

## A Confession

by Leo Tolstoy (1882)

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### III

... Thus another fifteen years went by.

In spite of the fact that during these fifteen years I regarded writing as a trivial endeavor, I continued to write. I had already tasted the temptations of authorship, the temptations of enormous monetary rewards and applause for worthless work, and I gave myself up to it as a means of improving my material situation and as a way of stifling any questions in my soul concerning the meaning of my life and of life in general.

As I wrote I taught what to me was the only truth: that we must live for whatever is best for ourselves and our family.

And so I lived. But five years ago something very strange began to happen to me. At first I began having moments of bewilderment, when my life would come to a halt, as if I did not know how to live or what to do; I would lose my presence of mind and fall into a state of depression. But this passed, and I continued to live as before. Then the moments of bewilderment recurred more frequently, and they always took the same form. Whenever my life came to a halt, the questions would arise: Why? And what next?

At first I thought these were pointless and irrelevant questions. I thought that the answers to them were well known and that if I should ever want to resolve them, it would not be too hard for me; it was just that I could not be bothered with it now, but if I should take it upon myself, then I would find the answers. But the questions began to come up more and more frequently, and their demands to be answered became more and more urgent. And like points concentrated into one spot, these questions without answers came together to form a single black stain.

It happened with me as it happens with everyone who contracts a fatal internal disease. At first there were the insignificant symptoms of an ailment, which the patient ignores; then these symptoms recur more and more frequently, until they merge into one continuous duration of suffering. The suffering increases, and before he can turn around the patient discovers what he already knew: the thing he had taken for a mere indisposition is in fact the most important thing on earth to him, is in fact death.

This is exactly what happened to me. I realized that this was not an incidental ailment but something very serious, and that if the same questions should continue to recur, I would have to answer them. And I tried to answer them. The questions seemed to be such foolish, simple, childish questions. But as soon as I laid my hands on them and tried to resolve them, I was immediately convinced, first of all, that they were not childish and foolish questions but the most vital and profound

questions in life, and, secondly, that no matter how much I pondered them there was no way I could resolve them. Before I could be occupied with my Samara estate, with the education of my son, or with the writing of books, I had to know why I was doing these things. As long as I do not know the reason why, I cannot do anything. ...

And I could find absolutely no reply.

#### IV

My life came to a stop. I could breathe, eat, drink, and sleep; indeed, I could not help but breathe, eat, drink, and sleep. But there was no life in me because I had no desires whose satisfaction I would have found reasonable. If I wanted something, I knew beforehand that it did not matter whether or not I got it.

If a fairy had come and offered to fulfill my every wish, I would not have known what to wish for. If in moments of intoxication I should have not desires but the habits of old desires, in moments of sobriety I knew that it was all a delusion, that I really desired nothing. I did not even want to discover truth anymore because I had guessed what it was. The truth was that life is meaningless.

It was as though I had lived a little, wandered a little, until I came to the precipice, and I clearly saw that there was nothing ahead except ruin. And there was no stopping, no turning back, no closing my eyes so I would not see that there was nothing ahead except the deception of life and of happiness and the reality of suffering and death, of complete annihilation.

I grew sick of life; some irresistible force was leading me to somehow get rid of it. It was not that I wanted to kill myself. The force that was leading me away from life was more powerful, more absolute, more all-encompassing than any desire. With all my strength I struggled to get away from life. The thought of suicide came to me as naturally then as the thought of improving life had come to me before. This thought was such a temptation that I had to use cunning against myself in order not to go through with it too hastily. I did not want to be in a hurry only because I wanted to use all my strength to untangle my thoughts. If I could not get them untangled, I told myself, I could always go ahead with it. And there I was, a fortunate man, carrying a rope from my room, where I was alone every night as I undressed, so that I would not hang myself from the beam between the closets. And I quit going hunting with a gun, so that I would not be too easily tempted to rid myself of life. I myself did not know what I wanted. I was afraid of life, I struggled to get rid of it, and yet I hoped for something from it.

And this was happening to me at a time when, from all indications, I should have been considered a completely happy man; this was when I was not yet fifty years old. I had a good, loving, and beloved wife, fine children, and a large estate that was growing and expanding without any effort on my part. More than ever before I was respected by friends and acquaintances, praised by strangers, and I could

claim a certain renown without really deluding myself. Moreover, I was not physically and mentally unhealthy; on the contrary, I enjoyed a physical and mental vigor such as I had rarely encountered among others my age. Physically, I could keep up with the peasants working in the fields; mentally, I could work eight and ten hours at a stretch without suffering any aftereffects from the strain. And in such a state of affairs I came to a point where I could not live; and even though I feared death, I had to employ ruses against myself to keep from committing suicide.

I described my spiritual condition to myself in this way: my life is some kind of stupid and evil practical joke that someone is playing on me. In spite of the fact that I did not acknowledge the existence of any "Someone" who might have created me, the notion that someone brought me into the world as a stupid and evil joke seemed to be the most natural way to describe my condition.

I could not help imagining that somewhere there was someone who was now amusing himself, laughing at me and at the way I had lived for thirty or forty years, studying, developing, growing in body and soul; laughing at how I had now completely matured intellectually and had reached that summit from which life reveals itself only to stand there like an utter fool, clearly seeing that there is nothing in life, that there never was and never will be. And it makes him laugh.

But whether or not there actually was someone laughing at me did not make it any easier for me. I could not attach a rational meaning to a single act in my entire life. The only thing that amazed me was how I had failed to realize this in the very beginning. All this had been common knowledge for so long. If not today, then tomorrow sickness and death will come (indeed, they were already approaching) to everyone, to me, and nothing will remain except the stench and the worms. My deeds, whatever they may be, will be forgotten sooner or later, and I myself will be no more. Why, then, do anything? How can anyone fail to see this and live? That's what is amazing! It is possible to live only as long as life intoxicates us; once we are sober we cannot help seeing that it is all a delusion, a stupid delusion! Nor is there anything funny or witty about it; it is only cruel and stupid.

There is an old Eastern fable about a traveler who was taken by surprise in the steppes by a raging wild beast. Trying to save himself from the beast, the traveler jumps into a dried-up well; but at the bottom of the well he sees a dragon with its jaws open wide, waiting to devour him. The unhappy man does not dare climb out for fear of being killed by the wild beast, and he does not dare jump to the bottom of the well for fear of being devoured by the dragon. So he grabs hold of a branch of a wild bush growing in the crevices of the well and clings to it. His arms grow weak, and he feels that soon he must fall prey to the death that awaits him on either side. Yet he still holds on, and while he is clinging to the branch he looks up to see two mice, one black and one white, evenly working their way around the branch of the bush he is hanging from, gnawing on it. Soon the bush will give way and break off, and he will fall into the jaws of the dragon. The traveler sees this and knows that he will surely die. But while he is still hanging there he looks around and sees some drops of honey on the leaves of the bush, and he stretches out his

tongue and licks them. Thus I cling to the branch of life, knowing that inevitably the dragon of death is waiting, ready to tear me to pieces; and I cannot understand why this torment has befallen me. I try to suck the honey that once consoled me, but the honey is no longer sweet. Day and night the black mouse and the white mouse gnaw at the branch to which I cling. I clearly see the dragon, and the honey has lost all its sweetness. I see only the inescapable dragon and the mice, and I cannot turn my eyes from them. This is no fairy tale but truth, irrefutable and understood by all.

