training-courses.html#training-skills

³www.canthology.org

8.2.3 How I Applied The Lessons I learned

The two skills that I mentioned earlier—programming and the ability to explain a complex topic in a simple way—are not *just* skills of mine: they are also my hobbies. This is important because it means I obtain great satisfaction when I can use my hobbies in a project that has the potential to help make the world a better place. It would not have been possible for me to invest years of effort to research and write the *Skills You Need to Change the World* training course or the months of effort to develop Canthology if those projects had been tedious chores instead of enjoyable hobbies.

The main piece of equipment I need to work on my hobbies is a laptop computer, and such computers are small enough and light enough for me to carry one with me almost everywhere I go. For example, when I am commuting to work on a train, I can use the commuting time to work on my hobbies. Whenever a train is delayed, most commuters complain that they will get to their destination late, but I think, “Great, this gives me extra time to work on my hobby”. My career as a consultant meant that I travelled a lot on business. Staying in hotel rooms can be pretty boring, but I often entertained myself in the evenings and weekends by using my laptop to work on my hobbies. In such ways, my efforts to make the world a better place have not been an inconvenience for me. Instead, they have fitted into my daily life.

Occasionally, I have changed my daily life to free up more time to work on my hobbies. For example, part-way through researching and writing the *Skills You Need to Change the World* training course, I decided to give up watching television, so I could devote more time to the training course. In doing so, I found that I obtained much more satisfaction and enjoyment from reading biographies of people who have lead fascinating and inspiring lives, than I obtained from watching television programs. To an outsider, my giving up watching television might seem like a sacrifice. But, in reality, I was just replacing one pastime with a more enjoyable one.

* * * * *

That brings me to the end of my long letter. There’s just one last thing: don’t ever forget that your mother and I love you.

Love,

Your father

9 Overcoming Fear

Dearest Toby,

Jan and I wish you a very happy and enjoyable life, full of fun and joy, and to always turn to your supportive circle to help you whenever you meet challenges in life.

When I was a little girl, my mother told me about the many challenging situations she faced and how she overcame her fears.

- One that stood out the most for me was how she managed to walk alone through a forest in Russia late at night hoping that she wouldn't get lost and attract the wolves and bears living there.
- Then when she was in Kenya, Africa, for six years, she and her friend shared a small mud hut. She told me how hard it was to sleep when lions prowled around their village, hoping they wouldn't jump up onto their straw roofs and maybe find a way into their huts.

Over the years, I have learnt a lot about fear and the many ways to stay calm when I'm challenged, so that I can think clearly and so decide the best course of action.

Last week, I was glad to help my little granddaughter, Isis, who is four years old and very frightened of our big black dog, Smithy, who is much bigger and stronger than she is.

If he came close to her and she wanted to cry but tried not to, her whole body trembled as she tried to work out what to do, hoping someone will rescue her. So I taught her to blow her breath out as soon as she started to feel uncomfortable. She learnt this very quickly and soon she was blowing out her breath just as if she was blowing out a candle every time she felt threatened, and soon she was able to continue colouring her beautiful drawings, and then felt happy to run and play, no longer wondering where Smithy was and whether he might come over to her. Smithy was able to feel calm and secure too, as he felt everyone around him was calm and relaxed, so he just went to sleep.

So dearest Toby, know how very much you are loved by your wonderful parents, family and friends; how powerful you are; and to never give your power away. One of

my biggest lessons has been that as soon as we believe our fears, we start to give our power away.

Your dearest friend,

Tess Swiestowski

Hillary Rettig
Boston, MA: 11 April, 2012

10 Generosity, Compassion and Productivity

Dear Toby,

Greetings from Boston, MA, and welcome to the world! Your parents have asked me to write a letter to you on the momentous occasion of your birth.

I don't know your father very well, but he is a very special person to me. After my first book, *The Lifelong Activist*,¹ was published, he wrote to me saying that he liked it, and also included a detailed list of grammatical and other errors he had spotted, to help me with my second edition. It was a generous gift of his time. And when I published my second book, *The 7 Secrets of the Prolific*,² your father was the very first person to order it—just a few moments after I sent out the announcement! True, he was on British time, and thus had a head start on the Americans who were still asleep. But it was still a very meaningful and encouraging thing he did.

So I know your father to be very intelligent and caring. And although I don't know your mother at all, I'm sure she is an equally special person. And this project they came up with of having friends write you a letter may be the most wonderful way possible to welcome any child into the world. Already so many people know you and care about you!

I think it's appropriate that I share with you some of the important things I've learned during my own years on the planet. I have had a pretty diverse career, with some ups and some downs, and my personal life has also had its ups and downs. However, I find myself, at age 53, in a very satisfying place. In particular, my professional life is very gratifying. I help people overcome procrastination, underproductivity, and underperformance. It is a relatively unusual specialty, and a very important one, and I am very good at it. It is also immensely illuminating.

The most important things I have learned is that underproductivity or underachievement *always* has a cause (or causes), and the cause is *always* valid. Always. 100%. No exceptions. Sooner or later, you will be underproductive or will otherwise disap-

¹www.amazon.com/The-Lifelong-Activist-Change-Without/dp/1590560906/

²www.amazon.com/The-Secrets-Prolific-Procrastination-Perfectionism/dp/098364540X/

point yourself—it happens to all of us. An important key to being happy, effective, and successful is that, when that happens, you not waste time bashing yourself or putting yourself down. Just work on characterizing and resolving the root problems, and things will clear up probably more quickly than you can imagine.

Try not to do this important work alone, but in the company of smart and compassionate friends, family, and other supporters. And be there for them, not just because it's the right thing to do, but because helping others is the best way to foster your own growth and healing.

Beyond that, the two values that I most commend to you are generosity and compassion.

Generosity feels wonderful, and of course it does wonderful things for others. In my life I've given away lots of free advice and help, and lots of money to individuals and causes. I've also given away my home (to foster children and foster animals), and a kidney. (Your Dad suggested that I send my article on that experience as this letter, but I trust in the enduring power of the Internet—as well as your own inquisitiveness—and believe that when you're ready to read the article it will be out there and you'll be able to easily find it.) I've also given away lots of love. Often that love was returned, but sometimes it wasn't, which was painful. But as Billy Joel sings in *The Longest Time*, “I have been a fool for lesser things.” I believe it is always worth taking a chance for love.

I see people who are not generous and their lives seem to me to be cramped and constrained. They're always weighing and measuring—money, time, favors, feelings—and they're also always hoarding (the same). The result may be relatively comfortable and safe, and possibly even happy to a degree, but they are capable of so much more—and in many cases they know it and are bitter.

As for compassion. . . the Greek philosopher Philo of Alexandria famously said, “Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle.” And Graham Greene, in one of his novels, says that everyone is less happy than he or she seems. The biggest impact you can have is to be compassionate on as wide a scale as possible—and I beg you not to forget the non-human animals in your efforts. Unfortunately, we are all victimized by the reality that we must compete for scarce resources and otherwise live at each other's expense. In light of all that, I believe humanity's greatest achievements will be veganism and the related ethics of ahimsa (doing no harm) and nonviolence. I urge you to explore all of these and adopt them as your personal credo.

Also, in your life, demand generosity and compassion from those around you, and never settle for anything less.

It's an amazing thing your Dad did, to generously and compassionately put in time to help me improve my books when he didn't know me at all. It was also incredible of your parents to ask me to participate in this most meaningful event in their lives. As a result of their generosity and compassion, I feel a connection with you right now. It may be that, as you grow up, you will want to reach out to me. I urge you to do so, because I

will be here for you.

Yours in peace, love, and freedom,

Hillary Rettig

11 A împărtăși, a zâmbi și a accepta

Dragă Toby,

Astăzi este o zi specială pentru tine din mai multe motive. Cel mai important este că îți vei cunoaște bunicul, tatăl mamei tale. De asemenea, astăzi inaugurezi prima ta vizită în România, țara natală a mamei tale și totodată, astăzi ai avut primul tău zbor cu avionul. Cam multe lucruri noi pentru o zi, nu?

Se spune că e foarte important și sănătos din punct de vedere mental să faci un lucru nou o dată pe săptămână, cum ar fi să mănânci o mâncare pe care nu ai mai încercat-o niciodată, să vizitezi un loc nou sau, de ce nu, să sari cu parașuta ori să faci bungee-jumping. Poți privi această simplă practică ca pe un joc care aduce cu sine dezvoltare cognitivă, flexibilitate în gândire și descărcare de endorfine care protejează împotriva tulburărilor psihologice la vârsta adultă, iar într-un singur cuvânt așa zice că aduce multă distracție.

Mă bucură faptul că de mic ai oportunitatea să îndeplinești această practică simplă și deosebit de utilă, bineînțeles prin intermediul părinților tăi, care apropo, pe lângă iubirea lor pentru tine care nu are cum să fie altfel decât necondiționată, sunt niște persoane deosebite care sunt convinsă că îți vor oferi ghidaj optim spre echilibrul necesar unei dezvoltări armonioase în devenirea ta ca adult.

