On the Relation between Love, Marriage and Suffering

An Interview with Alain de Botton

Our guest tonight has dedicated his life to answer to one main question: How do we live a good life and die well? The guest is founder of The School of Life, a global organization dedicated to developing emotional intelligence and applying psychology, philosophy, and culture to everyday life. His style made philosophy accessible to millions of people globally through numerous books, articles and videos, some of which was translated into Arabic such as The Consolations of Philosophy, How Proust Can Change Your Life and Why You Will Marry the Wrong Person. Mr. Alain de Botton welcome to **Hekmah journal**.

1- **Who is the philosopher who has influenced Alain de Botton the most? And why?**

I wouldn't have become the writer I am if I hadn't, in my early 20s, discovered the work of the French academic and essayist Roland Barthes. At university, I felt a confused longing to write, but couldn't imagine what sort of writer to be – nothing I'd yet come across seemed to provide the model that could offer me the courage to begin. I wasn't

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interested enough in novels, I couldn't tell 'a story', but the non-fiction I knew either had an off-puttingly impersonal, staid quality or else, in the case of memoirs, lacked the intellectual backbone I needed.

Then I discovered a Frenchman who showed me a new way of writing non-fiction. Roland Barthes spent much of his career writing about the most ordinary things: washing powder, the Eiffel Tower, falling in love, short and long-hemmed skirts, photographs of his mother. And yet he brought a classical education and a philosophical mind to bear on these subjects. He knew how to connect Racine and beach holidays, Freud and the anticipation of a lover's phonecall. His work rejected the division between the high and the low, like so many modern artists (Joyce and Beckett, Duchamp and Joseph Cornell), he could see the deeper themes running through supposedly banal things.

Like many modern artists too, he was an innovator at the level of form. His books have pictures in them. He played around with different fonts. He wrote an entire book, S/Z, on a single Balzac short story, analysing every line in playfully manic, encyclopedic detail. At the same time, his writing has a classical sense of poise and restraint. He looked back to the tradition of the French 'moralistes' (I'd never heard of them before Barthes), people like La Rochefoucauld, Montaigne, La Bruyere, Chamfort.

Barthes's next to last book, A Lover's Discourse helped me to shape my first book, On Love. His On Racine and Michelet were godfathers to How Proust can change your Life. The debt wasn't at the level of ideas, it was a question of style and approach.

2-**You advocate philosophy as a way of living and dying well. In a globalized world and capital economy, living well means things like knowing more information, data and being an expert at something. Philosophers, on the other hand, don't seem to agree on anything and that philosophy. It's just a waste of time. Your comment?**
I believe in education of the emotions. Education is designed to save us from two of our greatest infirmities: that we don't live for very long, given how much there is to find out. And that we are, each one of us, really rather stupid.

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However, in theory at least, thanks to education, we can within a few years pick up a stock of insights that it took geniuses centuries to arrive at. The fruit of millennia of hard thinking in a given field can be absorbed from a set of books in a matter of hours. The education system lays out for our collective benefit the best flickering moments of individual intelligence. It stabilises the high points of our viscous, chaotic minds and extends their survival from a single lifespan to eternity. It allows dimwits to harvest the crops of geniuses; it allows us to have lives that are far cleverer than we are.

We aren't most of us - individually - any more intelligent than a cow or a heron. But, unlike animals, we have the ability to learn from the smarter ones in the herd. Our saving grace is that we are, every now and then, inclined to go to school.

But what schools do we have? We have schools to educate pilots and neurosurgeons, actuaries and supply chain managers. We know how to teach the properties of plutonium and the principles of electromagnetics. We have instruction in pentaquarks and quantum chromodynamics.

Yet we are still notably selective about what areas we educate ourselves in. We worry intensely how well schooled our kids are in maths, less so about they're equipped to cope with marriage or anxiety. Our energy is directed towards material, scientific and technical questions - and away from psychological and emotional ones. In our classrooms, we learn a great deal about tectonic plates and cloud formations, but not so much about the origins of anger or the mechanics of love. We are taught about the properties of metal alloys but little about the operations of envy or guilt. It is as though we implicitly believed that emotional insight might in essence be unteachable, or lies beyond reason or methodology, and should therefore be abandoned to individual instinct and intuition. We more or less let everyone find a path around their emotional maze on their own - a move as striking and as wise as suggesting that each generation re-discover the laws of physics by themselves.

Our bias has left us with a costly legacy: of exponential progress in the material and technological fields combined with stasis in the psychological one. We are, in terms of wisdom, little more advanced than the Ancient Sumerians. We are experts at manipulating our natural habitats while remaining novices at the functioning of our psyches. We have the technology of an advanced civilisation on an emotional base that has not made much

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progress since the caves. We know how to propel ourselves through the universe at hypersonic speed while struggling to master the unruly content of our own frontal lobes. We have the appetites and destructive furies of primitive primates - who are in possession of thermonuclear warheads.

The way we define intelligence is partly to blame. The word gets wielded around without distinguishing between its many and often incompatible varieties. We tend to assume that real intelligence might mean something like an agility at picking up certificates from prestigious universities and a prowess at solving technical and commercial challenges.

Only occasionally are we brought up against some of the limits of our categorisations. We note in certain so-called clever lives powerful and enduring kinds of foolishness, coexisting alongside more customary and celebrated forms of brilliance. We wonder how they could be at once so intelligent - and yet so fundamentally at sea; so astute and yet so vindictive or unreconciled; so lauded by the education system, and yet so beaten by the world. We edge towards an unfamiliar possibility: the need for a term to capture a less heralded, no less crucial kind of mental capacity.

Under the phrase ‘emotional intelligence’, we can group five distinct cognitive skills: an understanding of oneself (the psychological past, the workings of one’s psyche, the mastery and maturity of feelings); an ability to relate to and live alongside others (with requisite patience, forgiveness, calm, charity and imagination); a talent at relationships (with their demands for communication, vulnerability, generosity, humour, sexual understanding and selective resignation); a grasp of the emotional underpinnings of the working world and an openness to feelings of gratitude and appreciation alongside a dignified accommodation with pain, loss and mortality.