The former delusion of the happiness of life that had concealed from me the horror of the dragon no longer deceives me. No matter how much I tell myself that I cannot understand the meaning of life, that I should live without thinking about it, I cannot do this because I have done it for too long already. Now I cannot help seeing the days and nights rushing toward me and leading me to death. I see only this, and this alone is truth. Everything else is a lie.

The two drops of honey which more than anything else had diverted my eyes from the cruel truth were my love for my family and my writing, which I referred to as art; yet this honey had lost its sweetness for me.

"My family," I said to myself. But my family, my wife and children, are people too. They are subject to the same conditions as I: they must either live in the lie or face the terrible truth. Why should they live? Why should I love them? Why care for them, bring them up, and watch over them? So that they can sink into the despair that eats away at me, or to turn them over to stupidity? If I love them, then I cannot hide the truth from them.

Every step they take in knowledge leads them to this truth. And the truth is death.

"Art, literature." Under the influence of success and praise from others I had persuaded myself for a long time that this was something that may be done in spite of the approaching death that will annihilate everything—myself, my works, and the memory of them. But I soon saw that this, too, was a delusion. It became clear to me that art is an ornamentation of life, something that lures us into life. But life had lost its charm for me, so how was I to charm others? As long as I was not living my own life but the life of another that was carrying me along on its crest, as long as I believed that life had a meaning, even though I could not express it, the reflection of every kind of life through literature and the arts gave me pleasure; I enjoyed looking at life in the mirror of art. But when I began to search for the meaning of life, when I began to feel the need to live, this mirror became either tormenting or unnecessary, superfluous and ludicrous. It was no longer possible for me to be consoled by what I saw in the mirror, for I could see that my situation was stupid and despairing. It was good for me to rejoice when in the depths of my soul I believed that my life had meaning. Then this play of lights and shades, the play of the comical, the tragic, the moving, the beautiful, and the terrible elements in life had comforted me. But when I saw that life was meaningless and terrible the play in the mirror could no longer amuse me. No matter how sweet the honey, it

could not be sweet to me, for I saw the dragon and the mice gnawing away at my support.

But it did not stop here. Had I simply understood that life has no meaning, I might have been able to calmly accept it; I might have recognized that such was my lot. But I could not rest content at this. Had I been like a man who lives in a forest from which he knows there is no way out, I might have been able to go on living; but I was like a man lost in the forest who was terrified by the fact that he was lost, like a man who was rushing about, longing to find his way and knowing that every step was leading him into deeper confusion, and yet who could not help rushing about.

This was the horror. And in order to be delivered from this horror, I wanted to kill myself. I felt a horror of what awaited me; I knew that this horror was more terrible than my present situation, but I could not keep it away and I did not have the patience to wait for the end. No matter how convincing the argument was that a blood vessel in the heart would burst anyway or that something else would rupture and it would be all over, I could not patiently await the end. The horror of the darkness was too great, and I wanted to be free of it as quickly as possible by means of a rope or a bullet. It was this feeling, more powerful than any other, that was leading me toward suicide.

## V

Several times I asked myself, "Can it be that I have overlooked something, that there is something which I have failed to understand? Is it not possible that this state of despair is common to everyone?" And I searched for an answer to my questions in every area of knowledge acquired by man. For a long time I carried on my painstaking search; I did not search casually, out of mere curiosity, but painfully, persistently, day and night, like a dying man seeking salvation. I found nothing.

I searched all areas of knowledge, and not only did I fail to find anything, but I was convinced that all those who had explored knowledge as I did had also come up with nothing. Not only had they found nothing, but they had clearly acknowledged the same thing that had brought me to despair: the only absolute knowledge attainable by man is that life is meaningless.

I searched everywhere. And thanks to a life spent in study and to my connections with the learned world, I had access to the most learned from all the various fields of knowledge. These scholars did not refuse to reveal to me the sum of their knowledge, not only through their books but in conversations with them; I knew everything that knowledge had to answer to the question of life.

For a long time I could not bring myself to believe that knowledge had no reply to the question of life other than the one it had come up with. For a long time I thought I might have misunderstood something, as I closely observed the gravity and seriousness in the tone of science, convinced in its position, while having nothing

to do with the question of human life. For a long time I was timid around knowledge, and I thought that the absurdity of the answers given to my questions was not the fault of knowledge but was due to my own ignorance; but the thing was that this to me was no joke, no game, but a matter of life and death; and I finally came to the conclusion that my questions were the only legitimate questions serving as a basis for all knowledge and that it was not I but science that was guilty before my questions if it should pretend to answer these questions.

My question, the question that had brought me to the edge of suicide when I was fifty years old, was the simplest question lying in the soul of every human being, from a silly child to the wisest of the elders, the question without which life is impossible; such was the way I felt about the matter. The question is this: What will come of what I do today and tomorrow? What will come of my entire life?

Expressed differently, the question may be: Why should I live? Why should I wish for anything or do anything? Or to put it still differently: Is there any meaning in my life that will not be destroyed by my inevitably approaching death?

Throughout human knowledge I sought an answer to this question, which is one and the same question in the various expressions of it. And I found that in regard to this question the sum of human knowledge is divided as if into two hemispheres lying opposite each other, into two opposite extremes occupying two poles, one positive and one negative. But there were no answers to the question of life at either pole.

One field of knowledge does not even acknowledge the question, even though it clearly and precisely answers the questions that it has posed independently. This is the field of experimental science, and at its extreme end is mathematics. The other field of knowledge acknowledges the questions but does not answer it. This is the field of speculative philosophy, and at its extreme end is metaphysics. ...

These areas of [scientific] knowledge completely ignore the question of life. They say, "We cannot tell you what you are and why you live; we do not have the answers to these questions, and we are not concerned with them. If you need to know about the laws of light, however, or about chemical compounds or the laws governing the development of organisms; if you need to know about the laws governing physical bodies, their forms and the relation between their size and number; if you need to know about the laws of your own mind, then for all this we have clear, precise, indubitable answers."

Generally the relation between the experimental sciences and the question of life may be expressed in this way: Question - Why do I live? Answer - In infinite space, in infinite time, infinitely small particles undergo modifications of infinite complexity, and when you understand the laws that govern these modifications, then you will understand why you live. ...