Eu am avut multe de învățat de la ei și sunt convinsă că încă mai am, dar așa vrea să îți spun cum i-am cunoscut. Când aveam vârsta de 11 anișori eram în clasa a cincea. Prima limbă străină la școală a fost limba franceză și am început să o studiez în clasa a doua. Ei bine, din clasa a cincea s-a introdus în programa școlară și a doua limbă străină, și anume limba engleză. Și acum vizualizez în minte dialogul de trei sfert de pagină dintre Tom și Jerry (o pisică și un șoricel, personaje dintr-un desen animat cu care am crescut eu), care a fost conținutul primei lecții de engleză. Atât de încântată eram de limba engleză încât acasă am recitat acel dialog până l-am memorat fără să vreau. Dar pe lângă acest lucru, eram încântată de acea profesoară tânără, drăguță și caldă care a scris pe tablă dialogul, și care nu era alta decât, ghicește! Mama ta! Da, așa am întâlnit-o pe mama ta, care atunci avea cam 23 de ani după calculele mele. Încântarea mea legată de limba engleză ne-a apropiat deoarece eram dornică să învăț mai repede și mai mult. Și atunci am rugat-

o să îmi dea lecții în particular, iar mama ta în fiecare sâmbătă venea la mine acasă și mă învăța din ce în ce mai multe și așa am devenit prietene, mai ales că descoperisem că familiile noastre se cunoașteau și că mamele noastre au învățat împreună la aceeași școală.

Însă timpul a trecut și mama ta a plecat în Anglia. O vreme am ținut legătura, Bianca mi-a trimis scrisori cu exerciții de gramatică, felicitări de ziua mea, dar și un telefon care a însemnat foarte mult pentru mine, în ziua în care a murit tatăl meu. Deși era o legătură specială, cumva s-a întrerupt și timp de câțiva ani nu am știut nimic una de cealaltă, până în decembrie 2008 când am regăsit-o prin intermediul unchiului tău, fratele mamei tale. Am fost foarte bucuroasă când l-am întâlnit pe Nicu pe internet printr-o rețea de socializare. Am știut că prin el voi afla vești despre mama ta, și așa a și fost! Dar în cele din urmă am început să petrec mai mult timp vorbind cu el decât cu mama ta și după cum poți anticipa, acum Nicu este iubitul meu și sper că într-o zi va deveni soțul meu și tatăl copiilor noștri. Despre tatăl tău pot să îți spun că este un om extraordinar! L-am întâlnit de 4 ori până acum pentru că de 4 ori m-a primit în casa lui și de fiecare dată când am plecat mi-a spus să mă reîntorc cu drag. Într-adevăr este un om deosebit pe care îl admir, îl apreciez și îi port respect. Dar acum să revin la motivul original al acestei scrisori, ceea ce fac eu pentru ca lumea să devină un loc mai bun sau cel puțin ceea ce credeam că o să fac are la bază dorința mea de a ajuta oamenii aflați în suferință. Studiind psihologia clinică, un domeniu care necesită pregătire permanentă, am considerat că îmi va lua mulți ani până să fiu pregătită riguros pentru a contribui și eu la a face o lume mai bună prin punerea aptitudinilor și competențelor mele în serviciul celor care au nevoie de ajutor și suport datorită condițiilor psihologice mai mult sau mai puțin severe cu care se confruntă. Și totuși, pe această cale părinții tăi m-au făcut să îmi analizez mai mult comportamentul în această direcție, de a face lumea un loc mai bun, și am descoperit că de fapt deja fac câteva lucruri în acest sens. Și aș vrea să le mulțumesc deoarece fără ideea lor de a-ți scrie această scrisoare, nu conștientizăm că și lucrurile mărunte pot avea greutate mare.

- Mi-am dat seama că îmi place să împărtășesc! Prin împărtășire pot dărui zilnic. Ce pot dărui prin împărtășire? Orice! Experiențe, sfaturi, cunoștințe, păreri, opinii, un cântec ce poate înmuia suflete sau un film din care am învățat ceva, o carte al cărei conținut poate schimba decizia sau alegerea pe care le facem mereu în viață, pentru că până la urmă, viața asta este, o sumă de alegeri. Prin urmare, o cale ușoară și la îndemână de a face lumea un loc mai bun este de a împărtăși cu cei dragi, cu cei apropiați, cu tineri sau cu vârstnici, cu străini sau cu necuvântătoare, nu contează cu cine, important e să dăruiești. De exemplu, mie îmi place să împărtășesc înțelepciunea dăruită de vârstnici care mereu devine o sursă de motivație. De la ei am învățat că dacă trăiesc corect și cinstit, când voi ajunge la bătrânețe mă voi putea bucura încă o dată de viața mea. Și tot de la ei știu că la bătrânețe voi avea

mai multe regrete pentru ceea ce nu am făcut, decât pentru ceva ce am făcut. În final, regretăm doar șansele pe care le-am ratat, relațiile de care ne-a fost frică să le avem și deciziile pentru care am așteptat prea mult timp ca să le luăm. Asta regretăm, și nu greșelile omenești care apar în devenirea oricărui om. De la vârstnici am învățat să împărtășesc, să transmit mai departe cunoștințele mele așa cum fac și ei cu înțelepciunea lor, pentru că doar așa, spun ei, putem cunoaște nemurirea.

- O altă modalitate de a contribui la o lume mai bună, extrem de simplă, dar în același timp naturală, fără nici un fel de costuri și cu beneficii maxime, este surâsul. Da! Un surâs, un zâmbet adresat cuiva automat stimulează un alt zâmbet ca răspuns, de aceea beneficiul este maxim pentru că de fiecare dată când zâmbești practic îți zâmbești ție. Și toată lumea știe că un zâmbet nu costă nimic, dar valorează neprețuit! Așa că, de ce să nu îl folosim mai des? Prietenii mi-au spus că mereu sunt cu zâmbetul pe buze și că eman bucurie ceea ce le transmite și lor bunădispoziție. Astfel am înțeles că atunci când zâmbesc cuiva mai mult ca sigur îmi va întoarce zâmbetul și în definitiv, sunt două persoane cărora le comunic bucuria: persoana căreia i-am zâmbit și eu, pentru că aproape orice surâs este produsul unui alt surâs. Cel mai probabil așa mi-a fost întărit și întreținut comportamentul de a zâmbi, pentru că este un fel de cerc de recompense în care un zâmbet îl provoacă pe celălalt și tot așa. Practic, zâmbetul este un fel de “terapie gratuită” pentru că este o unealtă deosebit de valoroasă cu care putem deschide suflete îndurerate sau le putem înduioșa pe cele împietrite. Totodată, poate fi considerat și un fel de “terapie autoadministrată”, deoarece se spune că atunci când suntem triști sau într-o dispoziție mai puțin bună e indicat să mimăm zâmbete cu mușchii feței, întrucât nervii legați de mușchii feței activează neuronii ce transmit creierului un semnal care codează bunădispoziție, putând astfel să ne influențăm într-o oarecare măsură starea de moment și să fim mai puțin triști. Sper că te-am convins de puterea pe care o poate avea un gest atât de simplu și necostisitor, precum un zâmbet!
- Acceptarea. E o punte care leagă un impas de firescul ce urmează. Deseori nevrând să acceptăm că unele lucruri se întâmplă altfel decât vrem noi, sau că unele lucruri nu mai pot fi schimbate, nu facem decât să ne împotmolim și să pierdem timp, în loc să trecem peste și să mergem mai departe. Încă lucrez la acceptare, încă învăț să accept și să mă accept. Dar de când am început să privesc cu alți ochi lucrurile și să accept mai ușor că în viață se întâmplă și lucruri mai puțin plăcute și că nu pot avea control ca lucrurile să se întâmple mereu așa cum îmi doresc eu, am descoperit că înaintez, că nu mai bat pasul pe loc așa cum se întâmpla înainte când nu mă gândeam la opțiunea de a accepta. Cum contribuie acceptarea la o lume mai bună? La fel de simplu ca și celelalte modalități! O folosesc ca pe un îndemn pentru toate persoanele care îmi cer sfatul sau părerea atunci când se află într-un impas, iar ele de obicei își schimbă perspectiva văzând că totuși

există alternative atunci când credeau că nu mai au cale de ieșire și se produce acel declin care declanșează și motivează găsirea altor soluții. Nu funcționează mereu cu toată lumea și cel mai puțin cu persoanele încăpățânate, dar și cu ele sunt șanse dacă reușești să le lași fără argumente.

Pe scurt, împărtășesc, zâmbesc și accept, așa contribui la o lume mai bună! Sunt lucruri ce denotă simplitate, dar care ascund în ele greutate în ceea ce privește efectele asupra oamenilor, având o importanță deosebită în relațiile interpersonale. Așa că dragul meu nepoțel, nu-mi rămâne decât să îți spun bun venit în această lume și să îți urez să descoperi de-a lungul vieții drumuri nebatătorite pe care să pășești cu zâmbetul pe buze (astfel pașii îți vor fi animați), să accepți că drumul ales de tine nu va mulțumi pe toată lumea (astfel îți vei putea continua drumul ales) și să împărtășești tot ceea ce vei întâlni și vei cunoaște în călătoria ta (astfel vei deveni nemuritor)!

