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Dying to Live: Exploring the Fear of an Unlived Life Using the Sociological Imagination

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Abstract: In this paper the author applies various sociological theories (phenomenological sociology, symbolic interactionism, social exchange/rational choice theory, functionalism, conflict theory, and the postmodern perspective) to explore her fear of living an unlived life, seeking to examine several important issues that provide her with opportunities for introspection, growth and motivation for living a full life. Using her sociological imagination she seeks to open her mind and heart to ponder more questions and dive deeper into what it means to discover how to fully live. Exploring the fear she has had of wasting her life gives her a deeper understanding of how she wants to live, and discovers some valuable tools to encourage her to stay on the right path.

INTRODUCING MY FEAR

I am not afraid of dying, but I *am* afraid of never really living. When I graduated from high school almost four years ago the world was mine for the taking. I was so excited to finally get out there on my own and LIVE. Next to my senior-year yearbook picture I included the quote by Henry David Thoreau which says, “Go confidently in the directions of your dreams. Live the life you’ve imagined.” It is interesting to me because when I look back on these last few years I *do* feel satisfied with my life, where I have been, what I have done, and who I am in the process of becoming. However, throughout this entire time I have had a fear that I will somehow waste my time; that I will come to the end of my life and regret how I lived. It is ironically this fear that sometimes holds me back from living the

way I want to. I want to live freely, simply, with a spirit of adventure, traveling, helping and loving others along the way. These ideas of a full free life often clash with society’s views and expectations of what constitutes a “successful” life. I think at the core of figuring out how to not waste my life is figuring out who I am, what I value and living freely according to *that* instead of living as I so often presently do with a mask on so that others approve.

Before I address the different way society influences what I do, I want to address this fear that I have. Louise DeSalvo, author of the book *Writing as a Way of Healing*, speaks to this fear of thwarted desires when she writes, “Desire. If we have always wanted to write—something, anything—and if we haven’t, our desire won’t dissipate...Each time we think about our unenacted desire, we will feel thwarted, di-

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minished, unfinished, incomplete” (33). While my thwarted desires will not be in the context of writing, this idea applies to my desire to live fully. If I don't follow my deepest desires there will always be a nagging from within, leaving me with these feelings of fear of being unfinished and incomplete.

IMPORTANCE OF INTROSPECTION

So how do I ensure that I will not waste my life? I will process this question throughout this paper by using my sociological imagination. This is a mindset which I can develop to enable myself to see society in different ways. C. Wright Mills explains this by saying that the “**sociological imagination** enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two in society” (349). It is important, in order to grow, to examine your life. DeSalvo writes “Live an introspective life, and determine what authentic success means to you and what kind of life and interpersonal and social relationships best suit your temperament and talent” (99). A reflective practice that I have benefited from has been keeping journals and art sketchbooks for years to document my growth, ask questions, and record desires. Looking through these old journals I see that I have often struggled over the same questions and the problem of not wanting to waste my life. Yet there is a difference in how I processed those feelings then and how I am beginning to learn to process them now.

In the past I had thought that I was solely responsible if I did not live the life I imagine; I did not recognize that outside forces need to be taken into account as well. I still believe that I am responsible for my decisions, the sociological **rational choice theory** supports the idea that “people are rational and base their actions on what they perceive to be the most effective means to their goals...this means constantly weigh-

ing alternative means to alternative ends and choosing between them” (303). This is a significant perspective because it recognizes that as decision makers we hold some power in the process of our lives. However, I would be seeing only part of the picture if I stopped here.

RECOGNIZING OUTSIDE INFLUENCES

In the past I did not take into account the influence of societal pressures on my decisions. Now I am beginning, through the study of sociological theories, to recognize and unpack the layers of socialization I have accumulated. Sociologist Peter Berger describes **socialization** as “the process through which internalization takes place and through which discrete individuals come to share the same objective reality” (Farganis 282). Now I see that it is not just myself that I am fighting against to live my life, it is also the norms of society. According to the macrosociological **Functionalist perspective**, “Society is conceived of as a system of interrelated parts in which no part can be understood in isolation of the whole” (Wallace and Wolf 17). This means I must consider how outside forces influence my life.