But, as in the domain of the experimental sciences, a person who sincerely asks how he is to live cannot be satisfied with an answer that tells him to study the infinite complexities and changes that an infinite number of particles may go through in infinite space and time. ... The task of experimental science is to determine the causal sequence of material phenomena. If experimental science should run into a question concerning an ultimate cause, it stumbles over nonsense. ...

Metaphysics or speculative philosophy occupies the extreme end of the spectrum of speculative sciences. This science clearly raises the question of what I am and what the universe is, the question of why I live and why the universe exists. And since its very beginning it has always answered in the same way. Whether the philosopher calls the essence of life that is within me and all living creatures an idea, a substance, a spirit, or a will, he is still saying that this essence exists and that I am this essence; but why it is there he does not know, and if he is a precise thinker, he does not answer. I ask, "Why does this essence exist, and what comes of the fact that it is and will be?" And not only does philosophy fail to answer, but all it can do itself is ask the same question. And if it is a true philosophy, then the sum of its labor lies in putting this question clearly. And if it holds firmly to its task, then it can have only one answer to the question of what I am and what the universe is: all and nothing. And to the question of why the universe exists and why I exist it can only reply: I do not know.

Thus no matter how I twist and turn the speculative answers of philosophy, I can obtain nothing resembling an answer; not because, as in the case of the clear, experimental sciences, the answer does not relate to my question, but because even though the sum of the intellectual labor is here directed toward my question, there is no answer. And instead of an answer, all one can obtain is the very same question put in a complicated form.

## VI

In my search for answers to the question of life I felt exactly as a man who is lost in a forest.

I came to a clearing, climbed a tree, and had a clear view of the endless space around me. But I could see that there was no house and that there could be no house; I went into the thick of the forest, into the darkness, but again I could see no house-only darkness.

Thus I wandered about in the forest of human knowledge. On one side of me were the clearings of mathematical and experimental sciences, revealing to me sharp horizons; but in no direction could I see a house. On the other side of me was the darkness of the speculative sciences, where every step I took plunged me deeper into darkness, and I was finally convinced that there could be no way out.

When I gave myself over to the bright light of knowledge, I was only diverting my eyes from the question. However clear and tempting the horizons that opened up to me might have been, however tempting it was to sink into the infinity of this knowledge, I soon realized that the clearer this knowledge was, the less I needed it, the less it answered my question.

"Well," I said to myself, "I know everything that science wants so much to know, but this path will not lead me to an answer to the question of the meaning of my life." In the realm of speculative science I saw that in spite of—or rather precisely because of—the fact that this knowledge was designed to answer my question, there could be no answer other than the one I had given myself: What is the meaning of my life? It has none. Or: What will come of my life? Nothing. Or: Why does everything that is exist, and why do I exist? Because it exists.

From one branch of human knowledge I received an endless number of precise answers to questions I had not asked, answers concerning the chemical composition of the stars, the movement of the sun toward the constellation Hercules, the origin of the species and of man, the forms of infinitely small atoms, and the vibration of infinitely small and imponderable particles of ether. But the answer given by this branch of knowledge to my question about the meaning of my life was only this: you are what you call your life; you are a temporary, random conglomeration of particles. The thing that you have been led to refer to as your life is simply the mutual interaction and alteration of these particles. This conglomeration will continue for a certain period of time; then the interaction of these particles will come to a halt, and the thing you call your life will come to an end and with it all your questions. You are a little lump of something randomly stuck together. The lump decomposes. The decomposition of this lump is known as your life. The lump falls apart, and thus the decomposition ends, as do all your questions. Thus the clear side of knowledge replies, and if it strictly follows its own principles, there is no more to be said.

It turns out, however, that such an answer does not constitute a reply to the question. I must know the meaning of my life, but to say that it is a particle of infinity not only fails to give it any meaning but destroys all possible meaning. ...

Wherever speculative knowledge is exact and may be called true philosophy, and not what Schopenhauer refers to as professorial philosophy, which serves only to divide all existing phenomena into new philosophical columns with new names; wherever philosophy does not turn away from the essential question, the answer is always the same as the one given by Socrates, Schopenhauer, Solomon, and the Buddha.

"We move closer to the truth only to the extent that we move further from life," says Socrates, as he prepares for death. What do we who love truth strive for in life? To be free of the body and of all the evils that result from the life of the body. If this is so, then how can we fail to rejoice when death approaches? "The wise man seeks death all his life, and for this reason death is not terrifying to him." ...



The fact that we are so frightened of nothingness, or that we long so to live only signifies that we ourselves are merely this desire to live, and that we know nothing except this desire. Therefore, upon the complete annihilation of the will, all that remains for us, we who are fulfilled by that will, is, of course, nothingness; but on the other hand, for those in whom the will has been transformed and renounced, this universe of ours which is so real, with all its suns and galaxies, is itself nothingness.

"Vanity of vanities," says Solomon, "vanity of vanities, all is vanity! What profit does a man derive from all the labors by which he toils under the sun? One generation comes, while another generation passes away; but the earth abides forever. What has been will be; what has been done will be done; and there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything, of which it may be said, behold, this is new? No, it has been already in the centuries that have come before us. There is no remembrance of former things; and there will be no remembrance of the things to come on the part of those who come afterward. I, the Preacher, was King over Israel in Jerusalem. And I gave up my heart to search and seek out through wisdom all the things that are under the sun; this hard pursuit God has given to the sons of men, so that they may be exercised in it. I have seen all things that are done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a languishing of the spirit. I spoke in my heart, saying, see how I have been exalted and have attained more wisdom than all who have ruled over Jerusalem before me.

And my heart held much wisdom and knowledge. And I gave my heart over to knowing wisdom and to knowing madness and folly; I discovered that this too is a languishing of the spirit. For in much wisdom is much grief, and he who increases wisdom increases sorrow.

"I spoke in my heart, saying, I will try you with mirth, and you will enjoy the pleasures of good things; but this too is vanity. Of laughter I said: it is foolishness; and of mirth: what does it do? I thought in my heart to delight my body with wine, and though my heart was guided by wisdom, I thought to adhere to foolishness until I could see what was good for the sons of men and discover what they should do under heaven during the few days of their lives. I undertook great deeds: I erected buildings and planted vineyards for myself. I set up gardens and orchards and planted every kind of fruit-bearing tree; I made reservoirs to water the orchards, so that the trees might spring up. I acquired servants and maidservants, and there were servants born in my house; I also had cattle, great and small, more than any who had been in Jerusalem before me; I obtained silver and gold and treasures from kings and from other regions; I gathered unto myself singers and women who sing and the delights of the sons of men and various musical instruments. And I became greater and wealthier than all who had ruled Jerusalem before me; and my wisdom abided with me. Whatever my eyes desired I kept not from them, nor did I forbid my heart any delight. And I looked around at all the deeds my hands had performed and at the labors by which I had toiled; and behold, all was vanity and a languishing of the spirit, and there was no profit from them under the sun. And I turned about to look upon wisdom and madness and

foolishness. But I found that one lot fell to them all. And in my heart I said: the same lot will fall to me as to the fool-why, then, had I become so wise? And I said to my heart: this too is vanity. For there will be no eternal memory of the wise man or of the fool; in the days to come all will be forgotten, and alas, the wise man dies the same death as the fool! And I came to hate life, because all the works that are done under the sun had become repulsive to me; for all is vanity and a languishing of the spirit. And I came to hate the labor by which I had toiled under the sun, because it must be left to the man who will come after me. For what will a man have from all his labor and the anxieties of his heart by which he toils under the sun? For all his days are sorrow and his labors grief; even at night his heart does not know peace. And this too is vanity. There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and let his soul find delight in his labor.