Cu multă dragoste,

mătușica ta Gaby

P.S. Zâmbetul tău topitor deja a înduișat multe suflete!

12 Sharing, Smiling and Acceptance (English Translation)

Dear Toby,

Today is a special day for you, for several reasons. The most important is that you will meet your maternal grandfather. Also, today you have started your first visit to Romania, your mother's native country. And finally, today you travelled for the first time in an aeroplane. That's a few too many new things for one day, don't you think?

It's been said it's important and good for one's mental health to try something new once per week. For example, eat some food you haven't tried before; visit a new place; or why not take a parachute jump, or do bungee jumping? You can view this as a game that brings with it cognitive development, flexibility in thinking, and a release of endorphins, which protects against stress in adulthood. Finally, I would say it is very enjoyable.

I'm glad that from a young age you have the opportunity to do this simple and useful practice—with your parents' help, of course. By the way, your parents are very special people who, besides their unconditional love for you, will offer you excellent guidance towards the necessary balance for a harmonious development as you grow up.

I have learned many things from your parents, and I'm sure I still have loads more to learn, but I'd like to tell you how I met them. When I was eleven years old, I was in fifth grade in school. The first foreign language taught in school was French, and I had started studying it in the second grade. From the fifth grade, a second foreign language, English, was added to the school curriculum. Even now, I can visualise the three-quarters' page conversation between Tom and Jerry (cat and mouse characters from a children's cartoon I had grown up with), and that was the first English lesson. I was so happy with the English language that, at home, I re-read that conversation until I had memorised it completely. But aside from that, I was also very happy with the nice and warm young teacher who wrote this dialogue on the blackboard, and who was no other than... guess! Your mother! Yes, this is how I met your mother, who was around 23-years-old, according to my calculations. My love of English brought us together, because I was eager to learn more English at a faster rate. And then I asked her to give me private

tuition, and your mother came every Saturday to my house, and she taught me more and more. In this way, we became friends—even more so when we discovered that our families knew each other, and our mothers had attended the same school.

Time passed and your mother went to England. For a while, we kept in touch. Bianca wrote letters to me in which she included grammar exercises. She also sent me birthday cards. And she telephoned me on the day my father died, which meant a lot to me. Even though we had a special link, somehow we lost touch, and for a few years we didn't know anything about each other. Then in December 2008, I found her again through your uncle, your mother's brother. I was very happy when I met Nick through a socialising network. I knew that through him I could obtain news about your mother, and that is what happened. But in the end, I started to spend more time talking to him than talking to your mother, and now, as you can anticipate, Nick became my lover, and I hope one day will become my husband and the father of our children. About your father, I can tell you he is an extraordinary man! I have met him four times so far, because he has received me in his house four times, and each time he has affectionately asked me to return. Indeed, he is a special man, whom I admire, appreciate and respect.

But now let's return to the original purpose of this letter. What do I do to help make this world a better place? Or at least what do I hope to do, which is based on my wish to help people in distress? Studying clinical psychology, a field which requires continual study, I consider it will take me many years to become rigorously prepared to contribute to making the world a better place by putting my aptitudes and skills to use in the service of those who need help and support due to their mental health problems. And yet, through writing this letter, your parents have helped me analyse my behaviour a bit more in this direction to make the world a better place, and I discovered that, actually, I already do a few things in this respect. I would like to thank them, because without their idea of writing a letter to you, I wouldn't have realised that even small things can have a big impact.

- I realised that I like to share. Through sharing, I can give daily. What can I give through sharing? Anything. My experience, advice, knowledge, viewpoint, opinion, a song that can warm hearts, or a film from which I have learned something, a book that can change decisions or choices we make in life, because in the end, life is a sum of choices. Therefore, an easy and convenient way to make the world a better place is to share with loved ones, with close friends, with young and old, with strangers, or with animals. It doesn't matter with whom. What's important is to give unselfishly. For example, I like sharing the wisdom given by the elderly, which always becomes a source of motivation. From them, I learned that if I live my life correctly and honestly, then when I grow old, I will enjoy my life once again. And also from them, I know that when I am old, I will have more regrets for things I haven't done than for things that I have done. Finally, we regret only

the opportunities that we missed, the relationships we were afraid to have, and the decisions that we postponed for too long. We regret these, and not the human mistakes that happen to everyone. From the elderly, I have learned to share and to pass on my knowledge, the way they pass on their wisdom. Because only in this way, they say, can we reach eternal life.

- Another way to contribute towards making the world a better place—which is very simple, natural and without cost but with maximum benefit—is to smile! Yes, a smile, when given to someone, automatically stimulates another smile in response. Because of this, the benefit is maximum: every time you smile, practically you smile to yourself. And everybody knows that a smile doesn't cost anything, but is very valuable. So why not use it more often? My friends tell me that I smile all the time, and that I radiate happiness, which puts them in a good mood. In this way, I realise that when I smile to someone, almost certainly that person will return the smile, and definitely there are two people to whom I communicate happiness: the person to whom I smiled, and myself, because almost every smile is the product of another smile. Almost certainly, this is how my habit of smiling has grown stronger. Because it is a kind of circular reward in which a smile provokes another one, and so on. Practically, a smile is a kind of “free therapy”, because it is a valuable tool with which we open distressed hearts, or we can arouse emotions in those who had become unfeeling. At the same time, it can be considered also a kind of self-therapy, because it's been said that when we are sad or in less than a good mood, it's best to mime smiles with the muscles of our face because the nerves linked to the muscles of the face activate neurons that transmit a signal to the brain that puts us in a good mood. In this way, we can influence our momentary mood and we can be less sad. I hope I have convinced you of the power that is inherent in a gesture as simple and free as a smile.
- Acceptance. It's a bridge that links a dilemma to the normality that follows. Often, not wanting to accept that some things happen differently than we want them to, or that some things cannot be changed, we do nothing except get stuck and lose time, instead of crossing over and going further. I'm still working on acceptance. I'm still learning to accept others and to accept myself. But since I've started to look at things with different eyes and to more easily accept that in life some not-so-nice things happen too, and that we cannot control things to always happen the way we want them to, I've discovered that I go forth, and that I'm not in the same place as I was before I was taking the option of acceptance into consideration. How does acceptance contribute towards making the world a better place? The same as the other things I mentioned. I use it as a stimulus for other people who are asking my advice when they find themselves with a dilemma. And they usually change their perspective, seeing that there are other alternatives, and this produces an insight

that starts and motivates the finding of other solutions. It doesn't always work with everybody, and especially not with stubborn people. But even with these people, there is a chance to succeed if you counter all their arguments.

In summary, I share, I smile and I accept. That is how I contribute towards making the world a better place. These are things that are simple, but that have a powerful effect on people, because they hold a special importance in inter-personal relationships. So, my dear little nephew, I don't have anything else to say, other than to welcome you into this world. I hope you discover the roads less travelled, and on which to walk *smiling* (in this way, your steps will be full of life), and to *accept* that the path that you have chosen will not satisfy everybody (this way you will be able to continue your chosen path), and to *share* everything you will find with those you will meet in your journey (in this way you will become immortal).

Lots of love,

Your aunt Gaby

P.S. Your melting smile has already touched loads of hearts.

13 Small Things that We Do

Dear Toby,

We are friends of your mummy. Many years ago in a social gathering, we met your lovely mother for the first time. It was just a couple of months before our first and only son Kuzey's arrival to this world. Having our first baby was the most exciting and challenging journey—many thanks to Bianca for making it easier with her gentle support, love and care during this period. She was brilliant with Kuzey, and her natural ability to sooth him, cheer him up and put him to sleep (and believe me what a challenge that was) made us realize that she would be an amazing mother!

We were so happy to hear about your birth and when we read the about the *Letters to Toby* project, about how we are contributing towards making the world better place, we had to write something. Even though we are not a very green family, there are still some small things that we do:

- We are living in a block of flats and there was no common recycling arrangement in place. Everything was going into rubbish bins. So Pelin called the council several times until she managed to get 4 giant boxes in the common area for recycling papers, glasses, plastics etc. which are in constant use by everybody nowadays.
- Regularly Kuzey chooses his used toys, clothes and books to be given away to charity shops, and we make this a special occasion for him to learn how to share, donate and recycle.
- We are walking and using public transport as much as possible to reduce our carbon footprint.
- The 30°C temperature program is always in use on the washing machine to reduce our energy consumption.
- From time to time we donate to Greenpeace, and contribute to the online actions of Avaaz.org.