As I am socialized, I learn to live in a way in which I respond to the reactions of others. The behaviors, attitudes, and values toward life which are acceptable to society will be the ones I am encouraged to follow. Sheerin Hosseini, a former student at UMass Boston, in her paper “Accepting Myself: Negotiating Self-Esteem and Conformity in Light of Sociological Theories,” draws on the sociologist George Homans while reflecting on the process of her own socialization and the demands the society put on her to conform. She notes Homans's **success proposition**, “For all actions taken by persons, the more often a particular action of a person is rewarded, the more

likely the person is to perform that action” (Wallace and Wolf 316). The problem for me also arises when my own personal desires conflict with society’s. Then I have a decision to make. Do I follow the easy road (being encouraged along the way) and hold to society’s norms? Or do I take the road less traveled and break out of the mold (risking being discouraged) and follow my own desires?

There are two ways I want to look at society as pressuring me in this way. First I want to explore the larger society—by this I mean the media and the idea of the “American Dream.” This plays a major role in influencing my ideas of what it means to have a successful life and I think it also accounts for the guilty feelings I can have if I do not follow the norm. The second way I would like to view this is on a smaller but no less significant scale. My major circle of influence including friends, family, and professors all influence and pressure me to conform in one way or another and I sometimes feel like I am putting on a show, a fake life in order to win their approval.

Central to the macrosociological **Conflict Theory** is “an emphasis on power as the core of social relationships.” In this theory “values and ideals are seen as weapons used by different groups to advance their own ends rather than as a means of defining a whole society’s identity and goals” (Wallace and Wolf 69). Ralf Dahrendorf, a Weberian conflict theorist, defines **conflict** as “the great creative force of human history” because it provides opportunity for change and revolution (Wallace and Wolf 122). If I uncritically absorb the messages society gives me I may end up inadvertently supporting the ruling class and its ideas while the class may in fact be oppressing me. Wallace and Wolf explain it well when they use the term **false consciousness** saying “People in a class society believe many things that are not correct but are rather a form of ideology whose main purpose is to legitimize the position of those

currently in control. Such ideology stands in the way of other people realizing what their real interests are” (87-88).

Conflict Theorists believe that **norms** “are established and maintained by power, and their substance may well be explained in terms of interests of the powerful” (Wallace and Wolf 123). What is it that makes certain ways of life less “successful” in the eyes of this society? **Social Stratification** assures that “positions and jobs are different and demand different skills and that different jobs are treated as superior or inferior to one another”; this stratification happens because of norms established by those in power, norms that “categorize some things as desirable and others as not” (Wallace and Wolf 123). **Marxist theory** “argues that different classes inevitably have incompatible interests because under systems of property ownership, one class makes economic gains at the expense of another” (Wallace and Wolf 83). When the lower classes internalize the ideals and values of the ruling class and make them their own they are submitting to the institution. Durkheim has defined **institution** as “beliefs and modes of behavior instituted by the collectivity” (Wallace and Wolf 21). Marxism functions to “encourage people—specifically the members of the exploited proletariat—to recognize and act upon their interests and to encourage and accelerate change and revolution” (Wallace and Wolf 85). While I have power over many aspects of my life it is important to recognize that these aspects of society do to a certain extent limit me.

WORK

American society tells us that we need to work a 9-5 job, make a lot of money, and have a nice house and things. The film *Affluenza* documents the extreme materialistic values of American society. One notable quote in the film says that we are “slaves to

the system.” I think to a certain extent this is true. I would not be considered a total outcast if I stepped out of line and did my life the way I want, but I would certainly be viewed as strange and deviant. According to my society my desire to live simply, travel, and help others is often not included in what constitutes a “successful” life. Society would tell me that what I want is irresponsible, or that my desires are simply just childish dreams that I need to outgrow. I do acknowledge that it would be much easier for me to simply follow the crowd, get a 9-5 job, and live a consumer driven life in this consumer driven culture, but in doing this I would be denying a very important part of who I am. There is a line in the film *The Matrix* where the main character Neo is being told about the reality of his situation by another character, Morpheus who says to him, “I didn’t say it would be easy, I just said it would be the truth.” Similarly my “truth” will only come to light if I allow it to come out through living out my desires, but with all the pressures of society telling me to conform it is not the easy road to travel.

