

What does it really mean to take a stand?

Werner Erhard December 1982

We sometimes think of taking a stand as making a decision for or against something, forming a resolution or choosing a side. But in the talk you are about to hear, Werner Erhard distinguishes taking a stand from any of these. As defined in this tape, it's a powerful way of being that can enable an individual to have an impact on the course of humanity.

Taking a stand was the subject of a series of talks given in December of 1982 in nine U.S. cities. More than 20,000 people from all over the world attended these events, demonstrating a remarkable demand to discover what it takes to make a real difference in life. This audio tape is a condensation of those talks and conveys their essence.

Ordinarily, when faced with a problem, we look for a solution. But when we address the vital question of how to make our lives really matter, we may need to find a new approach.

Werner Erhard

Tonight is not about answers, and our society is crazy for answers. Everybody knows that our problems would be solved if somebody came up with the answer. We look, we listen for solutions, we look for solutions, we talk in solutions, we talk in answers. We're information crazy.

It's kind of like, it's kind of like being on a train. And the train is, you know, if you look out the window, you can see that the train is going someplace. It's got a destination. And most people are not looking out the window. Most people are sitting in the sunlight streaming through the window of the train. And people begin to take a look out the window at where the train is going. And they're trying to say something about the train is not going to a good place. This train is headed in a bad place, or at least in a less than optimum place. And people begin to hear that the train is going in a bad place. And they're wise enough to pay attention to the old Chinese proverb that says, if we don't change our direction, we're likely to end up where we're headed.

So I think that most of us are starting to wake up to the idea that if we don't change our direction, we're probably going to wind up where we're headed. But what are our options?

Well, somebody comes along and says, look, we've got this dilemma. And you got two choices. You can get on the left side of the train or the right side of the train.

And I say that the right way to get this train, the right side of the train to be on to get this train to change its direction is the left side. And everybody ought to come over on the left side.

And that's pretty much the way most people think. They take sides. Oh, me, I'm on this side. You, you're on that side. That's wrong. That isn't going to work. Come on over on my side.

And we try the right side. And we keep trying the right side. And pretty soon we get the idea that the, that this is not going to, being on the right side did not get this train to change directions. So everybody moves over to the left side. And we try that for a number of years. And that doesn't get the train to change direction.

We move back to the right side. And we've been doing that for quite a long time now, going back and forth, taking sides on one side or the other, not really quite waking up to the fact that that hasn't changed the direction of the train. We're still going where we're headed.

What we need is a way to get out in front of the train and lay a little new track. But you see, it's unthinkable to get out in front of the train. So people keep going from one side of the train to the other side of the train in the hope that that's going to make some difference. Yet, if you're awake, you begin to see that it isn't making much difference.

See, if somebody ran for office and they said, and I think this is the only honest thing anybody could say, I don't know the answer for sure. You and I would not vote for him or her. And he or she would be crazy because he or she would not be elected. But the truth is, we don't have the answers. Because if we had the answers, the likelihood is that one of those last 90 or 1,000 or 450,000 people that we voted into office on the strength of that they had the answer would have had the answer. And it's not likely that the last people promised that they had the answer had the answer.

You see, questions are actually a lot more empowering to human beings than answers. And I can show you why very simply. This is a little oversimplified, but it makes the point.

Let's say the music stand is the answer. See, everybody now knows exactly where to focus their attention and in which direction to walk. I, for instance, know to focus my attention that way and to walk in this direction. But suppose rather than having an answer, somebody opens up a question. And I have a commitment to living inside that question rather than to getting the answer.

Suddenly, my attention is allowed to be free to take a look around myself to see what the possibilities are, to see what's open, to see what I can't see, to see what I haven't seen. And I'm free to explore and to move around and to check things out. And suddenly the world is opened up instead of closed down.

So if that isn't a description of freedom and freedom doesn't have a lot to do with power, I don't know what I'm talking about.