- We are trying to teach Kuzey how to love, share, respect, communicate and to celebrate life as it is. We are hoping to raise him as a caring, gentle boy who can contribute towards making the world better place :)

Love,

Pelin, Ersan and Kuzey River Akgun

14 Choosing to Do Things Actively

Dear Toby,

Your mother, Bianca, would love to write you a letter. However, at this stage, you are just two months old, and Bianca has a 24-hours-a-day job looking after you. Because of this, she doesn't have the time or energy to write a letter, so she suggested that I write one on her behalf.

During the twelve years I have known Bianca, she has always been involved in a variety of activities intended to help other people and make the world a better place. The sheer diversity of these activities would make it difficult to write about them all in anything other than a superficial manner. However, there is an underlying principle that has run through many of her activities. So I will start by discussing that principle, and then afterwards provide some examples of what Bianca has done to make the world a better place.

14.1 Choosing an Active Role Instead of a Passive One

Many things in life can be done in either *passive* or *active* ways. For example:

Music. You can listen to music (passive), or you can play a musical instrument (active).

Entertainment. You can watch fictional programs on television (intellectually passive), watch documentaries (intellectually active), or read non-fiction books (even more intellectually active).

Sport. You can watch a football match on television (passive), or you can go to a local park with some friends and play a game of football (active).

Commuting. You can commute to work by travelling in a bus, train or car (passive), or by cycling (active).

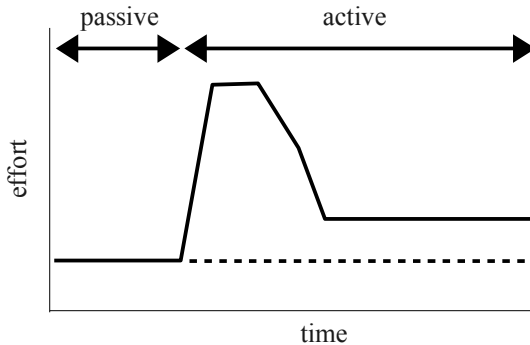
Food. You can eat pre-prepared food (passive) or cook your own meals from scratch (active).

Democracy. You can let the elected politicians run the country (passive), or you can play an active role in your community and thus play a part in the running of it (active).

14.1.1 Doing Things Actively May Require Extra Effort

Doing things in an active way tends to take more time than doing them in a passive way. This is illustrated by the graph in Figure 14.1.

Figure 14.1: Effort required to do a task in a passive and active way



The graph shows that a small amount of effort is required to do a task in a passive way. If you switch to doing the task in an active way, then the amount of effort required shoots up. This reflects the fact that you might have to learn new skills or spend more time to complete the task. Or perhaps you will have to make inconvenient changes to your daily schedule. If you stick with doing the task actively, then after a few weeks or months, you will master the new skills or adjust to the new schedule, so doing the task will become easier. Eventually, the effort required to do the task actively will settle down to a new level, which still may be higher than the original effort required to do the task passively.

14.1.2 Personal Benefits of Doing Things Actively

Since doing something actively usually requires more effort than doing it passively, this raises the question of why you would want to do a task in an active way. The most likely reason is that doing the task actively brings you some benefits that outweigh the extra effort required.

For example, cycling (active) instead of driving a car (passive) offers several significant benefits. First, the annual cost of owning and using a bicycle is thousands of pounds less than the cost of owning and using a car. Second, (according to a book Bianca read)

the fitness benefits of cycling far outweigh the risk of being involved in a traffic accident or the health risk of breathing the exhaust fumes from cars while you cycle. Because of this, cyclists tend to live several years longer than non-cyclists. Third, just like other forms of physical exercise, cycling is a great way to relieve stress. So if you feel stressed out when you leave work or school each day, then cycling home is likely to help you feel relaxed.

Likewise, it is easy to think of benefits of cooking your own meals from scratch instead of eating pre-prepared food: (1) it can save hundreds or thousands of pounds per year; (2) it is healthier; and (3) home-cooked food usually tastes better.

Even performing altruistic tasks can provide personal benefits. For example, doing volunteer work in a community group is a great way to make friends and broaden your social network.

14.1.3 Relevance to Making the World a Better Place

Doing things actively can often provide benefits not just for an individual, but also for the world. For example, I already mentioned some personal benefits of cycling, but cycling also benefits the world in two ways. First, cycling has a lower carbon footprint than driving a car. Second, unlike car exhaust fumes, cycling does not contribute to air pollution.

Likewise, preparing your own meals instead of eating pre-prepared food from supermarkets and takeaways offers benefits for the world. This is because there tends to be far less packaging on raw ingredients than there is on pre-prepared food. Thus, preparing your own meals reduces the amount of packaging waste that you throw into your bin.

The benefits to the world of doing things in an active way may be small when considered individually. But they start to add up when a person performs several tasks actively on a daily basis. And they can add up even faster if, nationwide, many people do those things in an active way.

14.1.4 Doing Things Actively Nurtures Perseverance

If you want to switch from doing a thing passively to doing it actively, then you first need to get over the hump shown in the graph of Figure 14.1 on the previous page. The extra effort required to get over that initial hump is too much for many people, and they give up. But people who continue making the effort until they get to the plateau on the far side of the hump are developing an important skill: perseverance.

The more you do things that require perseverance, the more your ability to persevere will increase. So, when you have put effort into doing one thing actively, you will then find it easier to put effort into doing a second thing actively, and then even easier to put effort into doing additional things actively. If that seems strange, then just consider that if

you can learn to play one musical instrument well, then it becomes easier to learn to play a second musical instrument, and then even easier to learn how to play additional musical instruments. Likewise, if you can speak only your native language, then you might find it difficult to learn one foreign language. But once you have mastered that, it becomes easier to learn additional foreign languages. The same principle applies to doing things actively. At first it is hard, but it then gets easier as you learn to do additional things actively.

14.2 Examples of How Bianca Makes the World a Better Place

Bianca does a great many more things in an active way than do most other people. And because doing things actively often provides benefits to the world, there are many ways in which Bianca helps to make the world a better place. I provide examples in this section. Some of these examples involve me as well, but it has typically been Bianca who has initiated the activeness of a task, and I have just gone along with it, so Bianca should get most of the credit.

14.2.1 Reducing Household Waste

A few years ago, Bianca and I watched *An Inconvenient Truth* and *The Story Of Stuff*.¹ Those documentaries encouraged us to reduce our materialistic ways, and we have been gradually incorporating the *Reduce, Reuse, Recycle* concept into our lives.

Bianca took charge of doing experiments to reduce our household waste. By doing more cooking from scratch, she cut down on the food packaging that was thrown into our landfill bin. By getting a compost bin, she cut down on the amount of food waste and grass clipping that also went into our bin. By switching from buying plastic bottles of milk from a supermarket to getting a home delivery of milk in reusable glass bottles, Bianca cut down on the amount of plastic containers that went into our recycling bin. (Sterilizing and reusing glass bottles is much more effective than recycling plastic ones.)

By making a series of small steps like those, Bianca reduced the amount of rubbish we throw into bins by about three-quarters. That reduction happened over the course of about six months. We found it to be a fun and intellectual challenge to think of additional ways to reduce the amount of rubbish we were throwing out.

We subscribed to the mail preference service,² which is a way to opt out of receiving junk mail through the postal service. To cut down on hand-delivered junk mail, we put a sign on our letterbox that says we do not want to receive junk mail, leaflets, free newspapers, catalogues, charity bags, menus and so on. Those two steps have reduced the amount of unwanted stuff being put through our letterbox by about 99.9%.

¹www.storyofstuff.org/movies-all/story-of-stuff

²www.mpsonline.org.uk/mpsr/

More recently, Bianca's decision to use washable nappies instead of disposable ones means we will avoid putting several tonnes of soiled nappies into a landfill site for each child we have. The use of washable nappies will also save us hundreds of pounds.

14.2.2 Using Freecycle and Freegle

Freecycle³ is a network of regional mailing lists that aim to keep items out of landfill sites. If you want to get rid of something that you no longer use, then instead of throwing it in the bin, you can send an email to your local Freecycle mailing list to offer the item free-of-charge to anyone who might want it. If somebody on the list wants the item, then they email you to arrange a mutually-convenient time to collect it.

Freecycle started off in 2003 as a mailing list for one town in America, but the idea quickly spread, and now there are thousands of Freecycle mailing lists in over 85 countries that, between them, keep over 500 tons of stuff *per day* out of landfills. A few years ago, many of the volunteers who managed Freecycle mailing lists in England had a disagreement with the head organisation (I can't remember the nature of the disagreement), and they decided to set up an alternative set of mailing lists called Freegle⁴ (a phonetic abbreviation for "free and legal"). In this way, our local Freecycle list became a Freegle list, but since then another Freecycle list has started up in Reading, so we are spoilt for choice.

Whenever Bianca and I do some spring cleaning, we usually discover a few no-longer-used items that we can offer on Freegle. It makes us feel good to know we are not putting still-usable items in the bin, and to know that we are helping the recipients to save money.

14.2.3 Organic Food

For health and environmental reasons, Bianca decided that, wherever possible, we should buy organic or eco-friendly products instead of mainstream equivalents.

