INTRODUCTION

Man is condemned to be free;
because once thrown into the world,
he is responsible for everything he does.

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

Look skyward on a dark night, away from city lights, and a few thousand stars are visible. Yet scientists tell us that there are more stars in the universe than grains of sand in all of the beaches on the earth. Look in the other direction toward the infinitely small, and it remains impossible, even with the aid of technology, to see the subatomic particles holding together the objects that surround us. Indeed, appearances are deceiving. The intricacies of these two fields of exploration lie beyond our ability to fully understand them. They are quite literally incomprehensible. Even the dozen or so physicists who know the most about subatomic particles are not bashful about their inability to fully grasp the implications of their work.

We don't find it strange or unusual that people spend little time trying to understand what is indeed too difficult to grasp. Most other fields of interest to human beings, however, we can and should try hard to figure out. But here again, appearances are deceiving. The existential reality is that many people hold adamant opinions about subjects they have little knowledge of. This is clearly the case concerning social matters and politics in particular. When we

consider the consequences of ignorance, this has to be one of the most unfortunate characteristics of our species. Why do so many people reach hard and fast conclusions based upon hearsay and water-cooler wisdom? Why are there so many *experts* among us who profess to know what no one does know or can possibly ever know? Some of these people are worth listening to, some aren't, and some should be subject to criminal prosecution for perpetuating fraud. *Existential Aspirations* is an audacious attempt to explore some of these subjects and, more importantly, to raise vital questions.

Collected in this book, as the subtitle asserts, are the reflections of a self-taught philosopher. I claim the tag of philosopher only in aspiration, only as an amateur—albeit one with a burning interest in ideas—and extend the caveat that I would rather watch paint dry than participate in professional philosophy. I think Richard Rorty was right to draw attention to the futility of arguing about matters that can't be settled or that wouldn't really change anything one way or the other if they were. I'm in agreement with Carl Sagan's assertion that "extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence," and I endorse Santayana's view about skepticism being the chastity of the intellect. Moreover, I think Dostoevsky's contention that "if God does not exist, everything is permitted" was an immature rejoinder. We would be better served by the notion that if God does not exist, then it is up to us to figure out what is going on; we would be wise to follow Alasdair MacIntyre's advice to use philosophy to determine the nature of virtue and as a means of defining justice.

In his splendid book *Living with Nietzsche*, philosopher Robert Solomon advocates reading Nietzsche existentially by taking him personally; I suggest this is good advice, no matter which author or what book we read. Taking personally what we read is a precondition for sparking a level of interest sufficient to ensure mastery. I'm reminded of a segment on *60 Minutes*, featuring a musical savant who could

play any piece on the piano in the style of any composer he was asked to emulate. It was a stunning performance. It made me realize that this level of comprehension of one's subject matter sheds a whole new light on the very concept of what it means to understand. So, if we read existentially with sufficient effort and understanding, we should be able at some point to imagine a particular situation and come up with a reasonable account of what Nietzsche would have thought of the matter, or anyone else with whose work we are so intimately acquainted. When we get this far existentially and have the ability to apply another's perspective as a lens for analysis, we begin to develop the capacity to know our own minds. When we are able to apply multiple perspectives, our own ideas are not so easily overwritten by the authority of one particular forceful argument; we have the power to resist through further reflection. We also learn to lay aside culturally induced nonsense fostered by an educational system that asks us to take in great quantities of information without really reflecting on it.

Critics of evolutionary psychology frequently point out that human adaptability surpasses our predispositions, and there is some merit in their arguments. But the bedrock of our ability to understand human behavior rests in understanding the very nature of belief itself. You've only to observe our inability to relate to one another without violence throughout the planet to appreciate the still-present influence of Stone Age thinking.

In *Wings of Illusion*, psychologist John F. Schumaker argues that we are predisposed to believe the unbelievable. His observation about the universality of a paranormal belief imperative deserves our undivided attention because credulity begets corruption; admitting that we are predisposed to gullibility and irrational bias is a first step in guarding against it. Belief lays the foundation for mistrust, contempt, conspiracy, hatred, and all-out war. Serious research in this arena can help us better understand the ubiquity of nonsensical beliefs that give rise to

anti-intellectualism, simply because it's such a short distance from credulity to fraud and from contempt to genocide. Michael Shermer's *Why People Believe Weird Things* is a primer on a subject to which we should devote a great deal of thought and attention.

To achieve anything resembling a genuine civilization, contemporary culture needs vibrant communication among all ages of people who learn to base their beliefs on good reasons. Young people, though, have great difficulty appreciating advice from their elders about what is truly important and meaningful in life because their limited experience doesn't offer sufficient context for an experiential perspective. Until such advice rings true of actual familiarity, it falls on deaf ears, so to speak. What they hear may be impressive, and they may have great respect for the person offering the guidance, but without an extraordinary effort to communicate, what we say is seldom enough to make a profound and lasting impression. This impedes the development of a mature society, whether we rely on the Stone Age model or one of progressive adaptation.