Shortfalls here are, sadly, no minor matter. They can be every bit as catastrophic as the worst errors in the material or technical sphere. Our lives are as easily be undone by their emotional dimensions as they are by the larger drama of our economies, our politics and our wars.

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3-**In your book The Consolation of Philosophy, you stated that "booksellers are the most valuable destination for the lonely, given the numbers of books written because authors couldn't find anyone to talk to." Does de Botton feel somehow lonely?**

There are few more shameful confessions to make than that we are lonely. The basic assumption is that no respectable person could ever feel isolated - unless they had just moved country or been widowed.

Yet in truth, a high degree of loneliness is an inexorable part of being a sensitive, intelligent human. It's a built-in feature of a complex existence. There are several big reasons for this:

- Much of what we need recognised and confirmed by others - a lot of what it would be extremely comforting to share - is going to be disturbing to society at large. Many of the ideas in the recesses of our minds are too odd, contrary, subtle or alarming to be safely revealed to anyone else. We face a choice between honesty and acceptability and - understandably - mostly choose the latter.

- It takes a lot of energy to listen to another person and enter sympathetically into their experiences. We should not blame others for their failure to focus on who we are. They may want to meet us, but we should accept the energy with which they will keep the topic of their own lives at the center of the conversation.

- We must all die alone, which really means, that our pain is for us alone to endure. Others can throw us words of encouragement, but in every life, we are out on the ocean drowning in the swell and others, even the nice ones, are standing on the shore, waving cheerily.

- It is deeply unlikely that we will ever find someone on exactly the same page of the soul as us: we will long for utter congruity, but there will be constant dissonance because we appeared on the earth at different times, are the product of different

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families and experiences and are just not made of quite the same fabric. So they won't be thinking just the same as us on coming out of the cinema. And looking out at the night sky, just when we want them to say something highflow and beautiful, they will perhaps be remembering a painfully banal and untimely detail from an area of domestic life (or vice versa). It is - almost - comic.

- We will almost certainly never meet the people best qualified to understand us, but they do exist. Probably they once walked past us in the street, though neither of us had the slightest idea of the potential for connection. Or maybe they died in Sydney two weeks ago or won't be born until the 22nd century. It isn't a conspiracy. We would just have needed a lot more luck.

- The problem is sure to get worse, the more thoughtful and perceptive we are. There will simply be less people like us around. It isn't a Romantic myth: loneliness truly is the tax we have to pay to atone for a certain complexity of mind.

- The desire to undress someone is for a long time far more urgent than the desire for good conversation - and so we end up locked in relationships with certain people we don't have much to say to, because we were once fatefully interested in the shape of their nose and the colour of their remarkable eyes.

And yet, despite all this, we should not be frightened or discomfited by our pervasive loneliness.

At an exasperated moment, near the end of his life, the German writer Goethe, who appeared to have had a lot of friends, exploded bitterly: 'No-one has ever properly understood me, I have never fully understood anyone; and no-one understands anyone else.'

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It was a helpful outburst from such a great man. It isn't our fault: a degree of distance and mutual incomprehension isn't a sign that life has gone wrong. It's what we should expect from the very start. And when we do, benefits may flow:

- Once we accept loneliness, we can get creative: we can start to send out messages in a bottle: we can sing, write poetry, produce books and blogs, activities stemming from the realisation that people around us won't ever fully get us but that others - separated across time and space - might just.

- The history of art is the record of people who couldn't find anyone in the vicinity to talk to. We can take up the coded offer of intimacy in the words of a Roman poet who died in 10BC or the lyrics of a singer who described just our blues in a recording from Nashville in 1963.

- Loneliness makes us more capable of true intimacy if ever better opportunities do come along. It heightens the conversations we have with ourselves, it gives us a character. We don't repeat what everyone else thinks. We develop a point of view. We might be isolated for now, but we'll be capable of far closer, more interesting bonds with anyone we do eventually locate.

- Even the people we think of as not lonely are in fact lonely. Years from now, members of that group who are presently out smiling and laughing may tell you, in a crisis, that they always felt misunderstood. The jovial camaraderie and laughter isn't a proof that they have found an answer; it's evidence of the desperate lengths some people go to hide the fact that we are all irremediably alone.

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- Loneliness renders us elegant and strangely alluring. It suggests there's more about us to understand than the normal patterns of social intercourse can accommodate - which is something to take pride in it. A sense of isolation truly is - as we suspect but usually prevent ourselves from feeling from fear of arrogance - a sign of depth. When we admit our loneliness, we are signing up to a club that includes the people we know from the paintings of Edward Hopper, the poems of Baudelaire and the songs of Leonard Cohen. Lonely, we enter a long and grand tradition; we find ourselves (surprisingly) in great company.

Enduring loneliness is almost invariably better than suffering the compromises of false community. Loneliness is simply a price we may have to pay for holding on to a sincere, ambitious view of what companionship must and could be.

4-**In your book The Architecture of Happiness, you stated "It is in dialogue with pain that many beautiful things acquire their value." In How Proust Can Change Your Life, you said that we don't really learn anything properly until there is a problem, until we are in pain, until something fails to go as we had hoped. We suffer, therefore, we think. "The best cure for love is to get to know them better," you wrote in The Course of Love. You also stated in other works of yours that it is the familiar suffering that we look for in marriage rather than happiness. It seems that everything is attributed to suffering and pain, a very dark view to life where happiness is pursued in the very wrong way. Do we enjoy suffering? Is it suffering that we will receive the most in our lives? And if there is such a thing called love and happiness, what is the secret of achieving it in your opinion?**

Few ideas are more unhelpful to our quest for psychological well-being than the presumption that our ultimate goal should be a state of enduring contentment. The promise of perfection is one of the most beautiful and most poisonous dreams afflicting advanced societies.