We have found that organic food tastes better than non-organic food, but it is more expensive. However, this additional expense has been largely offset by reducing how much pre-prepared food we buy and instead doing more cooking from scratch. Also, Bianca decided to become vegetarian (and I have reduced my meat consumption a bit), which has saved us more money because vegetables are cheaper than meat. I remember being surprised to learn that reducing our consumption of meat also significantly reduced our carbon footprint. Apparently, the carbon footprint of eating meat regularly is greater than the carbon footprint of having a car.

³www.freecycle.org

⁴www.ilovefreegle.org

14.2.4 Household Cleaning and Personal Hygiene Products

Mainstream household cleaning products and personal hygiene products often contain chemicals that are harmful both to the environment and to humans. Because of this, Bianca switched to buying eco-friendly products that contain only natural ingredients.

Is, say, eco-friendly shampoo more expensive than a mainstream shampoo? Yes, if you compare it to the cheapest brand of shampoo you can find. But if you compare it to the well-known brands of shampoo that advertise on television, then it is not more expensive.

For many years, Bianca has suffered from recurring health problems, such as skin rashes. Switching to eco-friendly hygiene and household cleaning products has noticeably reduced the frequency and severity with which she gets rashes. And switching from using tampons to using a Mooncup⁵ has eliminated recurring thrush infections, while saving us money and reducing our landfill rubbish.

14.2.5 Eco-friendly Construction

Our house has three bedrooms. The largest bedroom is where Bianca and I sleep (and you too, Toby, at the moment). For many years, the smallest bedroom served as my home office, and the middle-sized bedroom served as Bianca's home office, but was also used as a guest bedroom.

When we decided to have children—we hope to have two eventually—we realised that we would need a bigger house. We considered two options.

The first option was to sell our current house and buy one with five bedrooms: three bedrooms for us and our two children to sleep in, and the remaining two bedrooms for use as home offices. However, upgrading to a five-bedroom house would have cost us hundreds of thousands of pounds, which was beyond our means.

A second, and much cheaper, option was to construct a two-room building at the back of our garden. These two new rooms would serve as our new home offices, thus freeing up two bedrooms for use by our children. This option, which we chose, cost “only” tens of thousands of pounds, and was (just) within our means. This option also meant that we don't have to move, which is great because we like the house and area in which we live.

I would have been content to have our home offices built with mainstream construction materials. But Bianca insisted we should look into eco-friendly construction options first. When reading up on this topic, we found that the carbon footprint of the mainstream construction industry is higher than the carbon footprint of the airline industry! One of the main reasons for this is that the process for manufacturing cement requires heating the raw ingredient to 1500 degrees centigrade—that temperature is reached by burning lots of fossil fuel. Construction techniques that reduce, or eliminate, the need for cement

⁵www.mooncup.co.uk

have a much lower carbon footprint. If you use a carbon-based material—such as wood or straw bales— as your primary construction material, then the carbon footprint of a building can actually be negative.

Eventually, we decided to have our home offices constructed from wood. Our builder estimated that the use of wood instead of mainstream construction materials added about 10% to the cost of the project. We felt that 10% “eco tax” was an acceptable price to pay, for two reasons.

First, sometimes you have to pay more to be eco-friendly. Unfortunately, that’s just the way it is.

Second, I mentioned in Section 14.2.4 on the previous page that Bianca has suffered from recurring health problems, such as skin rashes, for many years, and that switching to eco-friendly hygiene and household cleaning products has noticeably reduced the amount of rashes she gets. Although these changes have improved Bianca’s health, she remains with some unidentified allergies. We think she may be suffering from what is known as *sick building syndrome* (SBS).⁶ Put simply, the materials used in the construction and furnishings of our house might be making her sick. When we decided to build home offices in our back garden, we knew we needed to avoid the possibility of introducing new causes of SBS. Hence, the few thousand pounds extra it cost us to have the home offices constructed from natural materials is an investment in Bianca’s health. As time and finances permit, we plan to replace carpets and laminated wood flooring in our house with natural wood flooring. We are slowly replacing flat-pack furniture (typically made from laminated chipboard or MDF) with solid wood alternatives, and will ensure we use paints made from natural ingredients when redecorating the house. In this way, we hope to reduce the number of artificial household furnishings that might be contributing to SBS.

14.2.6 Cycling

Bianca used to have a car years ago, but when it broke down and couldn’t be repaired, she switched to using buses to travel around Reading. Unfortunately, the bus service in our area is frustratingly infrequent. Finally, Bianca switched to cycling. When she found it was faster to cycle around Reading than to get buses, and that cycling avoided the stress of never knowing when a bus would finally arrive, she fell in love with this eco-friendly form of transport. We find that cycling serves almost all of our local commuting needs. A handful of times per year, when we feel the need for a car, we take a taxi. This combination of cycling with just an occasional taxi ride is thousands of pounds per year cheaper than owning a car.

⁶http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sick_building_syndrome

14.2.7 Volunteer Work at True Food

I estimate that only about 1% of the food sold in UK supermarkets is organic. For anyone who wants to eat organic food, being able to buy such food can be a bit of a challenge. To overcome this, in 1999 a group of local people decided to pool their money so they could place bulk food orders with organic suppliers. Over time, this organic food-purchasing group grew. In 2004, they started holding once-per-week food markets in community centres around Reading. Then, about two years ago, with the aid of a lottery grant, they were able to open a shop called True Food;⁷ they still run weekly community markets, so they can make organic food available in different parts of Reading.

True Food is not run like a typical business. Instead it is a cooperative. Shoppers are encouraged (but *not* required) to volunteer three hours every four weeks to help run the shop and markets. For example, every Thursday, some volunteers help to set up a mobile market at a particular community centre. Some of those volunteers unload goods from the True Food truck, while other volunteers arrange those unloaded goods on tables. Once the set-up is complete, those volunteers can go home, and a second set of volunteers arrive to help run the market. Finally, when the market is closing for the evening, a third set of volunteers arrive to reload unsold goods back onto the truck.

This volunteering system provides benefits all round. True Food benefits, because the volunteers help to keep down the cost of running True Food. Customers benefit because True Food pass on that cost saving, thus helping to make organic food available at an affordable price. Finally, volunteers benefit in two ways. First, they receive some money-off vouchers to use at True Food as a “Thank You” for their efforts. Second, many of the volunteers—and customers—feel there is a real sense of community at True Food, which makes it an enjoyable place to shop.

For several years, Bianca volunteered at True Food to help set up one of the weekly markets. She (reluctantly) gave up this form of volunteering during late pregnancy. She has also been a member of the True Food committee but will step down from this position at the forthcoming AGM (annual general meeting), because raising a young baby does not leave her with sufficient time to devote to committee business.

In late 2009, when True Food was able to use lottery funds to lease a shop, volunteer help was needed to refurbish, clean and decorate the shop before it could open. This happened to coincide with our Christmas holidays, so Bianca and I spent ten days working with Alex, the shop manager, and some other volunteers to paint the shop. Then, soon after the shop opened, True Food printed leaflets to advertise it. Bianca and I spent another ten days delivering 7000 leaflets to houses in the surrounding neighbourhoods.

Although True Food has grown relatively quickly, it is still in the “struggling to make ends meet” phase of a young business. Because of this, Bianca and I decided we would not spend the money-off vouchers that she receives for her volunteering. Instead, Bianca

⁷www.truefood.coop

staples those vouchers to a promotional leaflet that contains the address and opening times of the shop and weekly markets, and she gives them to people she thinks might be interested in shopping at True Food.

14.2.8 Lifelong Learning and Passing on the Knowledge

Bianca gets bored watching television. Instead, one of her favourite pastimes is to read non-fiction books on topics she thinks might be useful to her. For example, several years ago, Bianca became disillusioned with the state school system—both as a career option and as a way to educate her future children—so she started reading books on home education. Likewise, when planning to have children, Bianca started reading books on related topics, including fertility, natural childbirth, breastfeeding, sign language (because babies can learn to communicate through sign language long before they learn to talk) and development during the first few years of a baby's life. And, of course, when Bianca became interested in environmental issues, she started reading books on that topic.

When Bianca develops an interest in a topic, she is rarely satisfied to read just one book about it. Instead, she is likely to read five or more books. Unsurprisingly, this results in Bianca becoming very knowledgeable about such topics. And she is happy to share that knowledge. She loves sharing tips and advice with other knowledgeable people. And she regularly looks in charity bookshops and on the Amazon marketplace sellers to see if she can buy cheap second-hand copies of some of her favourite non-fiction books, so she can pass them on to others.

Bianca is not content to just *read* informative, non-fiction books. She also wants to *write* such books herself. For example, Bianca is fluent in four languages and, over the years, she has read hundreds of books on the topic of teaching and learning foreign languages. Many of these books were mediocre, but some were excellent. She has compiled an annotated bibliography of what she considers to be the most useful books, CDs, DVDs, websites and so on for learners of French. This 50-page document is called *Effective Resources for Learning French*, and she makes it available free-of-charge from her website.⁸ In the future, Bianca hopes to write annotated bibliographies on other topics, such as eco-friendly living. She is also writing a French grammar textbook that she plans to make available free-of-charge under an open-source license.