American society attributes much importance to what we do. When you introduce yourself to someone after saying your name usually you ask, “What do you do?” I struggle with this because I resist being defined by what I do. Our society judges and ranks people based solely on their profession and that is bothersome to me. The larger society tells me that I am to find my life, my worth, and my identity in *what I do*, not in who I am, what I value, or the experiences I have. That I think is the fundamental difference between how my society defines success and how I do. **Collective** self orientation “involves the dilemma of whether private interests can be gratified or some collective obligation or duty must be fulfilled” (Wallace and Wolf 30). I feel all these pressures to know what I will do when I graduate. I do want to *do*, I do not want to just be a consumer and not contrib-

ute to society, but also do not want to be defined by my job. It is important to me when considering what I will do for work to think of not just my intellectual interests but also my creative and emotional interests. A lot of these interests I think can be discovered through recreation and leisure. In the article “A mind for adventure” Mark Strother writes, “If you combine affinities with strengths, you begin to carve out a potential career. So you find your affinities in your recreation, and you use your strength in your career” (5). Through creative and leisure activities we can discover who we are. John and Janice Kelly speak to the importance of leisure in their article “Multiple Dimensions of Meaning in the Domains of Work, Family and Leisure,” saying that it includes “the development in which individuals seek to augment their identities and competencies” (6). They also explain the impact of leisure on the development of the whole person when they say “the satisfactions of leisure are more than immediate pleasure, but involve a sense of becoming a person more competent and more connected with other persons” (Kelly 6).

The second major way society influences me is on a smaller scale but is equally as effective in pressuring me to conform. I believe that much of what holds me back from living life the way I want and thus contributes to my fear that I will waste my life is in my caring too much about the opinions and judgments of others. Charles Horton Cooley’s concept of the looking glass self has helped me to realize this worry I have about how I appear to others. Wallace and Wolf define Charles Horton Cooley’s concept of the **looking glass self** as “the self you understand as a result of the information reflected back to you in the judgments of others with whom you interact” (Wallace and Wolf, 203). This concept asks us to consider how we imagine others view us, how we imagine they judge us as a result of how we imagine they view us, and how we feel about that judgment. The

way that I imagine I am judged by others plays a role in this problem of mine. I worry if I follow my desires and live life my way others will judge me and think I am irresponsible or that what I do is insignificant. This makes me afraid to step out and follow my dreams because I fear being rejected or looked down upon by others.

I can relate to how UMass Boston student Keyon Smith feels in his paper “Lifting the Fog: Finding Freedom in Light of the Sociological Imagination” when he writes, “It mattered to me a great deal what I thought others thought of me. The fact that this was so important to me played a key role in providing the conditions that allowed the blinding fog to form and maintain itself” (2). Similarly, I have realized that allowing myself to remain fearful of how I perceive others to be viewing me holds me back from being myself and living my life based on what is important to me. This influence creates fear and stops me from living the life I imagine. **Impression management** involves “how people present themselves to others” and it “is essentially a strategy for avoiding embarrassment or shame and is inspired by pride, a desire to look good” (Wallace and Wolf 340, 249). I am good at presenting myself to others so that they will accept me, but I want to change this. If fitting in leaves me feeling unfulfilled then I am willing to not fit in. If I learn how to be comfortable with *who* I am then I will not have this burden of trying to please others with what I do with my life; I will be free and confident to live life the way I choose. When I can learn to define and follow my own desires I will feel more free and create my own “subculture” as Morrie Schwartz explains in Mitch Albom’s novel (and movie of same name) *Tuesdays with Morrie*, “Here’s what I mean by building your own little subculture, I don’t mean you disregard every rule of your community. I don’t go around naked, for example. I don’t run through red lights. The little things, I can obey. But the big things—how

we think, what we value—those you must choose yourself. You can’t let anyone—or any society—determine those for you” (155).