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For thousands of years, we knew better than to put our faith in that very tricky word: happiness. All endeavours - marriage, child-rearing, work, politics - were protected by a bedrock of pessimism around their possible outcomes. Buddhism understood that life was fundamentally about suffering; the Greeks insisted on the tragic structure of every human project; Christianity described every one of us as being marked by 'original sin.' First formulated by St Augustine in the closing day of the Roman Empire, the idea of 'original sin' generously insisted that humanity was intrinsically, rather than accidentally flawed. That we suffer, feel lost, are wracked with worry, are defensive, miss our own talents, refuse love, lack empathy and forgiveness, sulk, obsess, and hate; these are not merely personal blips; they are what we ineradicably are. We are broken creatures and have been since our expulsion from Eden. It isn't just us; it's our race, damned by - to follow the resonant Latin phrase - 'Peccatum Originale'. There can be nothing perfect in the orbit of humankind. Even if we do not follow Augustine's logic, we can reach the same destination: there is no chance of being either normal or lastingly content.

This should feel not like a punishing observation. It should feel like a relief from the pressures of two hundred years of scientifically-mandated faith in the possibility of progress and wholehearted happiness.

There can therefore be no 'solutions', no self-help, of a kind that removes problems altogether. But this doesn't mean that no progress can be made. What we can aim for, at best, is consolation - an unfashionable yet hugely valuable word. Consolation does not mean cure. It accepts that life is a hospice, not a hospital. But it nevertheless allows for treatment of sorts and a marked alleviation of symptoms.

Two things offer consolation in particular: understanding and companionship, or grasping what our problem is - and knowing that we are not alone with it. We are too frequently puzzled by what afflicts us. We don't fathom where it comes from, what the symptoms are or how long the agony may last. Understanding doesn't magically remove the pain but it can reduce a range of secondary aggravations and fears. At least we know what is wracking us and why. We don't have to let our worst fears run wild. We don't need to feel singled out or punished for a misdeed. We can turn tears into knowledge.

We can acquire a vocabulary to tell others where it hurts. Every time the language

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expands to define a new ailment, a little of our suffering is removed. How generous of Portuguese to give us ‘saudade’ to capture the bitter-sweet yearning for something beautiful that is now gone; or of German to give us ‘Torschlusspanik’, ‘gate-closing panic, a flag we can place on the vast territory of anxiety about time running out and of being too old to make the necessary changes.

It helps immensely too, to know that we are not the only ones going through difficulties. The mood of society is cruel in its upbeatness; the official story of who we are airbrushes most of the agonies that we are privately enduring. There is warm relief in any evidence that others are, in private, as bewildered and regretful as we are. We don’t cease to suffer: but we no longer need to add a paranoia to our grief.

It does not lie within any of our remits to be entirely content - or sane. There are powerful reasons why we lack an even keel. We have complex histories, we are heading towards the ultimate catastrophe, we are vulnerable to devastating losses; love will never go wholly well, the gap between our hopes and our realities will be cavernous. In the circumstances, it does not even make sense to aim for sanity, we should fix instead on the goal of achieving a wise, knowledgeable and self-possessed relationship to our manifold insanities, or what we might term ‘sane insanity.’ The sane insane differ from the simply insane by critical virtue of the honest and accurate grasp they have on what is not entirely right with them.

They may not be wholly balanced, but they don’t have the additional folly of insisting on their normalcy. They can admit with good grace - and no particular loss of dignity - that they are naturally extremely peculiar at a myriad of points. They do not go out of their way to hide from us what they get up to in the night, in their sad moments, when anxiety strikes, or during attacks of envy. They can - at their best - be dryly funny about the tragedy of being human. They lay bare the fears, doubts, longings, desires and habits that don’t belong to the story we like to tell ourselves about sanity. They don’t make ready confessions to let themselves off the hook or to be eccentric. They simply realise the unreasonableness of expecting to be reasonable all the time. They warn others as far as possible in advance of what being around them might involve - and apologise promptly for their failings as soon as they have manifested themselves. They offer their friends and

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companions accurate maps to their craziness, which is about the most generous thing one can to anyone who has to endure us.

The sane-insane among us are not a special category of the mentally unwell: they represent the most evolved possibility for a mature human being.

5- **In your you lecture On Pessimism, you pointed out through quoting Seneca that optimism is the source of anger and disappointment. Optimists think the world should be perfect without misery and so on. Therefore, it is unhealthy and should be avoided in order to get a good life. Pessimism, on the other hand, is good and healthy. Recalling death, for example, was even praised as a means to reorganize one's priorities. I personally found such idea very helpful, however, what about other people who are already in state of high stress, anxiety, or depression and so on? Does the pessimistic receipt work for them just as well?**

A pessimist is someone who calmly assumes from the outset, and with a great deal of justification, that things tend to turn out really very badly in almost all areas of existence. Strange though it can sound, pessimism is one of the greatest sources of human serenity and contentment.

The reasons are legion. Relationships are rarely if ever the blissful marriage of two minds and hearts that Romanticism teaches us to expect; sex is invariably an area of tension and longing; creative endeavour is pretty much always painful, compromised and slow; any job - however appealing on paper - will be pretty irksome in many of its details; children will always resent their parents, however well-intentioned and kindly the adults may try to be. Politics is evidently a process of muddle and irksome compromise.

Our satisfaction in this life is critically dependent on our expectations. The greater our hopes, the greater the risks of rage, bitterness, disappointment and a sense of persecution.

Many forces in our society conspire to stoke our hopes unfairly. Our commercial

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and political culture is tragically built upon the manufacture of promises of improbably beautiful scenarios. These forces tap into a natural, though profoundly mistaken, tendency of the human mind to think that the possession of hope must be the key to happiness (and kindness).

Like optimists, pessimists would like things to go well. But by recognising that many things can - and probably will - go wrong, the pessimist is adroitly placed to secure the good outcome both of these parties ultimately seek. It is the pessimist who, having never expected anything to go right, tends to end up with one or two things to smile about.

6- **In Why You Will Marry the Wrong Person, you mentioned that the person who can negotiation differences in taste intelligently – the person who is good at disagreement and tolerating differences is the best suited to us. This may be what people commonly refer to as chemistry. In practice, however, this strategy doesn't seem to work well, particularly in the long term. What do we miss in practice?**

Much of our collective thinking about love targets the problems we face around starting a relationship. To the Romantic, love essentially means ‘finding love’. What we blithely call a love story is mostly in fact the *start* of a love story.