"All things come alike to all; one lot falls to the righteous and to the wicked, to the good and to the evil, to the clean and to the unclean, to the one who sacrifices and to the one who does not sacrifice; as to the virtuous, so to the sinner; as to the one who swears, so to the one who fears an oath. This is an evil among all things that are done under the sun, that one lot falls to all, and that the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, that there is madness in their heart and in their life; and after this they go to join the dead. Whoever is among the living still has hope, since it is better to be a living dog than a dead lion. The living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, neither have they any reward, for even the memory of them has been lost to forgetfulness; their love, their hate, and their jealousy have already vanished, and there will be no more honor done to them in all the things that are done under the sun."

Thus speaks Solomon, or the one who has written these words.

And this is what an Indian sage has to say:

Sakia-Muni, a young and happy prince from whom sickness, old age, and death had been hidden, went out for a ride one day and saw a dreadful, toothless, driveling old man. The prince, from whom until now old age had been hidden, was taken aback and asked the driver what this meant and why this man had come to such a pitiful, disgusting, hideous state. And when he found out that this is the common lot of all people, that he, the young prince, would also come to this, he could not go on with the drive and ordered the driver to return home so that he could reflect on this. And he shut himself up alone and pondered it. He probably thought of something or other to console him, for once again, happy and cheerful, he went out for a drive. But this time he met a sick man. He saw an emaciated, feeble, trembling man with dim eyes. The prince, from whom sickness had been hidden, stopped and asked what this could mean. And when he found out that this was sickness, which befalls all people, and that even he, the healthy and happy prince, may get sick tomorrow, once again the spirit of merriment left him; he ordered the driver to return home, where he again sought peace of mind. And he probably found it, for a third time he went out for a drive. But the third time he saw yet another new sight; he saw some people carrying something. "What is it?" A

dead man. "What does dead mean?" asked the prince. And he was told that to become a dead man means to become what this man had become. The prince went down to the dead man, uncovered him and looked at him. "And what now will become of him?" asked the prince. And he was told that the man would be buried in the earth. "Why?" Because he will never again be alive, and only stench and worms will come of him. "And this is the fate of all people? And it will happen to me as well? They will bury me, and a stench will rise from me, and worms will consume me?" Yes. "Go back! I don't want to go for a drive, I shall never go for a drive again."

Sakia-Muni could find no comfort in life. He decided that life is a great evil, and he drew on all the strength of his soul to free himself and others from life, to free them in such a way that after death life would never be renewed and the root of life would be completely destroyed. Thus speak all the Indian sages.

Thus we have the direct answers that human wisdom has to give when it answers the question of life.

"The life of the body is an evil and a lie. And so the destruction of the life of the body is a blessing, and we should long for it," says Socrates.

"Life is what it should not be, an evil; and a passage into nothingness is the only blessing that life has to offer," says Schopenhauer.

"Everything in the world-both folly and wisdom, wealth and poverty, joy and sorrow-all is vanity and emptiness. A man dies and nothing remains. And this is absurd," says Solomon.

"It is not possible to live, knowing that suffering, decrepitness, old age, and death are inevitable; we must free ourselves from life and from all possibility of life," says the Buddha.

And the very thing that has been uttered by these powerful minds has been said, thought, and felt by millions of people like them. I too have thought and felt the same way.

Thus my wanderings among the fields of knowledge not only failed to lead me out of my despair but rather increased it. One area of knowledge did not answer the question of life; the other branch of knowledge did indeed answer, all the more confirming my despair and showing me that the thing that had befallen me was not due to an error on my part or to a sick state of mind. On the contrary, this area of knowledge confirmed for me the fact that I had been thinking correctly and had been in agreement with the most powerful minds known to humanity.

I could not be deceived. All is vanity. Happy is he who has never been born; death is better than life; we must rid ourselves of life.

## VII

Having failed to find an explanation in knowledge, I began to look for it in life, hoping to find it in the people around me. And so I began to observe people like myself to see how they lived and to determine what sort of relation they had with the question that had led me to despair.

And this is what I found among people whose circumstances were precisely the same as mine with respect to education and way of life.

I found that for the people of my class there were four means of escaping the terrible situation in which we all find ourselves.

The first means of escape is that of ignorance. It consists of failing to realize and to understand that life is evil and meaningless. ... They see neither the dragon that awaits them nor the mice gnawing away at the branch they cling to; they simply lick the drops of honey. But they lick these drops of honey only for the time being; something will turn their attention toward the dragon and the mice, and there will be an end to their licking. There was nothing for me to learn from them, since we cannot cease to know what we know.

The second escape is that of epicureanism. Fully aware of the hopelessness of life, it consists of enjoying for the present the blessings that we do have without looking at the dragon or the mice; it lies in licking the honey as best we can, especially in those places where there is the most honey on the bush. Solomon describes this escape in the following manner:

"And I commended mirth, for there is nothing better for man under the sun than to eat, drink, and be merry; this will be his mainstay in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun.

"So go and eat your bread with joy and drink your wine in the gladness of your heart. Enjoy life with a woman you love through all the days of your life of vanity, through all your vain days; for this is your fate in life and in the labors by which you toil under the sun. Do whatever you can do by the strength of your hand, for there is no work in the grave where you are going, no reflection, no knowledge, no wisdom."

Most people of our class pursue this second means of escape. ... The dullness of the imagination of these people enables them to forget what left the Buddha with no peace: the inevitability of sickness, old age, and death, which if not today then tomorrow will destroy all these pleasures. The fact that some of these people maintain that their dullness of thought and imagination is positive philosophy does not, in my opinion, distinguish them from those who lick the honey without seeing the problem. I could not imitate these people, since I did not lack imagination and could not pretend that I did. Like every man who truly lives, I could not turn my eyes away from the mice and the dragon once I had seen them.

The third means of escape is through strength and energy. It consists of destroying life once one has realized that life is evil and meaningless. Only unusually strong and logically consistent people act in this manner. Having realized all the stupidity of the joke that is being played on us and seeing that the blessings of the dead are greater than those of the living and that it is better not to exist, they act and put an end to this stupid joke; and they use any means of doing it: a rope around the neck, water, a knife in the heart, a train. There are more and more people of our class who are acting in this way. For the most part, the people who perform these acts are in the very prime of life, when the strength of the soul is at its peak and when the habits that undermine human reason have not yet taken over. I saw that this was the most worthy means of escape, and I wanted to take it.