By being in tune with and motivated by my own desires (not society’s) I think I will enjoy my life more and regret less later. Strother writes of this contributing to an adventurous and full life when he says “When subjects are encouraged to pursue a task for their own sake, they do it better and enjoy it more than those told to do it for a reward or to avoid punishment... figure out what you care about and let it motivate you” (5). Defining my values and desires will be an important part of making the most of my life. After defining them I then need to make sure I follow them even if they seem insignificant to others. An important part of this process for me personally involves keeping journals and creative sketchbooks. This creative process allows me to work through important questions, and I know that maintaining it will be significant for my growth and motivation to live a full life. DeSalvo writes to this topic when she says,

If you want to write, you must follow your desire to write. And your writing will help you unravel the knots in your heart. I didn’t know that you could write simply to take care of yourself, even if you have no desire to publish your work...I didn’t know that if you want to write and don’t, because you don’t feel worthy enough or able enough, not writing will eventually begin to erase who you are. I didn’t know that the writers whose works we read harbored hopes and dreams like mine when they were young but that they acted on their desires, whereas I wasn’t acting on mine. (DeSalvo 31)

BE TRUE TO MYSELF

Now that I have acknowledged some of the major outside forces that act on and influence me, how do I begin to solve this problem I have? I think in order to not be hindered by societal demands and influences I need to learn to be true to my own self. I fear if I don't live according to my desires I will look back and regret. DeSalvo records this giving up of self when she wrote about Fitzgerald saying,

Rather than looking within to determine what he needed to satisfy himself, Fitzgerald had assumed other people's values. Rather than determining for himself how he might most fulfillingly interact with people to suit his needs he allowed someone else to dictate the fabric of his relationships... though he became an enormous popular success, he thought it was meaningless because he had been untrue to himself. (96-97)

The sociological understanding of the self is an important starting point. Mead defines the **self** as "an acting organism, not a passive receptacle that simply receives and responds to stimuli" (Wallace and Wolf 205). This definition is empowering because it says that the self can be realized by a person and that we are not completely influenced by society but we have the power to act. Yet, here the problem resurfaces. Because humans are social beings, we care a great deal about how others view us and we often hide our selves by playing roles. Sociologist Erving Goffman uses his theory of **dramaturgy** to illustrate how people in society act as though they are actors on-stage. Further he talks about the **backstage** where "actors do not need to engage in impression management; they can be themselves" (Wallace and Wolf 239). It is this

area that I want to explore, strengthen, and bring to the front stage. If I can tap into my backstage self I think I can follow my desires and not yield to society's pressures.

A good way to begin this study of myself is through the sociological theory of **symbolic interaction** which focuses on "the interaction between a person's internal thoughts and emotions and his or her social behavior" (Wallace and Wolf 205). As I engage with my thoughts and emotions and view my connected behavior I can begin to figure out how to change my behavior. When I gain courage and begin to express my desires to live a free spirited, simple life I often run into a conflict within my own self. The negative feedback I often receive from others causes me to doubt what I want and wonder if I am wrong for wanting to live an alternative to the "American dream." Sociologist George Herbert Mead believed that people have the ability "through **self interaction** to form and guide their own conduct" (Wallace and Wolf 206).

As I learn to be more confident in my own dreams instead of society's, and to be comfortable with myself and not disappointed that I do not match up to who society tells me to be, I will be free to live my life freely and uninhibited. Albom writes about his old professor living in this free way. Using dancing as an example he says of Morrie: "He had always been a dancer, my old professor. The music didn't matter. Rock and roll, big band, the blues. He loved them all. He would close his eyes and with a blissful smile begin to move to his own sense of rhythm. It wasn't always pretty. But then, he didn't worry about a partner. Morrie danced by himself" (Albom 5).

PROBLEMATIZING THINGS TAKEN FOR GRANTED

The microsociological theory called **Phenomenology** is "characterized as a sub-

jective or creative sociology because it seeks to understand the world from the point of view of the acting subject and not from the perspective of the scientific observer" (Farganis 281). This is of particular interest to me as I think about how I will answer this problem I have. I like that I can be my own observer and I can unpack these problems through self reflection and I don't need the help of a mediator. In her paper "Why do I not Like Me?" UMass Boston student C. G. further explains this perspective saying that phenomenology "encourages us to problematize what we hold to be normal. Phenomenologists would ask us to be strangers to ourselves and our environment so we can better analyze and question our norms. Phenomenologists believe that we take things for granted in our everyday lives and that we are not aware that these things were socially constructed and thus can be changed" (102).