When one is in the fall and winter of life, however, and closer to the final hour than many would want to admit, existential aspirations are apt to resonate with a need for perspective about having had the opportunity to live the life of a human being. When summoned from memory, our truly meaningful experiences surface with greater ease, and when one's image of the future begins to seem ever smaller, it's sometimes hard not to seek shelter in memories of the past. But doing so without being aware that that's indeed what we are doing, is to cheat ourselves out of some of the most exhilarating intellectual experiences that maturity offers us.

In the pages that follow, I trust you will find a thoughtful exploration of some unsettling matters. My words may call to mind some high points and peak experiences in your own life—moments of self-actualization that may not always have been fully realized when they occurred but now stand

out in hindsight as the kind of wisdom you would like to pass on, even though you are very much aware of the difficulty of the task for those too young to appreciate how the advice will season with age. I've made my granddaughter promise to read all of my books when she's fifty, when they will make much more sense to her than they do now.

The essays and aphorisms in this work represent points of view that for me are a constant work in progress. Some are long, some are short, and some of them address the same issues in differing contexts. This is the first nonfiction work I've produced without endnotes: everything referenced can be found in the bibliography. Some of these pieces were written long ago, but I update them regularly as my thinking changes. They're all products of my desire to learn, and I credit this aggressive learning with reducing my fear of death. My hope is that, by reading this work, you will achieve the same outcome.

My enthusiasm for enlightenment rests upon the simple premise that aggressive learning is the most practical guide to a passionately rewarding life. I've spent more than three decades engaged in an intense drive for self-education. A life devoid of zeal for learning is a life wasted, in my view, and I offer my own excitement as my credentials for making the claim. I believe that the goal of enlightenment, and of higher learning in particular, should be to develop one's mind to near one's capacity to understand what needs to be understood, to enhance the ability to see the world as it *is* and not as we *wish* it to be, and to develop a fervent sense of what a better world should and could be, if only we could help to make it so.

Many years ago, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross wrote a treatise on death and dying in which she described five stages of grief, beginning with denial and proceeding through anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Depending upon individual differences, these stages do not necessarily follow in her prescribed order as a person grieves. But most of us who have had some experience with the death of friends

and family members can relate to Kübler-Ross's model. These days, when someone describes a person going through one of these stages, there is a tendency to give Kübler-Ross credit for her contribution to these realties of death and dying. But she did not invent this phenomenon; she simply put words together to describe processes that fit with our notion of what we are witnessing. I use this example to make the point that the reality of an existentialist life stance is not something recently made up by philosophers; it is instead a human-centered predicament that is, for all practical purposes, inescapable.

I've long been of the opinion that the primary fear about one's inevitable death stems not from the anticipation of physical pain, but from all that the idea of nonexistence implies. I've read many points of view from individuals who seem to want desperately to strike the word *existential* from our language, as if getting rid of the word eliminates the problem of uncertainty inherent in a morally indifferent universe. And yet, it is no more realistic to think that existential angst will go away if we don't talk about it than it is to think that extra pounds will disappear if we don't weigh ourselves. Kübler-Ross's five conditions delineate an existential struggle from which none of us are exempt. The human predicament is that we are smart enough to fret about nonexistence, and yet nothing we learn satisfies our concern or completely stills our anxiety. Although such unease can be put aside for brief periods, it only comes roaring back unexpectedly. All of the Pollyanna and pie-in-the-sky positive attitude prescriptions so ubiquitous in self-help literature have a way of falling flat when one realizes that, hype aside, death awaits.

If we apply Kübler-Ross's template to life in general, something interesting and insightful comes to mind with regard to the fear of death. What role might religion play in the bargaining phase, as one copes with the underlying reality of infinite nonexistence? Setting out to believe the unbelievable in order to still one's anxiety, I suspect, may

be integrally bound to global conflict, where contemptuous hostility surfaces and continually resurfaces as something other than the *doubt* that it actually represents. In other words, the tendency to mask fear with rage makes war easier to cope with because rage occupies the mind, even though participation in war can actually result in a short-cut to oblivion.

We come into the world with the cerebral apparatus for caring about the very process of life itself. As we live, we cherish living and can't get enough of the things we desire. This insatiability sustains us and also foments anxiety as it undermines our sense of security and longevity, making us prone to misdirect attention to matters that seem simpler, less threatening, and more manageable. We are beset with anxiety by all things that remind us of our impending demise, and, without a great deal of thoughtfulness, we are helpless against having our anxiety used against us, especially by manipulative politicians. When all else fails, conflict and all-out war are great diversions.

Whereas self-help culture is concerned with deeply emotional issues, existentialism can be analogous to a wound that never heals but instead is sometimes aggravated and agitated by all of the attention it gets. The bandages are abrasive; the methods of healing often prove toxic; and the medicine sometimes irritates the injury, driving the infection deeper. Thus superficial self-help remedies compound the blatant difficulties inherent in the human condition—an existential condition to be sure—wanted or not, approved of or not. The condition is here: we are it; it is us, and whether we like the idea or not is off the mark and completely beside the point. That's the downside. If we keep this in mind, the upside is that meaningful experience *can* be found wherever we deem it so or act to make it so, free of concocted self-delusion.