So answers don't empower people, even though you and I think that they do. And a society built on answers and built out of commitment merely to answers is going to look like that. It's going to look like it's on rails headed towards a disaster. And it's going to look like fussing around inside the train for the answer about how to change direction. It's going to look like not being able to get out in front of the train, laying some new track.

So tonight is not about answers. It's about opening up a question. It's about creating a question. It's about the power of questions and the power of living your life inside of a question where you are committed to the question and not the answer.

Can you see what happens when you live your life out of a commitment to a question? What happens is that you get lots and lots and lots and lots and lots of answers. When you're committed to an open question, when you're committed to the question, answers are all over the place. And you really have a choice about which answer you're working on at the moment.

And you're never stuck with the answer that you've got because your commitment is not to find the answer. But your commitment is to living your life out of the question.

So this is about questions.

Now, there's one question on everybody's mind. It comes in lots of different forms. But the question is, will we survive? That's the question on everybody's mind. Will we survive?

Sometimes people are saying it about their whatever it is they're trying to accomplish personally. Will I be able to accomplish it? That's another form of will we survive. People say it about their enterprises. Will it fail or succeed? That's just a form of will we survive. People ask it with regard to nuclear weapons. Will we survive? And the answers are not good about nuclear weapons.

Even if nobody ever decided to have a war, let us assume that that is the truth. That people are building nuclear weapons in order not to have wars.

I mean, maybe let's accept that that's the truth. That people are building nuclear weapons not to have wars, even including those nations who have not shown much restraint, unlike some of the bigger nuclear powers. But let's assume even they would only want a nuclear weapon so that there wouldn't be any wars. And nobody wants a war. And the only reason we have nuclear weapons is not that wars. And the more nuclear weapons we have, the more likelihood we won't have a war. Let's assume that's all true.

There's something about probability of a mistake. See, if you take one opportunity and keep it alive for a long enough time, you get a very high probability of a mistake. You take and multiply the numbers that you've got. The longer you keep those numbers going, particularly if the numbers are expanding, the probability of a mistake becomes enormous.

So the question, will we survive, is a very real question. It ain't no joke.

Before the proliferation of nuclear weapons and before the weapons strategies that are now in place, there was never any question about anybody being able to annihilate the world. That only came up in the last few years. That is a different possibility than anybody has ever lived with before. You are not like any human being who has ever lived before, because no human being has ever lived when there was a weapon system such as the one we got now. Never. The ability to end the experiment called human being lay wherever you like to call it, either in nature or God's hands, but never in our own. You are not like any human being who has ever lived.

The question is, will we survive? And we don't have to do it with nuclear weapons. We could do it very easily economically.

I've been in countries where the question about survival, I mean like whether you're going to die if there's a drought, the absolute certainty that one out of every six, five children is going to die. Absolutely certain. And you should know that we could ruin this experiment called human being economically.

See, that's not very real to people. So let me tell you a little story.

Poland, Argentina, Mexico, and about six or seven other countries have enormous external debt to private banks, like 60, 70 billion dollars. That's like twice the total product of their exports. Now, if somebody says the emperor has no clothes, if somebody says those countries are not going to pay back those loans, the whole international monetary system will come down. Now, these are countries who cannot pay the interest on those loans.

Now, the banking system is very interesting. See, the banking system is a lot of paper and a bank has a book and there's a page on one side of the book and a page on the other side of the book. If you have to take a multi-billion dollar loan in a very large bank and move that multi-billion dollar loan from one side of the page to the other side of the page, suddenly that bank is bankrupt. That bank owes more than it can pay.

You see, banks owe a lot of money, an enormous amount of money to other banks and as long as they can pay that money, nobody cares. But the day somebody says about Brazil, Poland, Mexico, or any, as a matter of fact, any one of those countries, the emperor has no clothes, those people are not really ever going to pay those loans back. And I want you to know it's nothing more than saying it. I mean it's true now. They are not going to pay those loans back. And there isn't anybody in international finance who doesn't know that they're not going to pay those loans back. How in the hell are they going to pay the loans back when they can't pay the interest?