The film *Twelve Angry Men* illustrates how we can problematize the normal, everyday aspects of life and come out with greater meaning. When this jury of twelve men first began determining whether or not the defendant was guilty or not, all but one believed he was guilty based on the evidence. As the film progresses and the men problematize the case and challenge the previously held assumptions, we see that they get a deeper meaning and eventually come to the decision that there is not enough evidence to prove the defendant is guilty. Only when we question and carefully consider our assumptions can we then make them our own and not just follow the crowd.

Ethnomethodology, according to Harold Garfinkel who coined the term, studies the way and methods people use to make sense of their everyday activities (Wallace and Wolf 269). I think by following this approach and studying everyday things that I often take for granted I will be able to determine what is important to me and when I intentionally live according to

what I discover I will be able to say I lived my life fully.

ENJOY THE PROCESS/INTERROGATE THE QUESTIONS

I think that an important part of this process of unwrapping who my real self is involves allowing myself to work through it, not forcing myself to come up with an answer to impress others. What I mean by this is that I need to learn to be okay with not having all of the answers that others in society want from me. For example as a senior in college I am often asked the question, "What will you do when you graduate, for a job, for the rest of your life?" But I think that this is the wrong question. In my opinion it gives too much importance to the end result (whatever job I will land in) and not enough care to the process of who I become in the course of getting there. One person whose life has inspired this desire I have to live fully has been the late photo journalist and artist Dan Eldon. Eldon is renowned for his thoughts on the *process* of life, also famous for a simple saying which he wrote in one of his journals, "the journey is the destination," eluding to the idea that it is not the end result that should be our destination but rather it is through the experience of the journey itself that we become and experience the full life. DeSalvo also speaks to this thought of the process of life when she writes, "It is not what you write or what you produce as you write that is important. It is what happens to you while you are writing that is important. It is who you become while you are writing that is important" (74). I think it is also important to view education as a process of learning and growing, not just as a means to a job. In the process you can learn not just information in general but that about yourself as well. Strother speaks to this idea when he writes "One of the main goals of education is helping kids over time

figure out *who* they are” (5).

The answer to the previously posed question does not have a straightforward answer. The answer I want to give would be explaining my interests and how these and the things that are most important to me (faith, relationships, caring for others) can be incorporated all together into a career in the future. However, I do not know how all that fits into a specific job yet. I am comfortable with not knowing, but I think it makes others uncomfortable that I don't have a five-step plan to finish my life as society deems so important. In his book *Letters to a Young Poet* the great poet Rainer Maria Rilke writes about unanswered questions to an aspiring poet saying,

I want to beg you as much as I can... to be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves... do not seek answers which cannot be given to you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually without even noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer. (50)

I think sometimes I need to slow down and as Rilke says “be patient” and allow myself to work through who I am and what I will do, even if it is at the expense of others judging me in a negative way.

BE FULLY PRESENT

An essential part of not wasting my life involves living in the present, not just dreaming of and waiting for the future to happen. I often find myself dreaming so much into the future that I wonder where the present went. In reading the book and watching the film *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Morrie speaks to this idea of a full life in-

volving living in the moment when he says, “I believe in being fully present, that means you should be with the person you're with. When I'm talking to you now, Mitch, I try to keep focused on what is going on between us. I am not thinking of what's coming up this Friday. I am not thinking about doing another Koppel show, or about what medications I am taking” (135). Another individual who has influenced my desire to not waste my life has been Rita Golden Gelman. Gelman spent years traveling the world engaging people of different cultures and writing novels and children's books. She also speaks to this notion of not wanting to waste the present by living in the future in her book *Tales of a Female Nomad* when she writes,

And when this book is finished? Then what? I have no idea. I'm not thinking about the future. While I'm here, wherever that may be I want to be 100 percent here. One of the most important things I have learned during the last fifteen years is how to enjoy and savor the present. When I am writing, I am inside the sound and meaning of the words, playing with them, curving them around each other. When I am eating, I luxuriate in the taste and texture of every bite. When I am alone, I listen to and communicate with the silence within me and the noises and messages of the world around me. And when I am with people I am really with them. (Gelman 302)

I want to learn to live this way. Living in the moment and not wishing time away will be an important factor to living my life in a full way.