In a book titled *The Discovery of Being*, the late existential psychologist Rollo May said, "Existentialism, in short, is the endeavor to understand man by cutting below the

cleavage between subject and object which has bedeviled Western thought and science since shortly after the Renaissance." May said further, "Existentialism is not a comprehensive philosophy or way of life, but an endeavor to grasp reality." Indeed, that is how I view it, and I do so with my own sense of dismay that getting beneath the subject-and-object nature of the human condition is itself little more than an aspiration very likely to be a subjective enterprise forever. Grasping is the best we can ever do.

For most of my years of self-education I've been an advocate for a liberal education as a requirement for a qualitative existence. I've recently come to the glaring conclusion, however, that a liberal education has never been an adequate descriptor of what one needs for an authentic life lived far above clichés, slogans, and platitudes. I am now an enthusiastic advocate for an *existential education*. An existential education is a journey, not a destination. If you feel this assertion has a ring to it like just another cliché, you are not altogether wrong. An existential education cannot be completed; it is a stance, a process, and a grasping for reality, along with an acknowledgment that even though one's answers to questions will never be fully satisfying, the questions still must be asked. So, perhaps a better description of an existential education is simply a liberal education that takes or really works as it's supposed to.

There are many approaches that one can choose in pursuit of an existential education, and I would be reluctant to argue that my approach is necessarily any better than yours. Nevertheless, my experience suggests that when your own genuine curiosity is revived in such a way that you truly find the world and your own life interesting to the point of fascination, your course of inquiry and study will take on an existential form of investigation that is self-perpetuating. Once this level of interest in life is achieved, you begin to wonder how it is possible to be a human being and be bored.

An even more urgent need for an existential education is that it can help to create a society in which people can discuss political matters and critical life-and-death questions in a civil manner without resorting to outrageous behavior or physical conflict. Many cultural critics in recent years have advocated vocational education alone for a large percentage of the populace. It seems to have escaped them that doing so creates a two-tiered society incapable of developing a meaningful dialogue because the two sides have so little in common that there is virtually nothing to talk about. It may be true that not everyone is academically inclined to bookish pursuits, but I don't buy the premise that only some and not all humans should be concerned with the humanities that indeed help to make us human. History offers glaring evidence of how ignorance invites inhuman behavior.

The late Viktor Frankl advocated living one's life with the feeling that we have lived before and with a sense of awareness that we acted wrongly the first time and we may be on the verge of doing so again in this very instant. It was a way to dramatize the reality of one's existence and to draw our attention the multitude of possibilities available in each moment of life. To my thinking, each morning, the minute we awaken to yet another day, the scene that floods our consciousness resets the existential questions that will still be unanswered when we fall asleep again that night. I maintain that the sheer wonder of existence, when fully realized, is drama enough to make us forever cognizant that life is indeed worth living if we deem it so and that the shortness of life ups the ante and applies a highlighter to our experience if we are paying attention.

On a recent road trip home from the lower 48 states, I was driving the Alaska Highway in June on a clear, late evening about 10:00 p.m., with the sun still high in the sky. Looking at the mountains near a scenic turnout, I witnessed a jaw-dropping view that words could never fully capture. The colors were subtle but bright, subdued but

vivid, the mountains infinitely tall but at the same time so stately as to seem modest. The detail of the forest below with the shimmering lakes strewn about for miles in every direction offered an explosive contrast with every individual feature on the horizon; each characteristic begged for attention in its own right, and yet each object was so complementary in the panorama that the whole vista would seem lost without it. I heard myself exclaiming that this is simply not possible—nothing could appear this glorious and grandiose—and yet it kept happening as I drove, with one magnificent view taking over from the last, as if Olympians were passing off a baton of spectacular sunlit radiance in a footrace across the horizon.

A couple in a car that had passed me several times seemed frantic as they sped ahead, stopped, took photos, jumped back in the car, and took off again, giving me looks that said I must not know what I was missing. I had a camera, but I knew better than to try to capture what can't be captured. The photos would have been great, no doubt, but they would never measure up to the memory. I would rather attempt to rely on the reminiscence rather than tarnish the recollection with anything less than I might be able to call to mind. Then, as these scenes reached a critical mass, I was overtaken by a sense of sadness that lasted for a half-hour or so but vanished gradually with the retreating sunlight. An awe-inspiring view still stood on the horizon, but it could not compare to what it had been like before.

Twenty years ago I would have been puzzled by the sadness, but this time I knew what it was immediately: it was an inescapable existential sadness that comes with knowing that one will be dead soon and there are simply not enough of these experiences to be had. When they do occur, the contrast they provide in our ability to experience aesthetic pleasure juxtaposes the high and low points in life, giving rise to a profound realization of the brevity of life. No, I'm not terminally ill that I know of, but being in my seventh decade, I know that *soon* is a relative thing.

When my mother died, I brought home the old, worn-out wall clock that had for many years stood prominently at the center of the mantel over her fireplace, even though it had not worked in decades. It now has a place above my desk with the time stuck at five minutes till midnight. I use it as a reminder that time is short and that how I spend my days is a matter of great importance to me. I trust this book will be worth your time.