The fourth means of escape is that of weakness. It consists of continuing to drag out a life that is evil and meaningless, knowing beforehand that nothing can come of it. The people in this category know that death is better than life, but they do not have the strength to act rationally and quickly put an end to the delusion by killing themselves; instead they seem to be waiting for something to happen. This is the escape of weakness, for if I know what is better and have it within my reach, then why not surrender myself to it? I myself belonged in this category.

Thus the people of my class save themselves from a terrible contradiction in these four ways. No matter how much I strained my intellectual faculties, I could see no escape other than these four. One escape lies in failing to realize that life is meaningless, vain, and evil, and that it is better not to live. It was impossible for me not to know this, and once I had discovered the truth I could not close my eyes to it. Another escape lies in making use of whatever life has to offer without thinking about the future. And this I could not do. Like Sakia-Muni, I could find no pleasure in life once I had come to know what old age, suffering, and death are. My imagination was too active. Moreover, I could not enjoy the transient pleasures that just happened to come my way for a moment. The third escape lies in knowing that life is evil and absurd and putting an end to it by killing yourself. I understood this, but for some reason I did not kill myself. The fourth means of escape lies in knowing that life is as Solomon and Schopenhauer have described it, knowing that it is a stupid joke being played on us, and yet continuing to live, to wash, dress, dine, talk, and even write books. Such a position was disgusting and painful to me, but I remained in it all the same.

Now I see that if I did not kill myself, it was because I had some vague notion that my ideas were all wrong. However convincing and unquestionable the train of my thoughts and of the thoughts of the wise seemed to me, the ideas that had led us to affirm the meaninglessness of life, I still had some obscure doubt about the point of departure of my reflections.

My doubt was expressed in this way: I, that is, my reason declared that life is irrational. If there is nothing higher than reason (and there is no way to prove that there is anything higher than it), then reason is the creator of life for me. If there

were no reason, then for me there would be no life. So how can this reason deny life when it is itself the creator of life? Or to put it differently: if there were no life, my reason would not exist either. Therefore, reason is the offspring of life. Life is all. Reason is the fruit of life, and yet this reason denies that very life. I felt that something was wrong here.

"Life is an absurd evil; there is no doubting this," I said to myself. "But I have lived, and I am still living; and all of humanity has lived and continues to live. How can this be? Why do men live when they are able to die? Can it be that Schopenhauer and I are the only ones brilliant enough to have realized that life is meaningless and evil?"

Understanding the vanity of life is not so difficult, and even the simplest of people have understood it for a long time; yet they have lived and continue to live. How is it that they all go on living and never think to doubt the rationality of life?

My acquired knowledge, confirmed by the wisdom of the wisest of men, revealed to me that everything in the world, both organic and inorganic, was arranged with extraordinary intelligence; my position alone was absurd. But these fools, the huge masses of simple people, know nothing about the organic and inorganic arrangement of the world, and yet they live, all the while believing that life is arranged in a very rational manner!

It occurred to me that there still might be something that I did not know. After all, ignorance acts precisely in this manner. Ignorance always says exactly what I was saying. Whenever it does not know something, it says that whatever it does not know is stupid. It really comes down to this: all of mankind has lived and continues to live as if it knew the meaning of life, for without knowing the meaning of life it could not live; but I am saying that all this life is meaningless and that I cannot live.

No one prevents us from denying life, as Schopenhauer has done. So kill yourself, and you won't have to worry about it. If you don't like life, kill yourself. If you live and cannot understand the meaning of life, put an end to it; but don't turn around and start talking and writing about how you don't understand life. You are in cheerful company, for whom everything is going well, and they all know what they are doing; if you are bored and find it offensive, leave.

After all, if we are convinced of the necessity of suicide and do not go through with it, then what are we, if not the weakest, most inconsistent, and, to speak quite frankly, the most stupid of all people, fussing like foolish children over a new toy?

After all, our wisdom, however accurate it may be, has not provided us with an understanding of the meaning of life. Yet the millions who make up the sum of humanity take part in life without ever doubting the meaning of life.

Indeed, since ancient times, when the life of which I do know something began, people who knew the arguments concerning the vanity of life, the arguments that

revealed to me its meaninglessness, lived nonetheless, bringing to life a meaning of their own. Since the time when people somehow began to live, this meaning of life has been with them, and they have led this life up to my own time. Everything that is in me and around me is the fruit of their knowledge of life. The very tools of thought by which I judge life and condemn it were created not by me but by them. I myself was born, educated and have grown up thanks to them. They dug out the iron, taught us how to cut the timber, tamed the cattle and the horses, showed us how to sow crops and live together; they brought order to our lives. They taught me how to think and to speak. I am their offspring, nursed by them, reared by them, taught by them; I think according to their thoughts, their words, and now I have proved to them that it is all meaningless! "Something is wrong here," I said to myself. "I must have made a mistake somewhere." But I looked and looked and could not find where the mistake could be.

## VIII

All these doubts, which I am now in a position to express more or less dearly, I was then unable to express. I simply felt that no matter how logically inescapable my conclusions about the vanity of life might have been, there was something wrong with them, even though they had been confirmed by the greatest of thinkers. Whether it was my thinking or my formulation of the question, I did not know. I only felt that as convinced as my reason might have been, this was not enough. All of these arguments could not persuade me to follow my thinking to its logical end, that is, to kill myself. I would not be speaking the truth if I were to say that it was through reason that I had arrived at this point without killing myself. Reason was at work, but there was something else at work too, something I can only call a consciousness of life. There was also a force at work that had led me to focus my attention on one thing instead of another; it was this force that brought me out of my despairing situation, and it took a direction that is completely foreign to reason. This force led me to focus my attention on the fact that like hundreds of other people of my class I was not the whole of humanity, and that I still did not know what the life of humanity was.

As I looked about the narrow circle of my peers I saw only people who did not understand the problem, people who understood it but drowned it their intoxication with life, people who understood it and put an end to life, and people who understood it but out of weakness continued to live a life of despair. That was all I could see. I thought that this narrow circle of learned, wealthy, and idle people to which I belonged comprised the sum of mankind and that the millions who had lived and continued to live outside of this circle were animals, not people.

How strange and utterly incredible it seems to me now that in my reasoning I could have overlooked the life of humanity all around me, that I could have fallen into such a ridiculous state of error as to think that my life and the life of a Solomon or a Schopenhauer was the true, normal life, while the lives of millions of others were not worthy of consideration; but however strange it may seem to me now, such was the case at that time. Led astray by intellectual pride, I thought there could be

no doubt that along with Solomon and Schopenhauer, I had posed the question so precisely, so truthfully, that there were no two ways about it; I thought there could be no doubt that all these millions were among those who had never penetrated the depths of the question. As I searched for the meaning of my life it never once occurred to me to ask, "What sort of meaning do the millions in the world who have lived and who now live ascribe to their lives?"