14.2.9 Politics and Protest Marches

Bianca and I have written to our local MP (member of Parliament) twice, and met him once, to express our concerns at a misguided proposal for a change in the law. We have also attended protest marches in support of issues we feel are important, such as home education, LGBT rights and environmentalism.

⁸www.BiancaMcHale.com

14.3 Final Words

“It takes ten years to become an overnight success.” The contradiction in that statement arises because the media usually focus on a person’s “sudden” success and ignore the years of work that preceded it. Such selective reporting gives the false impression that success often happens without much effort being required.

Contrary to what the media might have you believe, sustained work is usually required for any type of success, whether it be success in a career, or success in making the world a better place. And to be able to do sustained work, you need perseverance. As I discussed in Section 14.1.4 on page 33, you can develop your perseverance skills by switching from doing something passively to doing it actively.

I urge you to take inspiration from Bianca’s perseverance in doing things actively. You don’t need to get excited by the specific issues Bianca is working on to make the world a better place. For example, if cycling and reducing household waste don’t particularly excite you, then don’t worry that you don’t share those passions with your mother (you will find other issues to feel passionate about). Instead, seek inspiration from *how* Bianca develops and uses her perseverance skills. For example, if you ask her about the journey she took from doing something in a passive way to doing it in an active way, including tactics she used to overcome any obstacles she faced, then you are likely to find useful advice.

All our love,

Mum and Dad

Joan Barrett
Dublin: 15 May 2012

15 Donations

Dear Toby,

I would like to introduce myself. I am your dad's aunt Joan, your late grandmother's sister. I am delighted to have the chance to welcome you into this world of ours.

I first heard your mum was pregnant when I was at a wedding in Dublin with my husband Christy. I did notice that your parents were looking very happy and content, and I suspected there was some good news; I soon found out I was right. It was a lovely start to the day.

I have made a difference with two good deeds so far. A lady I know whose three-year-old grandchild was having a heart transplant in Great Ormond St. Hospital was raising money for parents in the same position to help with their expenses, so I donated to that cause in your name. The second donation was to a nun I know who does missionary work in Guatemala teaching children. I will be giving a little more to the charity Concern.¹

I have seen a lovely photo of you. I could see a resemblance to both of your parents. Your dad had a lovely big smile for everyone when he was a baby, and has always been a very generous person to those in need. He is a great example to those who want to make a difference. I hope you have a very happy and healthy life.

Love,

Aunt Joan

¹www.concern.net

Muriel Lynch
Wexford: 7 March 2014

16 Chernobyl Children

Hi Toby,

You don't know me, but I am your auntie Muriel from Wexford in Ireland.

I am involved with bringing children from Belarus to Wexford for a three-week holiday every July. These children are called Chernobyl Children. Over 25 years ago a nuclear factory exploded, causing a lot of damage to the earth in Belarus. Everything the children eat and drink is contaminated, so the children have a very poor immune system. They get sick very often. Their three-week holiday in Ireland helps build up their immune system. With fresh air, fresh fruit and plenty of milk, they are guaranteed two to three years added to their lives.

I have a market stall where people donate things to me to sell, and the money I get goes towards the funds to bring the children over here. The enclosed train set came to me, so I bought it for you. I hope you are not too big to play with it.

You have lots of cousins in Wexford. Maybe some day when you are big you might come for a visit.

Now I must go and post your train set to you. Bye for now.

Lots of love,

Auntie Muriel and Uncle David

Appendices

A Announcement of Toby's Birth

Dear relatives, friends and neighbours,

Our son Toby was born at 5:17am on Friday 17 February 2012. We know that many friends and relatives will have lots of questions to ask. So, rather than repeat the same conversation lots of times with different people, we decided to put all the details in a letter, and to put a copy of that letter on the Internet at www.CiaranMcHale.com/Toby/.

What's Toby Like?

So far, Toby (at nine days old) is very placid, comfortable with strangers, and rarely cries. His main hobbies are sleeping, breastfeeding and filling his cloth nappy. Occasionally, he manages to squeeze a fourth activity into that hectic schedule: carefully studying his surroundings and people who talk to him. We all enjoy co-sleeping at night.¹ You can see some photographs of Toby on the next page.

Why We Chose the Name *Toby*

Why did we choose the name *Toby*? Simple: we like the sound of the name. *Toby* is a friendly name. It makes you smile. By the way, the name is spelled *Toby* rather than *Tobey*.

Pregnancy

You sometimes hear of women who have a miserable time during pregnancy: they frequently suffer from morning sickness, are bed-ridden with pain, find it difficult to walk,

¹We are aware that co-sleeping is controversial because of anecdotes of a sleeping parent rolling over and smothering their baby. However, research suggests that this danger exists only if the parents smoke, are drunk or high on drugs. We don't smoke, drink alcohol or take drugs. The following newspaper article summarises research findings: www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2009/oct/16/sudden-infant-death-syndrome-children.

Figure A.1: Toby is exhausted after a marathon breastfeeding session



Figure A.2: Toby wonders, “Will I ever grow into these clothes?”



and so on. In contrast, Bianca's pregnancy was remarkably trouble-free. Perhaps this was due to her having a healthy diet (well, aside from chocolate, that is). Or perhaps it was due to her having led an active lifestyle over the past few years—swimming, jogging, cycling around town, and so on. Or perhaps none of that matters, and it was just due to genetic good luck. Whatever it was, Bianca thoroughly enjoyed her pregnancy, from conception right up to a few days before giving birth.

Ciaran and Bianca are sometimes regarded as being a bit “unusual”: *eccentric* or *weird* are terms that pop into people's minds. Sometimes people describe us as *committed*, but we suspect they really mean that we *should be committed*. Bianca lived up to her “unusual” reputation during pregnancy. Lots of people were shocked to see a heavily pregnant woman cycling (she last cycled the day before her waters broke). But what they failed to realise is that, when you are pregnant, cycling is significantly easier and less tiring than walking.

In the first trimester, Bianca was enjoying her pregnancy so much that she started to feel a bit sad that she had not (yet) experienced morning sickness. Then one day, she *did* get sick. Ciaran, being a caring husband and always sensitive to Bianca's needs, said, “That must make you happy.” Yes, Ciaran can be sarcastic too.

Ciaran has the following pieces of advice to offer any men whose partners are trying to get pregnant:

1. When you are trying to conceive, you need to buy some pregnancy tests. Buying a test kit in a pharmacy or supermarket for, say, £5 does not seem like much of an expense. But if the first test indicates that your partner is not pregnant, then she might decide to wait a few days and take another test. And another. And another. What if you have to try to conceive for several months or years before striking it lucky (it took us three months)? You might end up having to buy *a lot* of pregnancy tests, so the cost of all those pregnancy tests can mount up. Because of this, I was delighted when I saw that a local discount shop called *Poundland* was selling two pregnancy tests for £1. That worked out to be just 50p each! So, my first piece of advice is this: visit discount stores to save money.
2. *Never* let your partner know just how cheap the pregnancy tests were to buy. Rather than admire your money-saving skills, she is likely to be angry at how little you apparently value her and the new life the two of you are trying to create.
3. If you do make the mistake of boasting to your partner how cheap the pregnancy tests were, she will eventually forgive you when she finds the same tests for sale in a pharmacy for £7.99.

Books

Bianca and Ciaran read lots of non-fiction books as a way to learn about new topics. So it wasn't a surprise that, when planning to have a baby, Bianca compulsively read books about fertility, pregnancy, giving birth, breastfeeding, and other related topics. And since we are subscribed to an Internet-based, DVD rental scheme called *LoveFilm*,² we were able to rent some obscure DVDs on such topics.

Although not all of the books and DVDs were equally good, overall this self-learning approach turned out to be remarkably useful. It meant that we did not have to blindly trust the advice of healthcare workers, but rather could compare their advice to that in books. When the two sets of advice agreed, we could gain trust in the healthcare workers. And when there were discrepancies in advice, we were able to ask questions to clarify the issues.

If you are planning to have a baby, then, to save you the bother of having to sift through lots of books to find the best ones, Bianca recommends the following:

- *Taking Charge of Your Fertility*, by Toni Weschler. This book is a goldmine of information about female fertility.
- Anything written by Sears and Sears. This married couple have looked after eight children of their own and thousands of others in 30 years of paediatric practice. Their books are full of well-researched, useful advice. So far, Bianca has read *The Pregnancy Book*, *The Birth Book*, *The Breastfeeding Book*, *The Baby Book* and *The Attachment Parenting Book*.
- *New Active Birth: A Concise Guide to Natural Childbirth*, by Janet Balaskas.
- *Three in a Bed: The Benefits of Sleeping with Your Baby*, by Deborah Jackson.
- *The Politics of Breastfeeding*, by Gabrielle Palmer. From the back cover: "Every thirty seconds a baby dies from infections due to a lack of breastfeeding and the use of bottles, artificial milks and other risky products. In her powerful book, Gabrielle Palmer describes how big business uses subtle techniques to pressure parents to use alternatives to breastmilk. The infant feeding product companies' thirst for profit systematically undermines mothers' confidence in their ability to breastfeed their babies."
- *Diaper Free*, by Ingrid Bauer. From the back cover: "Most new parents think of diapers as a smelly, expensive, and unavoidable necessity. The good news is that it's possible—even practical—to raise your children with significantly fewer

²www.lovefilm.com/

or even zero diapers. *Diaper Free* offers a gentle and nurturing philosophy that shows how”.