Yet the true, heroic challenges of love are concerned with how to keep love going over the long-term, in the face of hurdles not generally discussed in art and, as a result, lacking glamour: incompatible work schedules, differing ideas about bathroom etiquette, phone calls with ex’s, waning lust, the demands of household management, business trips that clash with anniversaries, the question of whether and when to have children, divergent parenting styles, problematic in-laws and economic stresses.

To negotiate these challenges, long-term love requires us to develop a host of skills that our societies tend to stay quiet about: forgiveness, charity, humour, imagination, seeing the other as a loveable idiot (rather than simply a disappointment). To love over time involves striving to understand what another person is really trying to say when they are upset - even if what they are uttering is on the surface shockingly disdainful. It might

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involve discovering the dignity of domestic chores or a melancholy acceptance that a good relationship might require the sacrifice of certain dreams of sexual fulfillment. We'll have to say sorry even if we are not really at fault; we'll have to tell many little white lies and maybe the occasional rather large ones; we'll have to face the fact that we'll discover some grim shortcomings in the other person - and they in us.

Realistic scratchy long-term love is diametrically at odds with the Romantic vision of being in love. And therefore by the standards of Romantic love it has to look like an unfolding catastrophe. Far from it, it is what naturally happens when love is reciprocated and when decent, normal people live side by side for a long time. It is part of what good ordinary relationships look like over the years. It is what happens when love succeeds.

6- **Do you think that art has been somehow destructive to marriage since the Romantic movement?**

Romanticism is a movement of art and ideas that began in Europe in the mid eighteenth century and has now taken over the world. It is hard to go far on almost any issue without encountering a dominant Romantic position.

At the core of the Romantic attitude is a trust in feeling and instinct as supreme guides to life - and a corresponding suspicion of reason and analysis. In relation to love, this inspires a belief that passionate emotions will reliably guide us to a partner who can provide us with fifty years or so of intimate happiness. It also leads to a veneration of sex as the ultimate expression of love (a position which turns adultery from a problem into a disaster). In relation to work, the Romantic spirit leads to a faith in spontaneous 'genius' and a trust that all talented people will experience the pull of a vocation. In social life, Romanticism argues against politeness and convention and in favour of frankness and plain-speaking. It assumes that children are pure and good, and that it is only ever society that corrupts them. Romanticism hates institutions and venerates the brave outsider who fights heroically against the status quo. It likes what is new rather than recurring. The Romantic spirit pits itself against analysis; it believes there is such a thing as 'thinking too much' (rather than just thinking badly). It doesn't favour logic or discourse. Music is its

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favourite artistic medium. It is offended by what is humdrum and ordinary and longs for the special, the rare, the distinctive and the exclusive. It likes revolution rather than evolution. The Romantic attitude disdains organisation, punctuality, clarity, bureaucracy, industry, commerce and routine. These things are of course (it admits) necessary but they are (as we tellingly put it) 'un-Romantic'; miserable impositions forced upon us by the unfortunate conditions of existence.

The supreme symbol of the Romantic attitude is Eugène Delacroix's legendary painting *Liberty leading the People.*

An invitation to Romanticism
Eugène Delacroix, *Liberty leading the people,* 1830

Romanticism has its distinctive wisdom, but its central messages have, in many areas, become a catastrophic liability in our lives. They push us in decisively unhelpful directions; they incite unreal hopes, make us impatient with ourselves, discourage introspection, blind us to the dangers of obeying instinct in love and work, turn us away from our realities and lead us to lament the normal conditions of existence.

The huge task of our age is to unwind Romantic attitudes and replace them with an outlook that might be called - for the sake of symmetry and historical accuracy - Classical.

7- **Some societies have faced modernity, including romantic ideas, later and all at once. How is that going to affect the institution of marriage? Will there be any different outcome in comparison with Europe?**

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It has become, for many of us, ever harder to know what the point of marriage might be. The drawbacks are evident and well-charted. Marriage is a state-sanctioned legal construct, fundamentally linked to matters of property, progeny and pension entitlements - a construct which aims to restrict and control how two people might feel towards one another over fifty or more years. It places a cold, unhelpful, expensive and entirely emotionally-alien frame around what is always going to be a private matter of the heart. We don't need a marriage certificate to show affection and admiration. And indeed, forcing commitment only increases the danger of eventual inauthenticity and dishonesty. If love doesn't work out, being married simply makes it much harder to disentangle two lives and prolongs the agony of a dysfunctional union. Love either works or it doesn't - and marriage doesn't help matters one iota either way. It is completely reasonable to suppose that the mature, modern and logical move is to sidestep marriage entirely, along with the obvious nonsense of a wedding.

It would be hopeless to try to defend marriage on the grounds of its convenience. It is clearly cumbersome, expensive, risky and at junctures wholly archaic. But that is the point. The whole rationale of marriage is to function as a prison that it is very hard and very embarrassing for two people to get out of.

The essence of marriage is to tie our hands, to frustrate our wills, to put high and costly obstacles in the way of splitting up and sometimes to force two unhappy people to stay in each other's company for longer than either of them would wish. Why do we do this?

Originally, we told ourselves that God wanted us to stay married. But even now, when God looms less large in the argument, we keeping making sure that marriage is rather hard to undo. For one thing, we carefully invite everyone we know to watch us proclaim that we'll stick together. We deliberately invite an elderly aunt or uncle who we don't even like so much to fly around the world to be there. We are willingly creating a huge layer of embarrassment were we ever to turn round and admit it might have been a mistake. Furthermore, even though we could keep things separate, marriage tends to mean deep economic and legal entanglements. We know it is going to take the work of a phalanx of accountants and lawyers to prize us apart. It can be done, of course, but it will be ruinous.

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It is as if we somewhere recognise that there might be some quite good, though strange-sounding, reasons to make it harder than it might be to get out of a public life-long commitment to someone else:

One: Impulse is dangerous

The Marshmallow Test was a celebrated experiment in the history of psychology designed to measure children's ability to delay gratification – and track the consequences of being able to think long-term. Some three-year-old children were offered a marshmallow, but told they would get two if they held off from eating the first one for five minutes. It turned out a lot of children just couldn't make it through this period. The less immediate benefit of gobbling the marshmallow in front of them was stronger than the strategy of waiting. Crucially, it was observed that these children went on to have lives blighted by a lack of impulse control, and fared much worse than the children who were best at subordinating immediate fun for long-term benefit.