For a long time I lived in this state of madness which, if not in word then in deed, is especially pronounced among the most liberal and most learned of men. I do not know whether it was due to the strange sort of instinctive love I had for the working people that I was compelled to understand them and to see that they are not as stupid as we think; or whether it was my sincere conviction that I knew nothing better to do than to hang myself that led me to realize this: if I wanted to live and to understand the meaning of life, I had to seek this meaning not among those who have lost it and want to destroy themselves but among the millions of people, living and dead, who created life and took upon themselves the burden of their lives as well as our own. So I looked around at the huge masses of simple people, living and dead, who were neither learned nor wealthy, and I saw something quite different. I saw that all of these millions of people who have lived and still live did not fall into my category, with only a few rare exceptions. I could not regard them as people who did not understand the question because they themselves put the question with unusual clarity and answered it. Nor could I regard them as Epicureans, since their lives are marked more by deprivation and suffering than by pleasure. And even less could I regard them as people who carried on a meaningless life in an irrational manner, since they could explain every act of their lives, even death itself. And they looked upon killing oneself as the greatest of evils. It turned out that all of humanity had some kind of knowledge of the meaning of life which I had overlooked and held in contempt. It followed that rational knowledge does not give meaning to life, that it excludes life; the meaning that millions of people give to life is based on some kind of knowledge that is despised and considered false.

As presented by the learned and the wise, rational knowledge denies the meaning of life, but the huge masses of people acknowledge meaning through an irrational knowledge. And this irrational knowledge is faith, the one thing that I could not accept. This involves the God who is both one and three, the creation in six days, devils, angels and everything else that I could not accept without taking leave of my senses.

My position was terrible. I knew that I could find nothing in the way of rational knowledge except a denial of life; and in faith I could find nothing except a denial of reason, and this was even more impossible than a denial of life. According to rational knowledge, it followed that life is evil, and people know it. They do not have to live, yet they have lived and they do live, just as I myself had lived, even though I had known for a long time that life is meaningless and evil. According to faith, it followed that in order to understand the meaning of life I would have to turn away from reason, the very thing for which meaning was necessary.



## IX

I ran into a contradiction from which there were only two ways out: either the thing that I had referred to as reason was not as rational as I had thought, or the thing that I took to be irrational was not as irrational as I had thought. ...

Having understood this, I realized that I could not search for an answer to my question in rational knowledge. ...

I also realized that no matter how irrational and unattractive the answers given by faith, they have the advantage of bringing to every reply a relationship between the finite and the infinite, without which there can be no reply. However I may put the question of how I am to live, the answer is: according to the law of God. Is there anything real that will come of my life? Eternal torment or eternal happiness. What meaning is there which is not destroyed by death? Union with the infinite God, paradise.

Thus in addition to rational knowledge, which before had seemed to be the only knowledge, I was inevitably led to recognize a different type of knowledge, an irrational type, which all of humanity had: faith, which provides us with the possibility of living. As far as I was concerned, faith was as irrational as ever, but I could not fail to recognize that it alone provides humanity with an answer to the question of life, thus making it possible to live.

Rational knowledge led me to the conclusion that life is meaningless; my life came to a halt, and I wanted to do away with myself. As I looked around at people, I saw that they were living, and I was convinced that they knew the meaning of life. Then I turned and looked at myself; as long as I knew the meaning of life, I lived. As it was with others, so it was with me: faith provided me with the meaning of life and the possibility of living.

Upon a further examination of the people in other countries, of my contemporaries, and of those who have passed away, I saw the same thing. Wherever there is life, there is faith; since the origin of mankind faith has made it possible for us to live, and the main characteristics of faith are everywhere and always the same.

No matter what answers a given faith might provide for us, every answer of faith gives infinite meaning to the finite existence of man, meaning that is not destroyed by suffering, deprivation, and death. Therefore, the meaning of life and the possibility of living may be found in faith alone. I realized that the essential significance of faith lies not only in the "manifestation of things unseen" and so on, or in revelation (this is simply a description of one of the signs of faith); nor is it simply the relation between man and God (faith must first be determined and then God, not the other way around), or agreeing with what one has been told, even though this is what it is most often understood to be. Faith is the knowledge of the meaning of human life, whereby the individual does not destroy himself but lives. Faith is the force of life. If a man lives, then he must have faith in something. If he

did not believe that he had something he must live for, then he would not live. If he fails to see and understand the illusory nature of the finite, then he believes in the finite; if he understands the illusory nature of the finite, then he must believe in the infinite. Without faith it is impossible to live. ...

And what did I do when I searched for an answer in the area of philosophy? I studied the thoughts of those who found themselves in the same situation as I, and they had no answer to the question of why I live. I was not able to learn anything here that I did not already know—namely, that it is impossible to know anything.

... The concepts of an infinite God, moral good and evil, the immortality of the soul, and a relation between God and the affairs of man are ones that have been worked out historically through the life of a humanity that is hidden from our eyes. They are concepts without which there would be no life, without which I myself could not live, and yet, putting aside all the labor of humankind, I wanted to do it all over again by myself and in my own way.

I did not think so at the time, but even then the seeds of these thoughts had already been planted within me. I realized first of all that despite our wisdom, the position of Schopenhauer, Solomon, and myself was absurd: we considered life evil, and yet we lived. This is clearly absurd because if life is meaningless and if I love reason so much, then I must destroy life so there will be no one around to deny it. Secondly, I realized that all our arguments went round and round in a vicious circle, like a cog whose gears are out of sync. No matter how refined our reasoning, we could not come up with an answer; it would always turn out that  $0 = 0$ , and our method was therefore probably mistaken. Finally, I began to realize that the most profound wisdom of man was rooted in the answers given by faith and that I did not have the right to deny them on the grounds of reason; above all, I realized that these answers alone can form a reply to the question of life.

## X

I understood this, but it did not make things any easier for me.

I was now prepared to accept any faith, as long as it did not demand of me a direct denial of reason, for such a denial would be a lie. So I studied the texts of Buddhism and Muhammadanism; and more than ever those of Christianity and the lives of Christians who lived around me. ...