- Booklets published by the Association for Improvements in the Maternity Services (AIMS): www.aims.org.uk. Each booklet provides research-based advice on a specific topic, such as: induction, ultrasound, breech birth, and giving Vitamin K to newborn babies.

You might want to look at readers’ reviews of the above books on Amazon.com or Amazon.co.uk to get a good idea of their contents.

Midwives

In England, the National Health Service (NHS) provides midwives who can offer advice to pregnant women, free of charge. However, one of our friends who recently had a baby found it frustrating that she did not have the same NHS midwife for the entire duration of her pregnancy, but rather saw a different midwife for each visit. Another friend had opted to pay a few thousand pounds for an independent midwife. Doing that meant she saw the same midwife for the entire duration of her pregnancy, and for four weeks postnatally, which meant she was able to build up a relationship of trust with her midwife.

Based on what Bianca read, and the midwife experiences of her friends, we decided to have an independent midwife, and we have no regrets about having done so. Our midwife, Kathryn Weymouth from Independent Midwives,³ is very knowledgeable, friendly, helps to reduce bureaucratic form filling to an palatable level, and was able to offer us wise advice during pregnancy. With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that she also offered *life-saving advice* during labour. Why did we take her life-saving advice? Because we had grown to trust her.

Bianca’s Mother

Bianca’s mother, Geta (short for Georgeta), came from Romania at the start of February to be with us during the final weeks of pregnancy, and is staying on for a while to help while Bianca recuperates.

Labour and Birth by Caesarean Section

A few weeks before giving birth, Bianca got violently ill with vomiting and diarrhoea. We rang our midwife for advice. When Bianca described the symptoms, Kathryn reassured her that: it was like just a stomach bug that was going round at the time; she would

³www.independentmidwives.com

feel better within a few days; and the possibility of the bug bringing on an early labour was very low. Sure enough, Bianca recovered within a few days.

Then about two weeks later, Bianca started getting cold-like symptoms. Such symptoms are common at the start of a pregnancy—it seems to be the body’s way of forcing a woman who has just conceived to take things easy for a few days to give the implantation a better chance to succeed. Bianca had also learned that some women have similar symptoms in the lead up to labour—again, it seems to be the body’s way of encouraging a woman to get home and stay in bed in preparation for impending labour. Then a few days later, about 2pm on Wednesday 15 February, Bianca’s waters broke. Yippee! We were so excited. Ciaran let his manager know he was starting his paternity leave, and came straight home.

Some women go into labour just a few hours after their waters break. But in other women, it might take several days—or even more than a week in some cases—before labour starts. Our midwife had examined Bianca just an hour or so before the waters broke and knew that everything was fine. She told Bianca to telephone her when Bianca started having contractions, or whenever Bianca had any questions. Contractions did not start on Wednesday. We were not surprised, but we were a bit disappointed: we wanted to have the baby as soon as possible. Bianca’s cold-like symptoms did continue, however.

On Thursday, Bianca’s cold-like symptoms started getting much more intense. Sometimes, Bianca’s whole body aches when she has a bad cold, and this is what it started to feel like on Thursday evening. About 11:30pm on Thursday night, Bianca’s whole body was aching badly from the intense cold-like symptoms, *plus* she started to have contractions that were intensifying the pain. We called Kathryn, and she came over. Through examination, Kathryn discovered three things: (1) Bianca had a dangerously high temperature; (2) the baby’s heartbeat was dangerously high; and (3) Bianca’s cervix was dilated about 2 cm. Put simply, Bianca was in the early stages of labour (what doctors sometimes call pre-labour), but she had an infection (indicated by the high temperature and rapid heartbeat) that was a danger to both Bianca and the baby. Kathryn recommended that we abandon our plans to have a home birth, and instead go to hospital. She also explained that if the doctors could not bring the temperature and heart rate under control, then Bianca would probably need to have a caesarean section.

At a moment like this, it is vitally important to feel you can trust the advice of a midwife. If we had had a succession of NHS midwives, and a midwife we had seen for the first time that night was telling us to go to hospital, then we might have wanted to ignore the advice, perhaps thinking that the midwife was overreacting or prejudiced against home births. But we knew Kathryn well enough to know that she was completely in favour of home births, and Kathryn knew how much Bianca wanted a home birth. Because of this, we realised that Kathryn was not giving such unwelcome advice lightly. We agreed to her suggestion that she should call for an ambulance and inform the Royal Berkshire Hospital of Bianca’s condition.

Some people might think that giving birth at home is intrinsically dangerous: “What if something goes wrong? You might not receive appropriate medical attention quick enough to save your life.” Actually, midwives carry a medical kit with them, so they can deal with some of the problems that might arise. Also, if a problem arises that the midwife cannot deal with, then the chances are that there will be plenty of time to call for an ambulance. Bianca’s high temperature and the baby’s rapid heartbeat were dangerous *if left untreated*, but there was a time window of many hours in which they could be treated. So, it wasn’t like an episode of ER in which somebody with multiple gunshot wounds is brought into hospital and the doctors instruct the nurses to hand them various instruments “stat”.

Five of us—Bianca, Ciaran, Kathryn, Geta, and one of Bianca’s friends, Stefanie, who Bianca wanted to attend the home birth—went to the hospital. However, the medical staff there said having so many people around would make it difficult for them to do their work, so Geta and Stefanie had to go home. Kathryn briefed the doctors and nurses on Bianca’s condition, and checks were done that confirmed Kathryn’s analysis. The doctors agreed that a caesarean section would be necessary. However, two things had to happen before the operation could start. First, blood samples from Bianca had to be analysed, which would take one or two hours. Second, an anaesthetist (*anesthesiologist* for American readers) would have to become available: the one on duty at the time was busy with another operation. Because of this, there was a wait of two hours before Bianca could have the caesarean. In the meantime, Bianca was put on a drip to get some antibiotics into her: these brought down her temperature and the baby’s heart rate slightly, but Bianca was in agony from the ache from her intense cold-like symptoms combined with contractions. She was given gas and air to ease the pain, but it didn’t work. The doctors did not want to give her any other pain relief because doing that might delay the start of the operation.

When it was finally time for the caesarean section, we were told that either Kathryn or Ciaran could accompany Bianca into the operating theatre. Ciaran decided that wanting to stay beside Bianca and to see the baby as soon as possible was less important than having Kathryn with Bianca to offer medical advice if the need arose.

In the operating theatre, Bianca was given an Epidural⁴ (basically, an injection into the spine) to make her feel numb. Then, a few minutes of surgery was sufficient to deliver the baby. Putting in stitches took considerably longer: about 45 minutes. During the operation, Bianca was awake but without pain. Nevertheless, she cried throughout, due to the sorrow that her plans for a natural birth were being replaced with the numb detachment of a caesarean section. Bianca was scared that this might prevent her being able to bond with her baby. During the stitching, the doctors placed Toby on Bianca’s chest for immediate skin-to-skin contact, which they hoped would provide comfort for

⁴<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epidural>

both of them. Despite this, Bianca still cried. The doctors had to ask Bianca to stop crying because her body was shaking too much for them to put in stitches. Throughout the operation, Kathryn held Bianca's hand and tried to distract her with positive conversation, such as an assurance that Bianca would be able to use a baby sling⁵ while recovering from the operation.

Post-operation Recovery

After the operation was complete, Bianca was brought back into the room where Ciaran had been waiting. The doctors were concerned that, having been born, Toby's heart rate and breathing were still very rapid. But rather than put Toby into an intensive care unit, he was put onto Bianca's breast. Bianca was still numb (it would be hours before the effects of the epidural would start to wear off), so she could not tell if Toby was feeding properly. But Kathryn and the other staff there ensured this was the case. After a hour, Toby's heartbeat and breathing were slowing down to an acceptable rate—this is typical when a mother and newborn baby have skin-to-skin contact—so the doctors decided to continue this course of treatment. After a second hour, Toby's vital signs were back to normal.

Because of Bianca's infection, it was likely that Toby also had the same infection, even though his heartbeat and breathing rate had returned to normal. Because of this, the doctors recommended that both Bianca and Toby should start a five-day course of antibiotics: Bianca by tablets twice a day, and Toby by injections twice a day through a cannula.⁶ A blood sample was taken from Toby and sent for analysis, which would take two days. If the analysis indicated that he did not have an infection, then the course of antibiotics could be stopped. However, the results indicated that he did, indeed, have an infection, so he completed the five-day course.