According to the modernist perspective, *tradition* which is “an organizing medium of collecting memory,” is replaced with expertise. Wallace and Wolf expound

upon this loss of tradition saying, “Alongside the perception that anything in the world can be changed—though often not in the way that anyone intended—there comes a view of oneself and one’s identity as something that involves choices, decisions, and creation. The loss of tradition means that people have to decide on their lifestyle, their relationships with people, and the sort of person they are going to be” (190-191). This offers us more freedom in how we live our lives. However, it also leaves us with more pressure to make decisions and more confusion if we have a hard time figuring it out.

BE INTENTIONAL

I can help myself not to be overly influenced by society if I limit the amount of messages coming in. This is not easy to do, especially since there is no way to escape from constant advertising messages in this culture. However, I can be intentional about who and what I surround myself with. Conflict Theorist Randall Collins uses the idea of *social density* to explore “how society creates loyalty and identification among its members” (Wallace and Wolf 151). An aspect of this is *mutual surveillance* which says that “the more that people are in the physical presence of others—the more they accept the culture of the group and expect precise conformity in others” (Wallace and Wolf 151). Since I know that the things and people I spent the most time with will impact me, I can do a few different things to protect myself. For example I can limit the amount of time (or types of programs) I watch on television. I can also screen the information I choose to read and stay away from material that I know will only encourage me to conform; for example I can stay away from women’s magazines which will pressure me to conform to society’s ideals of beauty and success. I can also be intentional about the kind of people I

have around me, because we often become like the people we surround ourselves with. If I spend my time with people who are, as I am, intentionally in pursuit of a full life, I will be encouraged to do likewise. There is also wisdom in being exposed to different kinds of people and ideas. The more I experience, the larger my worldview will be and the better I will be at thinking through problems. Wallace and Wolf have a helpful way of expressing this when they say,

The diversity or *cosmopolitanism* of people’s contacts similarly affects the way they think. Collins argues that the more different sorts of communication people are involved in, the more likely they are to start thinking in abstract terms of long-range consequences. On the other hand, the less varied people’s contacts, the more likely they are to think only about particular people and particular things and to see the world outside their own familiar circle as alien and threatening. Thus limited contact will tend to create shared, local views of reality and a feeling of identification with familiar local people vis-à-vis the outside world. (151-152)

ONE FINAL QUESTION

Albom writes about a conversation he had with Morrie about unfulfilled living asking, “But if aging were so valuable, why do people always say, ‘Oh, if I were young again’... He Smiled. “You know what that reflects? Unsatisfied lives. Unfulfilled lives. Lives that haven’t found meaning. Because if you’ve found meaning in your life, you don’t want to go back. You want to go forward. You want to see more, do more. You can’t wait until sixty-five” (118). How can I ensure that I will lead a meaningful life?

This essay has been exploring a variety of ways I can help ensure that my life will be fulfilling on my terms; however, I do have one more important addition before I conclude. A lyric from a song often enters my head and challenges me to consider how I am living my life; it asks very simply "This is your life, are you who you want to be?" As I listen to this song I am challenged to slow down, take a step back, and problematize and examine my life. This is a good reminder I can stop at any point and make changes in my life to live more fully if I just stop to consider where I am at.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

As a result of this study and exploration of how to not waste my life I have not come up with a specific answer and step by step plan to implement in my life. However, I have uncovered several important things which provide me with opportunity for introspection, growth and motivation for living a full life. I have realized the significance of my journaling and keeping a sketchbook. Through these activities I sort through questions, record ideas, and can look back and see growth overtime. As a result of this exploration I have also begun to be more comfortable with and confident in who I am and I feel less pressured to fit into society's ideal. I have learned that I do not have to have all the answers and that it is important for me to slow down and live fully in the present. If I live this way I will not let moments pass by. I have also realized that it is helpful to periodically ask myself if I am living my life the way I desire, so that if I find I am not, I can redirect myself before it is too late.

As a result of using my sociological imagination my mind and heart have been opened in this process to ponder more questions and dive deeper into what it means to discover how to fully live. Exploring this fear I have had of wasting my life

has given me a deeper understanding of how I want to live, and some valuable tools to encourage me to stay on the right path.

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