And I began to grow closer to the believers from among the poor, the simple, the uneducated folk, from among the pilgrims, the monks, the Raskolniks, the peasants. .. [T]he whole life of the believers from the working people was a confirmation of that meaning of life which was the substance of their faith. So I began to examine the life and the teachings of these people, and the closer I looked, the more I was convinced that theirs was the true faith, that their faith was indispensable to them and that this faith alone provided them with the meaning and possibility of life. Contrary to what I saw among the people of our class, where

life was possible without faith and scarcely one in a thousand was a believer, among these people there was scarcely one in a thousand who was not a believer. Contrary to what I saw among the people of our class, where a lifetime is passed in idleness, amusement, and dissatisfaction with life, these people spent their lives at hard labor and were less dissatisfied with life than the wealthy. Contrary to the people of our class who resist and are unhappy with the hardship and suffering of their lot, these people endure sickness and tribulation without question or resistance—peacefully, and in the firm conviction that this is as it should be, cannot be otherwise, and is good. Contrary to the fact that the greater our intellect, the less we understand the meaning of life and the more we see some kind of evil joke in our suffering and death, these people live, suffer, and draw near to death peacefully and, more often than not, joyfully. Contrary to peaceful death—death without horror and despair, which is the rarest exception in our class—it is the tormenting, unyielding, and sorrowful death that is the rarest exception among the people. And these people, who are deprived of everything that for Solomon and me constituted the only good in life, yet who nonetheless enjoy the greatest happiness, form the overwhelming majority of mankind. I looked further still around myself. I examined the lives of the great masses of people who have lived in the past and live today. Among those who have understood the meaning of life, who know how to live and die, I saw not two or three or ten but hundreds, thousands, millions. And all of them, infinitely varied in their customs, intellects, educations, and positions and in complete contrast to my ignorance, knew the meaning of life and death, labored in peace, endured suffering and hardship, lived and died, and saw in this not vanity but good.

I grew to love these people. The more I learned about the lives of those living and dead about whom I had read and heard, the more I loved them and the easier it became for me to live. I lived this way for about two years, and a profound transformation came over me, one that had been brewing in me for a long time and whose elements had always been a part of me. The life of our class, of the wealthy and the learned, was not only repulsive to me but had lost all meaning. The sum of our action and thinking, of our science and art, all of it struck me as the overindulgences of a spoiled child. I realized that meaning was not to be sought here. The actions of the laboring people, of those who create life, began to appear to me as the one true way. I realized that the meaning provided by this life was truth, and I embraced it.

## XI

When I remembered how these very beliefs had repelled me and seemed meaningless in the mouths of people who led lives in contradiction to them, and when I recalled how the same beliefs attracted me and seemed sensible as I saw people who lived by them, I realized why I had once turned away from them and had found them meaningless, while now I was drawn to them and found them full of meaning. I realized that I had lost my way and how I had lost my way. My straying had resulted not so much from wrong thinking as from bad living. I realized that the truth had been hidden from me not so much because my thoughts were in error as

because my life itself had been squandered in the satisfaction of lusts, spent under the exceptional conditions of epicureanism. I realized that in asking, "What is my life?" and then answering, "An evil," I was entirely correct. The error lay in the fact that I had taken an answer that applied only to myself and applied it to life in general; I had asked myself what my life was and received the reply: evil and meaningless. And so it was: my life, wasted in the indulgence of lusts, was meaningless and evil, and the assertion that life is meaningless and evil thus applied only to my life and not to life in general. I understood the truth that I later found in the Gospel, the truth that people clung to darkness and shunned the light because their deeds were evil. For he who does evil hates the light and will not venture into the light, lest his deeds be revealed. I realized that in order to understand the meaning of life, it is necessary first of all that life not be evil and meaningless, and then one must have the power of reason to understand it. I realized why I had been wandering around such an obvious truth for so long and that in order to think and speak about the life of humankind, one must speak and think about the life of humankind and not about the life of a few parasites. This truth has always been the truth, like  $2 \times 2 = 4$ , but I had not acknowledged it, for in acknowledging that  $2 \times 2 = 4$ , I would have had to admit that I was not a good man. And it was more important and more pressing for me to feel that I was a good man than to admit that  $2 \times 2 = 4$ . But I came to love good people and to hate myself, and I acknowledged the truth. Now it all became clear to me.

Consider an executioner who has spent his life in torture and chopping off heads or a hopeless drunk or a madman who has wasted away in a dark room, who has despised this room and yet imagines that he would perish if he should leave it—what if these men should ask themselves, "What is life?" Clearly, they would be able to come up with only one answer, that life is the greatest of evils; and the madman's answer would be quite correct but only for him. What if I were such a madman? What if all of us who are wealthy and learned are such madmen?

And I realized that we were in fact such madmen. I, at any rate, was such a madman. To be sure, it is the nature of a bird to fly, gather food, build a nest; and when I see a bird doing this I rejoice in its joy. It is the nature of the goat, the hare, the wolf to feed, multiply, and nourish their young; and when they do this I am firmly convinced that they are happy and that their lives are reasonable. What then should man do? He should earn his life in exactly the same way the animals do but with this one difference: that he will perish if he does it alone—he must live his life not for himself but for all. And when he does this, I am firmly convinced that he is happy and his life is reasonable. What, indeed, had I done in all my thirty years of conscious life? Not only had I failed to live my life for the sake of all, but I had not even lived it for myself. I had lived as a parasite, and once I had asked myself why I lived, the answer I received was: for nothing. If the meaning of human life lies in the way it is lived, then how could I, who had spent thirty years not living life but ruining it for myself and others, receive any reply other than this, that my life was meaningless and evil? It was indeed meaningless and evil. The life of the world unfolds according to someone's will; the life of the world and our own lives are entrusted to someone's care. If we are to have any hope of understanding this

will, then we must first of all fulfill it; we must do what is asked of us. And if I will not do what is asked of me, then I will never understand what is asked of me, much less what is asked of all of us and of the whole world.

If a naked, hungry beggar should be taken from the crossroads and led into an enclosed area in a magnificent establishment to be given food and drink, and if he should then be made to move some kind of lever up and down, it is obvious that before determining why he was brought there to move the lever and whether the structure of the establishment was reasonable, the beggar must first work the lever. If he will work it, then he will see that it operates a pump, that the pump draws up water, and that the water flows into a garden. Then he will be taken from the enclosed area and set to another task, and then he will gather fruits and enter into the joy of his lord. As he rises from lower to higher concerns, understanding more and more about the structure of the establishment and becoming part of it, he will never think to ask why he is there, and there is no way he will ever come to reproach his master.

Thus the simple, uneducated working people, whom we look upon as animals, do the will of their master without ever reproaching him. But we, the wise, consume everything the master provides without doing what he asks of us; instead, we sit in a circle and speculate on why we should do something so stupid as moving this lever up and down. And we have hit upon an answer. We have figured it out that either the master is stupid or he does not exist, while we alone are wise; only we feel that we are good for nothing and that we must somehow get rid of ourselves.

## XII

Recognizing the errors of rational knowledge helped me to free myself from the temptations of idle reflection. The conviction that a knowledge of the truth can be found only in life led me to doubt that my own life was as it should be; and the one thing that saved me was that I was able to tear myself from my isolation, look at the true life of the simple working people, and realize that this alone is the true life. I realized that if I wanted to understand life and its meaning, I would have to live not the life of a parasite but the genuine life; and once I have accepted the meaning that is given to life by the real humanity that makes up life, I would have to test it out.