Relationships are no different. Here too, many things feel very urgent. Not eating marshmallows, but escaping, finding freedom, running away, possibly with the new office recruit… Sometimes, we're angry and we want to get out very badly. We're excited by a stranger and want to abandon our present partner at once. And yet as we look around for the exit, every way seems blocked. It would cost a fortune, it would be so embarrassing, it would take an age.

Marriage is a giant inhibitor of impulse set up by our conscience to keep our libidinous, naive, desiring selves in check. What we are essentially buying into by submitting to its dictates is the insight that we are (as individuals) likely to make very poor choices under the sway of strong short-term impulses. To marry is to recognise that we require structure to insulate us from our urges. It is to lock ourselves up willingly, because we acknowledge the benefits of the long-term; the wisdom of the morning after the storm.

Marriage proceeds without constant reference to the moods of its protagonists. It isn't about feeling. It is a declaration of intent that it is crucially impervious to our day-to-

day desires. It is a very unusual marriage in which the two people don't spend a notable amount of time fantasising that they weren't in fact married. But the point of marriage is to make these feelings not matter very much. It is an arrangement that protects us from what we desire and yet know (in our more reasonable moments) that we don't truly need or want.

9- **Do we really look forward to familiar suffering in marriage rather than happiness? You said in your book The Course of Love, "There is no one more likely to destroy us than the person we marry." How is that possible? And why humans get married from the first place?**

At their best, relationships involve us in attempts to develop, mature and become 'whole'. We often get drawn to people precisely because they promise to edge us in the right direction.

But the process of our maturation can be agonisingly slow and complicated. We spend long periods (decades perhaps) blaming the other person for problems which arise from our own weaknesses. We resist attempts at being changed, naively asking to be loved 'for who we are'.

It can take years of supportive interest, many tearful moments of anxiety, much frustration, until genuine progress can be made. With time, after maybe 120 arguments on a single topic, both parties may begin to see it from the other's point of view. Slowly we start to get insights into our own madness. We find labels for our issues, we give each other maps of our difficult areas, we become a little easier to live with.

Unfortunately, the lessons that are most important for us - the lessons that most contribute to our increasing wisdom and rounded completeness as people - are almost always the most painful to learn. They involve confronting our fears, dismantling our defensive armour, feeling properly guilty for our capacity to hurt another, being genuinely sorry for our faults and learning to put up with the imperfections of someone else.

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It is too easy to seem kind and normal when we keep starting new relationships. The truth about us, on the basis of which self-improvement can begin, only becomes clear over time. Chances of development can increase hugely when we stay put - and don't succumb to the temptation to run away to people who will falsely reassure us that there's nothing too wrong with us.
Many of the most worthwhile projects require immense sacrifices from both parties, and it's in the nature of such sacrifices that we're most likely to make them for people who are also making them for us.
Marriage is a means by which people can specialise – perhaps in making money or in running a home. This can be hugely constructive. But it carries a risk. Each person (especially if one person stays at home) needs to be assured that they will not later be disadvantaged by their devotion.
Marriage sets up the conditions in which we can take valuable decisions about what to do with our lives that would be too risky outside of its guarantees.
Over time, the argument for marriage has shifted. It's no longer about external forces having power over us: churches, the state, the legal idea of legitimacy, the social idea of being respectable…
What we are correctly now focused on is the psychological point of making it hard to throw it all in. It turns out that we benefit greatly (though at a price) from having to stick with certain commitments, because some of our key needs have a long-term structure.
For the last fifty years, the burden of intelligent effort has been on attempting to make separation easier. The challenge now lies in another direction: in trying to remind ourselves why immediate flight doesn't always make sense; in trying to see the point of holding out for the second marshmallow.
Tethering ourselves to our partner, via the public institution of marriage, makes our unavoidable fluctuations of feeling have less power to destroy a relationship, one that we know, in calmer moments, is supremely important to us. The point of marriage is to be usefully unpleasant - at least at crucial times. We together embrace a set of limitations on

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one kind of freedom - the freedom to run away - so as to protect and strengthen another kind of freedom: a shared ability to mature and create something of lasting value, one whose pains are aligned to our better selves.

10- **Teaching (transforming an idea from one to another in a way that can be accepted) partners is perceived as an attack. What makes it even worse is that we only start teaching when we are frightened that we married an idiot! So, we start screaming our partners. We ought to be relaxed when we want to teach them something. This requires a great deal of control over our emotions. It even seems like an impossible task because we often feel the urge of giving a lesson when we feel that we are being provoked by stupidity, carelessness, rudeness and so on. How we can manage to teach in the right way?**

Teaching and Learning are the two central emotional skills we need for life among other humans. Considered properly, teaching - by which we mean, the business of getting an important idea from one mind into another - is vital in any couple, office or family we'll ever belong to. Every one of us, whatever our occupation, needs to become a good teacher, for our lives constantly require us to deliver crucial information with grace and effectiveness into the deep minds of others. Furthermore, we also all need the humility required by the student role; we need to recall how little we know, we need to acknowledge how generally unpleasant it is to have to take anything new on board and we need to admit how tempting it always is to blame the teacher rather than confront their message.

Most of us have probably started off by being quite bad teachers, with tendencies to get annoyed simply by the fact that another person doesn't know something yet - even though we have never actually told them what it might be. Certain ideas can seem so important to us, we simply can't imagine that others don't already know them. We suspect they may be deliberately upsetting us by pretending not to have a clue. This attitude makes it unlikely that what we actually have to teach will make its way successfully into the unfortunate other person's head. Good teaching starts with the idea that ignorance is not a

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defect of the individual we're instructing: it's the consequence of never having been properly taught. So the fault, rightly, really only ever belongs with the people who haven't done enough to get the needed ideas into others' heads: in other words, with you.