Kathryn stayed with Bianca and Ciaran until sometime after 9am, so she could offer advice while decisions surrounding Toby's treatment options were still up in the air. At lunchtime, Bianca and Toby were moved from the delivery unit to the maternity ward, where they stayed for the next five days, until their courses of antibiotics were finished and they were discharged. A blood test on Bianca indicated her iron levels had dropped low enough for doctors to consider giving her a blood transfusion. However, she was not showing any symptoms associated with low iron levels, so, instead of a blood transfusion, she was put on a three-day course of iron supplements delivered via a drip into a cannula.

Ciaran visited Bianca and Toby each day in the hospital. Unfortunately, Geta could visit only twice because she then came down with a cold which meant she then had to stay away from the hospital.

⁵http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baby_sling

⁶<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canula>

Bianca and Toby received excellent care from the medical staff at the hospital. In fact, it was quite intensive, with a nurse or midwife checking on them several times per hour. Having experienced the high skills of our independent midwife, Kathryn, we were delighted to discover that the NHS midwives were equally skilled. It seemed that some of the midwives either worked part-time or were being rotated from one ward to another, because Bianca might be treated by one midwife one day, and a different midwife the next day, and so on. At first, Bianca felt frustrated at this, because it made it difficult to build up a relationship of trust with the hospital's midwives. However, Bianca grew to see a positive side to it: some midwives had an area of specialised skill, so Bianca could get advice on one topic from one midwife, and then get advice on a different topic from another midwife the next day, and so on.

During their stay at the hospital, Toby was breastfed exclusively, to the delight of the medical staff, and Bianca co-slept with Toby. The breastfeeding and co-sleeping was the highlight of the hospital stay for Bianca, and it helped her bond with Toby.

About 5pm on Wednesday 22 February, Bianca and Toby were discharged from the hospital. Bianca's brother, Nick, who had just returned from a short holiday in Romania, collected us from the hospital in his car and drove us home. In the few days since then, we have been adjusting to the household changes.

Optimism

Bianca had dreamed for many years of having children, and of giving birth naturally. She had done everything right to ensure the birth of a healthy baby: she didn't drink or smoke, she ate a very healthy diet, lead an active lifestyle, and read many books on relevant topics, such as fertility, pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, co-sleeping, and attachment parenting. Because of this, she felt devastated when an unpredictable infection resulted in her having a caesarean section. Just before Bianca was taken to have her operation, Ciaran was shocked to hear Bianca say, "I'm sorry". In fact, he was so shocked that he could not respond. He realised that, quite irrationally, Bianca felt guilty and ashamed for not having a natural childbirth.

After the operation, Bianca repeated the "I'm sorry" statement. Ciaran assured her that she had done nothing wrong and had nothing to apologise for. We both worried that such irrational feelings of shame might result in postnatal depression. However, over the next few days, Bianca came to appreciate that the caesarean section had saved both her life and Toby's. Before the operation, a doctor had explained that, because this was Bianca's first pregnancy, labour might go on for up to, say, 16 hours, and it was likely that neither she nor her baby had the strength to endure such a prolonged labour with the infection that was causing them both intense distress. Rather than feeling ashamed for not having a natural childbirth, Bianca should feel grateful for the life-saving operation.

Bianca and Ciaran are both optimists by nature, and are good at finding the silver lining in clouds. It was natural for Bianca to feel frustrated and cheated at not having a natural childbirth, but the day after the operation—when the numbing effects of the epidural had worn off and, with the aid of painkillers, Bianca was able to get out of bed to change Toby’s nappy—she was starting to see the positives in the situation. She was alive and recuperating, and she had an adorable, healthy baby. The breastfeeding and co-sleeping helped Bianca to regain her positive attitude, and that, in turn, helped to speed recovery.

Gifts

Please do not feel obliged to buy any gifts for us or Toby. We say this for a few reasons:

1. We are in a comfortable financial situation—we own a house without a mortgage, and Ciaran has a well-paying job—so we can afford to buy whatever Toby might need.
2. A few years ago we saw the excellent online documentary *The Story Of Stuff*⁷ (the book of the same name is also great). That video has encouraged us to reduce our materialistic ways, and we have been gradually incorporating the *Reduce, Reuse, Recycle* concept into our lives. As such, we want to avoid receiving an over-abundance of materialistic gifts for Toby.

The *Story of Stuff* also made us aware that many synthetic materials commonly used in children’s toys contain toxins that may not have an adverse effect immediately, but can have a longer-term impact on health. This has strengthened our desire to reduce our materialistic ways, and, whenever possible, to opt for toys made out of wood and rubber rather than plastic.

3. During pregnancy, Bianca visited charity shops to get pre-loved clothes for a newborn baby and children’s books. Because of this, we have sufficient baby clothes to last us for a few months. *If* you happen to have some pre-loved clothes for a six-months-or-older baby that you would like to pass on, then we will gratefully receive them, but please do not send us new clothes.

There is, however, one sort of gift that we would love to receive, as we now explain. . .

⁷www.storyofstuff.org/movies-all/story-of-stuff

Letters to Toby

We believe there are two kinds of power: (1) power *over* people; and (2) power *to help* people.⁸

It is easy to think of examples of the first kind of power, and mainstream society encourages people to seek out that kind of power. Of course, power *over* people is a scarce resource and it has a tendency to corrupt: hence the slogan, “Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely”.

In contrast, the second kind of power—*to help* people—is in abundant supply: almost every individual in the world has the power to help others, often in small ways, and occasionally in bigger ways. Unfortunately, the power to help people is often overlooked. This is a great shame, because some of the most inspiring people in history have been those who have used their power to help others to great effect: for example, Florence Nightingale, Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.

We want Toby to grow up knowing that, regardless of how rich or poor he is, he has the power to help others, and for him to use that power. Towards that goal, we would be delighted if you could spare the time to write Toby a letter in which you briefly explain how you use your power to help other people. An example letter is shown in Figure A.3 on the next page.

There is no minimum or maximum size to the letter: it might be as short as one paragraph or longer than 50 pages. You might want to say that you donate money to a good cause, or that you do some volunteer work in your local community. If you have a career that enables you to help people (or animals, or the environment), then you might discuss that. If you do any sort of activism aimed at making the world a better place, then please mention that.

You can send your letter by postal mail to us, or (probably more conveniently) by email to Ciaran⁹ or Bianca.¹⁰

Our aim is to compile these letters into a book. Then, when Toby grows a bit older, we can read him not just fairy tales but also real stories of how ordinary people—such as relatives, friends and random visitors to this web page—have the power to help others and make the world a better place. In this way, with your help, we can inspire Toby to make a positive contribution to the world.

Ciaran has written software that will make it easy to create an anthology¹¹ of the letters and, by default, he will make the anthology freely available online (in HTML format for online viewing and PDF format for downloading) in the hope that others might

⁸A more in-depth discussion of the two kinds of power is given in Chapter 2 of the slides manual for the *Skills You Need to Change the World* training course, which is available at www.ciaranmchale.com/training-courses.html#training-skills

⁹ciaran_mchale@yahoo.co.uk

¹⁰biancamchale@yahoo.co.uk

¹¹www.canthology.org

Figure A.3: Example letter to Toby

Dear Toby,

I am a friend of your parents. I contribute towards making the world a better place in the following ways.

First, I have insulated my home and use energy efficient light bulbs. These reduce my energy consumption, which is important because of climate change.

Second, I buy a copy of *The Big Issue* each week. I enjoy reading the magazine, and the homeless people I buy it from make a profit from it, which helps them to rise out of poverty.

Yours sincerely,

...

find the letters inspiring. If there is demand for a printed version of the book, then he might investigate the possibility of making the book available through a print-on-demand company.

If you do not want your letter to be included in a publicly-accessible anthology, then we will be happy to print out the letter separately for Toby to read.

Visiting Us

Doctors have told Bianca it will take about six weeks for her to recover from the operation and, until then, she shouldn't lift anything heavier than Toby. During this recovery period, Bianca and Toby will be spending most of their time at home, and letting Geta take care of housework. Visitors are welcome and encouraged. No advance booking is required.

Yours sincerely,

Ciaran and Bianca McHale

Colophon

The contents of this anthology of letters were formatted using the markup language of the \LaTeX typesetting system.¹² Each letter was written in its own ".tex" file, and Canthology¹³ was used to create a root ".tex" file that included all the other ".tex" files. Canthology then used `pdflatex` to generate PDF versions of the manual, and `HEVEA`¹⁴ to create a HTML version.

The main font used in the PDF versions of the manual is 10pt Times rather than the default Computer Modern fonts supplied with \LaTeX . The decision to use Times was made because Ciaran finds it easier to read on computer screens.

This book is available from www.CiaranMcHale.com in various formats, including HTML, PDF and the Canthology "source code".

¹²www.latex-project.org

¹³www.canthology.org

¹⁴<http://hevea.inria.fr/>