This is what happened to me at the time: in the course of a whole year, when almost every minute I was asking myself whether I should end it all with a rope or a bullet, when I was occupied with the thoughts and observations I have described, my heart was tormented with an agonizing feeling. This feeling I can only describe as a search for God.

I say that this search for God was born not of reason but of an emotion because it was a search that arose not from my thought process—indeed, it was in direct opposition to my thinking—but from my heart. It was a feeling of dread, of

loneliness, of forlornness in the midst of all that was alien to me; and it was a feeling of hope for someone's help. ...

If I exist, then there is something that causes me to exist, the cause of all causes. And this cause of all that exists is called God; and I dwelled on this thought and tried with all my being to recognize the presence of this cause. As soon as I was conscious of the existence of such a power over me, I felt the possibility of life. But I asked myself; "What is this cause, this power? How am I to think about it? What is my relation to this thing I call God?" And only the answer that was familiar to me came into my head: "He is the creator, the provider of all things." I was not satisfied with this answer, and I felt that the thing I needed in order to live was still missing. I was overcome with horror, and I began to pray to the one whom I sought, that he might help me. And the more I prayed, the more clear it became to me that he did not hear me and that there was absolutely no one I could turn to. My heart full of despair over the fact that there is no God, I cried, "Lord, have mercy on me, save me! O Lord, my God, show me the way!" But no one had mercy on me, and I felt that my life had come to a stop.

But again and again and from various directions I kept coming back to the conviction that I could not have come into the world without any motive, cause, or meaning, that I could not be the fledgling fallen from a nest that I felt myself to be. If I lie on my back in the tall grass and cry out like a fallen fledgling, it is because my mother brought me into the world, kept me warm, fed me, and loved me. But where is my mother now? If I have been cast out, then who has cast me out? I cannot help but feel that someone who loved me gave birth to me. Who is this someone? Again, God.

"He sees and knows of my search, my despair, my struggle," I would say to myself. "He exists." And as soon as I acknowledged this for an instant, life immediately rose up within me, and I could sense the possibility and even the joy of being. But again I would shift from the acknowledgment of the existence of God to a consideration of my relation to him ... And again, isolated from me and from the world, God would melt away before my eyes like a piece of ice; again nothing remained, again the source of life withered away. I was overcome with despair and felt that there was nothing for me to do but kill myself. And, worst of all, I felt that I could not bring myself to go through with it.

I slipped into these situations not two or three times but tens and hundreds of times—now joy and vitality, now despair and a consciousness of the impossibility of life.

I remember one day in early spring when I was alone in the forest listening to the sounds of the woods. I listened and thought about the one thing that had constantly occupied me for the last three years. Again I was searching for God.

"Very well," I said to myself. "So there is no God like the one I have imagined; the only reality is my life. There is no such God. And nothing, no miracle of any kind, can prove there is, because miracles exist only in my irrational imagination."

"But where does my notion of God, of the one whom I seek, come from?" I asked myself. And again with this thought there arose in me joyous waves of life. Everything around me came to life, full of meaning. But my joy did not last long. My mind continued its work. "The concept of God," I told myself, "is not God. A concept is something that occurs within me; the concept of God is something I can conjure up inside myself at will. This is not what I seek. I am seeking that without which there could be no life." Once again everything within me and around me began to die; again I felt the longing to kill myself.

But at that point I took a closer look at myself and at what had been happening within me; and I remembered the hundreds of times I had gone through these deaths and revivals. I remembered that I had lived only when I believed in God. Then, as now, I said to myself, "As long as I know God, I live; when I forget, when I do not believe in him, I die." What are these deaths and revivals? It is clear that I do not live whenever I lose my faith in the existence of God, and I would have killed myself long ago if I did not have some vague hope of finding God. I truly live only whenever I am conscious of him and seek him. "What, then, do I seek?" a voice cried out within me. "He is there, the one without whom there could be no life." To know God and to live come to one and the same thing. God is life.

"Live, seeking God, for there can be no life without God." And more powerfully than ever a light shone within me and all around me, and this light has not abandoned me since.

Thus I was saved from suicide. When and how this transformation within me was accomplished, I could not say. Just as the life force within me was gradually and imperceptibly destroyed, and I encountered the impossibility of life, the halting of life, and the need to murder myself, so too did this life force return to me gradually and imperceptibly. And the strange thing is that the life force which returned to me was not new but very old; it was the same force that had guided me during the early periods of my life. In essence I returned to the first things, to the things of childhood and youth. I returned to a faith in that will which gave birth to me and which asked something of me; I returned to the conviction that the single most important purpose in my life was to be better, to live according to this will. I returned to the conviction that I could find the expression of this will in something long hidden from me, something that all of humanity had worked out for its own guidance; in short, I returned to a belief in God, in moral perfection, and in a tradition that instills life with meaning. The only difference was that I had once accepted all this on an unconscious level, while now I knew that I could not live without it.

What happened to me was something like the following. Unable to recall how I got there, I found myself in a boat that had been launched from some unknown shore;

the way to the other shore was pointed out to me, the oars were placed in my inexperienced hands, and I was left alone. I worked the oars as best I knew how and rowed on. But the further I paddled toward the center, the faster became the current that took me off-course, and I encountered more and more people who, like myself, were being carried away by the current. There were a few who continued to row; some had thrown away their oars. There were large boats, enormous ships, filled with people; some struggled against the current, others gave themselves up to it. And, looking downstream at everyone being carried along by the current, the further I rowed, the more I forgot the way that had been pointed out to me. At the very center of the current, in the throng of boats and ships being carried downstream, I lost my way altogether and threw down my oars. All around me, in joy and triumph, people rushed downstream under sail and oar, assuring me and each other that there could be no other direction. And I believed them and moved along with them. And I was carried off a long way, so far that I heard the roar of the rapids in which I was bound to perish and saw boats being destroyed in them. Then I came to my senses. For a long time I could not understand what had happened to me. I saw before me the singular ruin toward which I was rushing headlong and which I feared, I could not see salvation anywhere, and I did not know what to do. But, looking back, I saw countless boats that were relentlessly struggling against the current, and I remembered the oars and the way to the shore and began to pull against the current and head back upstream toward it.

The shore was God, the stream was tradition, and the oars were the free will given to me to make it to the shore where I would be joined with God. Thus the force of life was renewed within me, and I began to live once again.

### XIII

... This meaning, if it is possible to express it, was the following. Every human being has been brought into the world according to the will of God. And God created us in such a way that every human being can either save his own soul or destroy it. Man's task in life is to save his soul.

In order to save our souls, we must live according to the ways of God, and in order to live according to the ways of God, we must renounce the sensual pleasures of life; we must labor, suffer, and be kind and humble. This is the meaning that the people have derived from all the religious teachings handed down and conferred upon them by their pastors, and from the tradition that lives in them, expressed through their legends, sayings, and stories. This meaning was clear to me and dear to my heart. ...