The more we need other people to know something, the less we may be able to secure the calm frame of mind which is indispensable if we are to have a chance of conveying it to them effectively. The possibility that they won't quickly understand a point that matters immensely to us can drive us into an agitated fury, the very worst state in which to conduct any lesson. By the time we've started to insult our so-called pupil, to shout, call them a blockhead or a fool, the lesson is plainly over. No one has ever learnt anything under conditions of humiliation. Paradoxically, the best sort of teachers can bear the possibility that what they have to teach will not be understood. It is this slightly detached, slightly pessimistic approach that stands the best chance of generating the relaxed frame of mind essential to successful pedagogy.

Good teachers are also good students. They know that everyone has a lot to learn and everyone has something important to impart to others. We should never get incensed if someone is trying to teach us something. We should never want to be liked just as we are. Only a perfect being would be committed to their own status quo. For the rest of us, good learning and teaching are the only ways to ensure we have a chance of developing into slightly better versions of ourselves.

11- **Do you think that expressing what one needs from a partner (like saying I depend on you, do you still care about me, or I need you beside me etc.) instead of getting procedural may throw a burden on the other. A burden of heavy emotional responsibilities that one may get one frightened to bear, particularly when the relationship is fairly new?**

There are moments when the revelation of weakness, far from being a catastrophe, is the only possible route to connection and respect. At points we may dare to explain, with rare frankness, that we are afraid, that we are sometimes bad and that we have done many silly

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things. And rather than appalling our companions, these revelations may serve to endear us to them, humanising us in their eyes, and letting them feel that their own vulnerabilities have echoes in the lives of others. Together, we realise that the definition of what is normal has missed out on key aspects of our mutual reality.

In other words, vulnerability can be a bedrock of friendship, friendship properly understood not just, or primarily, as a process of admiration but as an exchange of sympathy and consolation for the troublesome business of being alive.

There can, of course, be unfortunate ways of handling vulnerability: when we do so in the form of an aggressive demand that others rescue us, or when our frailties lack boundaries, or when we are close to rage and hysteria rather than melancholy and grief.

Good vulnerability doesn't expect another person to solve our difficulties; we let them see a tricky part of who we are, simply in the hope that they will be emboldened to feel more at ease with their own, less dignified sides. Good vulnerability is fundamentally generous: it takes the first step at disclosure so as to render it safe for others to unburden themselves and disclose something of their hidden selves in turn. It is a gift in the form of a risk taken for someone else.

Furthermore, displays of vulnerability have a curious way of signalling that we are, despite the embarrassing avowals, far from fundamentally ridiculous or pitiful. We are, rather, strong enough to be weak; to let our silliness, our idiocy, our anger and our sadness show, confident that these do not have to be the final verdicts on who we are. We proceed with a bold sense that despite the lack of surface evidence, everyone is in the end as wounded, aggrieved, worried and damaged as we are and that we are not therefore, through our disclosures, casting ourselves out of the clan for good: we are simply reconfirming our essential membership of the human race.

It is something of a minor tragedy that we should spend so much of our lives striving to hide our weakness when it is in fact only upon the dignified sharing of vulnerability that true friendship and love can arise.

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14- You said that to love is to unfold the surface of partners' misbehaviors and to add generosity in interpretation. How can we achieve generosity of interpretation when we are, in fact, dangerous beings?

Small children sometimes behave in stunningly unfair and shocking ways: they scream at the person who is looking after them, angrily push away a bowl of animal pasta, throw away something you have just fetched for them. But we rarely feel personally agitated or wounded by their behaviour. And the reason is that we don’t assign a negative motive or mean intention to a small person. We reach around for the most benevolent interpretations. We don’t think they are doing it in order to upset us. We probably think that they are getting a bit tired, or their gums are sore or they are upset by the arrival of a younger sibling. We’ve got a large repertoire of alternative explanations ready in our heads – and none of these lead us to panic or get terribly agitated.

This is the reverse of what tends to happen around adults in general, and our lovers in particular. Here we imagine that others have deliberately got us in their sights. If the partner is late for our mother’s birthday because of ‘work’, we may assume it’s an excuse. If they promised to buy us some extra toothpaste but then ‘forgot’, we’ll imagine a deliberate slight. They probably relish the thought of causing us a little distress.

But if we employed the infant model of interpretation, our first assumption would be quite different: maybe they didn’t sleep well last night and are too exhausted to think straight; maybe they’ve got a sore knee; maybe they are doing the equivalent of testing the boundaries of parental tolerance. Seen from such a point of view, adult behaviour doesn’t magically become nice or acceptable. But the level of agitation is kept safely low. It’s very touching that we live in a world where we have learnt to be so kind to children: it would be even nicer if we learnt to be a little more generous towards the childlike parts of one another.

Adulthood simply isn’t a complete state; what we call childhood lasts (in a submerged but significant way) all our lives. Therefore, some of the moves we execute with relative ease around children must forever continue to be relevant when we’re dealing with another grown-up.

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The accurate, corrective reimagining of the inner lives of others is a piece of empathetic reflection we constantly need to perform with those around us. We need to imagine the turmoil, disappointment, worry and sheer confusion in people who may outwardly appear merely aggressive or mean.

We do our fellow adults the greatest possible favour when we are able to regard at least some of their bad behaviour as we would those of an infant. We are so alive to the idea that it's patronising to be thought of as younger than we are; we forget that it is also, at times, the greatest privilege for someone to look beyond our adult self in order to engage with – and forgive – the disappointed, furious, inarticulate or wounded child within.

15- **You keep insisting in your works that love is a skill not an instinct nor enthusiasm. How one can master the skill of love? Is it only through loving and learning from mistakes? Or is it about good communication? Or something else?**

We need to learn the art of charity. At its most basic, charity means: giving someone something they need but can't get for themselves. Normally this is understood to mean something material. We overwhelmingly associate charity with giving money.

But, at its core, charity goes far beyond finance. It is about the interpretation of motives. It involves seeing that another person's bad behaviour is not a sign of wickedness or sin, but is a result of suffering.

The psychologically charitable feel inwardly 'fortunate' enough to be able come forward with explanations of others' misdeeds - their impatience or over-ambition, rashness or rage - that take attenuating circumstances into account. They generate a picture of who another person might be that can make them seem more than simply mean or mad.

In financial matters, charity tends always to flow in one direction. The philanthropist may be very generous, but they normally stay rich; they are habitually the giver rather than the recipient. But in our relationships with others more broadly, the need for charity is unlikely ever to end up being one-sided, for we all stand in need of constant

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generosity of interpretation. We are never far from requiring help in explaining to the world why we are not exactly as awful as we appear.

17- **What we, in fact, look for in marriage is familiarity. The familiarity in love and the suffering that comes with it which we have experienced through our parents when we were children. What about a man who says that I do not want to marry someone like his mother, or a girl who says that I do not want to marry someone like her father. Are they wrong but they do not know it yet?**

Challenging past experiences can shape our relationship instincts in a very distinct way. Instead of being drawn to an adult who reminds us of a parent, our instincts may turn emphatically in the opposite direction. Something in our younger experience was so difficult that *any sign of similarity* between a parent and a prospective partner becomes deeply off-putting. We call this the Recoil Dynamic.

The reason that this is can turn into problem is that almost all parents have good as well as bad sides. When we suffer from the Recoil Dynamic, we may want to escape the Bad but along the way, can also end up developing irresistible allergies to a lot of what was Good. Maybe a parent was deeply creative, *but had an appalling temper*: now we can’t stomach anyone creative. Maybe a parent was very clever, *but humiliating*: now we can’t stomach anyone clever. Maybe a parent was good at business, *but emotionally cold*: now we can’t stomach anyone who succeeds in commerce.

We may therefore have no internal option but to end up with people who are without qualities that would actually have benefited us, that would have nurtured us and with which we are by nature in sympathy. Our friends can be puzzled. They may ask how someone so creative - and whose mom was too - be with a partner like that… Or how someone from such an economically competent family could have ended up with this kind of lay-about… We should, in such circumstances, look for tell-tale evidence of the Recoil Dynamic.

Good Quality in a Difficult Parent	Recoil Requirement
High economic competence	Very unimpressive around money
Ordered and punctual	Freewheeling and chaotic
Socially poised and Polite	Blunt and uncouth
Obviously intelligent	Very unintellectual

21- **Before we conclude, our reader would like to know about your project The School of Life. What is it about? How many unsuccessful attempts came prior to its success? And will we witness a location of The School of Life in the Arab world in the future?** The School of Life is an organisation with a simple mission: to increase the amount of Emotional Intelligence in circulation. We seek more emotionally intelligent kinds of relationships, workplaces, economies and culture.

What structures our thinking - found in the dictionary entries in the pages ahead - are eight central themes, which unfold as follows:

1. Self-Knowledge

Socrates, the earliest and greatest of philosophers, summed up the purpose of philosophy in one resonant phrase: 'Know Yourself.' A capacity for self-knowledge is at the heart of our inclinations to forgiveness, kindness, creativity and wise decision making, especially around love and work. Unfortunately, knowing ourselves is the (always unfinished) task of a lifetime. We are permanently elusive and mysterious to ourselves, we have to catch our real intentions and feelings obliquely, with some of the patience of a lepidopterist.

One of the tasks of culture is therefore to offer us tools to assist us with the task of

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self-knowledge. We need a vocabulary to name feelings and states of mind, we need encouragement to be alone with ourselves at regular moments, we need friends and professionals who will listen to us with editorial precision and sympathy and we need works of art that can illuminate elusive aspects of our psyches.

Above all, we need to adopt a modesty as to our capacity easily to understand who we are and what we want. We should nurture a stance of scepticism towards many of our first impulses and beliefs - and submit all our significant plans to extensive rational cross-examination.

Failures of self-knowledge lie behind some of our gravest individual and collective disasters.

2. Other People

Having to live around other people can severely challenge any desire to remain calm, kind and good. The School of Life takes seriously the ambition of being polite and nice, despite the lack of prestige that surrounds these concepts and the constant frictions and misunderstandings that attend communal life.

It also knows that kindness is a skill that has to be learnt - and that we must put unexpectedly-intense energy into the task of overcoming our first responses to other people, which often veer (quite understandably) towards rage, paranoia and defensiveness.

Two manoeuvres stand out: we must expect less of people, not in order to do an injustice to them, but so as to be readier to forgive and accept problems when they arise. And we must learn to see that bad behaviour stems almost always not from evil but from pain and anxiety. We need to direct sympathy and imagination towards a very unfamiliar target: those who frustrate us most.

3. Relationships

Relationships are perhaps our single greatest source of both happiness and suffering. Unlike previous ages, we don’t merely seek a partner we can tolerate, we seek someone we can love, usually over many decades, at an intense pitch of desire, commitment and

interest. We dream of someone who will understand us, with whom we can share our longings and our secrets and with whom we can be properly ourselves.

Then the horror begins. We need to understand why. Some of it is because our childhoods leave us with a legacy of trouble around relating to others. We have difficulties trusting or being close, achieving the right distance or staying resilient. We cannot comfortably express what we feel - and are prone to 'transfer' a lot of emotions from the past on to present day scenarios where they don't quite belong.

We need to chart our own psyches and offer maps of our madness to partners early on, before we have had the chance to hurt them too much with our behaviour.

Our current relationship difficulties stem in part from a cultural source which we call 'Romanticism'. In the background, we operate with a deeply problematic Romantic picture of what good relationships should be like: we dream of profound intimacy, satisfying sex, an absence of secrets and only a modicum of conflict. This faith in love is touching, but it carries with it a tragic flaw: our expectations turn out to be the enemies of workable mature relationships.

At the School of Life, we are drawn to what we call a Classical approach to love. The Classical view is in certain ways cautious. Classical people pay special attention to what can go wrong around others. Before condemning a relationship, they consider the standard of partners across society and may interpret a current arrangement as bearable, under the circumstances. This view of people is fundamentally, but usefully, dark. Everyone is ultimately deeply troubled and hard to live with. The only people whom we can think of as normal are those we don't yet know very well.

4. Sexuality

At the School of Life, we are aware of the scale of the hopes and challenges around sex. Though we often believe ourselves to be living in a liberated age, it remains acutely difficult not to feel shame around many of our sexual impulses. It is especially tricky to communicate what we want to those we are drawn to.

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We believe in laying out a sober understanding of what drives desire and in removing some of the shame around fantasies, revealing that many our more outlandish wishes belong to complex quests for intimacy.

5. Work

One of the distinctive ideas of modern times is that we don't expect work to be simply a drudgery that we have to undertake to survive. We have high expectations of this huge part of our lives. Ideally, we want work to be 'meaningful', which involves the belief that we are in some way either reducing the pain, or increasing the happiness of other humans.

Three big reasons stand out for why meaningful work has become difficult to secure: firstly, because it's perilously hard for us to locate our true interests in the time we have before sheer survival becomes an imperative. Our interests don't manifest themselves spontaneously, they require us to patiently analyse ourselves and try out a range of options, to see what feels as if it might have the best 'fit' for us. But unfortunately, schools and universities, as well as society at large, doesn't place much emphasis on helping people to understand their authentic working identities. There's far more stress on simply getting ready for any job as opposed to a job that would be particularly well suited to us. Which is a pity not just for individuals, but for the economy as a whole because people always work more imaginatively and more fruitfully when their deep selves are engaged.

Secondly, many jobs are relatively meaningless because it's very possible, in the current economy, to generate profits from selling people things that don't fundamentally contribute to well-being, but prey instead on our appetites and lack of self-command.

Thirdly, a job may have real meaning while not feeling as if it does day to day because many organisations are so large, so slow moving, so split up over continents that the purpose of everyone's work gets lost amidst meetings, memos, conference calls and administration.

This diagnosis helps to point the way to what we might begin to do to make work more meaningful: firstly, pay a lot more attention to helping people find their vocation,

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their real working authentic selves. Secondly, the more we, as customers, can support businesses engaged in meaningful work, the more meaningful jobs there will be. By raising the quality of demand, we raise the number of occupations that answer to humanity's deeper needs.

Thirdly, in businesses which do carry out meaningful work, but on too large a scale over too long a period for it to feel meaningful, there is scope to narrate stories of the organisation's purpose that offer a more tangible sense of every individual's contribution to the whole.

Ensuring that work is meaningful is no luxury: it determines the greatest issue of all in modern economics: how contentedly and how skilfully people will work – and therefore how successful and fruitful societies can be.

6. Capitalism

Economies look as if they are driven by huge material elements, as if they are about oil fields, communications satellites, huge retail complexes and vast entertainment districts. But behind these impressive factors, the economy is to an extraordinary extent a psychological phenomenon driven by our collective appetites, imaginations and longings. What we call capitalism is simply, in the end, the result of the way our minds work.

Up till now, capitalism has unsurprisingly tended to focus on the supply of our more basic needs. We're interested in a kind of capitalism that can target higher needs: that is, a capitalism that is as efficient at meeting our needs for understanding as for sweet things to eat; that is as great at helping us live wisely as it is, at present, adept at uniting us with the ideal confectionary or garment.

The task is to expand the economy so as to help it engage with humanity's real internal issues - which have usually lain outside the area of commerce as commonly defined.

7. Culture

People who want to express admiration for culture often say it is valuable 'for its own

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sake'. We propose that it is valuable because of its capacity to address our needs for education, guidance, consolation, perspective, encouragement and correction.

We are drawn to the idea that culture is therapeutic. This doesn't mean it should primarily help us with very urgent mental health issues. But it can assist us with managing the normal troubles of everyday life; like the tendency to get unhelpfully irritated with people we like, to lose perspective over minor matters, to abandon sympathy for people who in fact deserve our compassion and to take too harsh a view of our own mistakes.

We believe that the world has, up to now, not properly made use of the true therapeutic potential of culture, paying it reverence without learning how systematically to make use of it.

8. Religion

The School of Life is both a secular organisation and interested in many of the moves of religions. The faith-based ideas (for example, the claim that the soul can be reincarnated, that Christ rose from the dead or that the creator of the cosmos made specific promises about land rights at the eastern end of the Mediterranean) have clouded some highly important psychological practices that religions were adept at promoting. Religions have been machines for addressing a range of important emotional needs, which endure even into a scientific era.

At their best, religions tried to keep ideas about forgiveness at the front of our minds, encouraged compassion, insisted that certain forms of worldly success were misleading ways of assessing the worth of people, got us to recognise our own capacities to hurt others and to feel sorry for doing so, nudged us to be tender and understanding towards the secret sufferings of others and gave us helpful rituals and beautiful works of culture to keep important ideas before us throughout the year.

We see the School of Life as picking up many of the tasks of religion and creating secular substitutes for a range of religious ideals and practices. We believe in the idea that culture can and should replace scripture.

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We are, ultimately, a school. That is, we believe that the ability to learn is one of the most basic things about human beings. The range of things that we can learn to do better, via instruction, is very wide, far wider than we tend to think.

The powerful influence of Romanticism, which is convinced that better emotional responses cannot be taught, means the current education system fails to pass emotional intelligence down the generations as as it should.

We take the more Classical view that all important human achievements – especially around emotions – can be transmitted: how to control rage; how to have a conversation, how to be a loving parent, how to be calmer or less inclined to bitterness.

Nevertheless, we are aware of how easily people are turned off by anything that appears too preachy and by a fatal tendency for what is worthy to come across as dull. Our commitment to education makes us profoundly interested in the task of seduction: the need to get and hold people's attention artfully in a highly individualistic world filled with distractions and demands.

Because education is so central, we are ambitious about what learning should be like. It should not only be children who go to school. All adults should see themselves as in need of education pretty much every day. One should never be done with school. One should stay an active alumni, learning throughout life. In the adult section of schools, there should be courses on how to converse with strangers or how to deal with the fear of getting old; how to calm down and how to forgive. Schools should be where a community gets educated, not just a place for children. Some classes should have seven-year-olds learning alongside fifty-year-olds (the two cohorts having been found to have equivalent maturities in a given area). In the utopia, the phrase 'I've finished school' would sound extremely strange.

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As for being in the Arab world, we are already in it digitally - and will open a branch as soon as we find a good partner!

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