They build up those enormous loans during good times. These are bad times. So if good times come back, they will get more loans, not pay the old loans off. If you pay the old loans off in good times, you don't have good times.

Now, the banking system is very clever. So it doesn't have just two sides of the page, assets and liability. It's got something in the middle. The thing in the middle is called a non-performing asset. A non-performing asset is a loan which you are still claiming you are going to get paid off on, but which is not producing any interest. So it still stays kind of on the right side of the page. That is to say, you don't have to say to the other banks to whom you owe the money, we can't pay you the money. You don't have to say to your depositors, uh listen, we're bankrupt.

So what do you think happens if you say to somebody who put their money in a bank that you're not liquid anymore? What do you think would happen? All those people would go to your bank and say, here's my passbook, give me my money back. That's it. I don't want to do business with you anymore.

That happened. That happened to a very large bank in the United States. When the Polish debt came into question, and this bank was a major holder of that debt, billions, listen, billions of dollars in deposits were removed from that bank and put into a bank across the street.

No kidding.

People all over the world took their money out and put it in the bank across the street.

Why have your money in a bank that looks shaky when there's one across the street that doesn't look shaky? The only problem is that the bank they took their money out of owes enormous sums of money to the bank that they put their money into.

So we could go down the tubes very, very, very simply, very easily. I mean, no problem. We could go down the tubes very, very, very easily economically. I mean, really easily. Wouldn't be any problem at all to go down the tubes economically.

We could do it environmentally. Doesn't take much. You know, and right now we can't afford to have much environmental protection. We're in too deep a hole and things are too terrible and we can't be too worried about that at the moment. We have to pay attention to the moment. We can't worry about the long term. Wouldn't be very hard for us to destroy ourselves. I mean, environmentally. We could do it with the topsoil we're now losing. We could do it polluting the oceans, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

So this question's all the time going on and on and on because I want to rub our noses a little bit. In the fact that this question, will we survive, is a very legitimate question. Of course, you already knew that, but I wanted to rub our noses in it. So it's very legitimate.

We're going to have good people working on it. And we do have good people working on it. That's what we elect people for, is to work on the question, will we survive? So we've got good people working on the question, will we survive? And it's an important question. It's also a question which has never made any difference.

Now, I didn't say it wasn't important. I said it doesn't make any difference.

See, a more important question might be something like, what if we survive? Then what? Suppose you don't die tomorrow. So what? Suppose your enterprise doesn't fall apart next year. Then what? Suppose things go well and we keep being viable. Then what? What if we do survive?

So the question for tonight, and it's a question designed to create a space out here in which something can show up. It's not a question designed to get an answer. You understand? This is not a question designed to get an answer. We'll talk about answering it, but it's not really designed to get an answer. It's designed to give some freedom in which to be, some freedom to look around, some freedom to experiment, some freedom to move in.

So the question is, does my life really matter?

Very few people ask that question very often. People are always asking the question, will I survive? But almost never do you and I ask the question, does my life really matter?

Do I make any difference? Does really anything make any difference? Is there such a thing as making a difference?

So we're going to look at that question. Now, not only are we going to look at the question, but we're going to look at it in a way that actually makes a difference.

So people have been asking the question, do I make any difference in ways that haven't made a difference for a long time? Comes up a lot, but it never makes any difference. So then people stop asking it.

So the commitment tonight is not only to look at the question, to open up the question, does my life really matter? Do I really matter? Do I make a difference? Does anything make a difference? But to look at it and to interact with it and open it up and ask it in a way that actually makes a difference, a difference in my life, in your life, a difference in the lives of our families, a difference in the lives of our organizations and enterprises, a difference in society. So I want to ask that question in a way that makes a difference to society, that actually makes a difference. So that's what we're going to be doing.

Most of us at one time or another have had the feeling that something important is missing from life. And if we take a close and careful look into our lives, we can find an area that falls short of our expectations. This disparity between what we expect and what we experience is the subject of the next section.

I want to do a little bit more hard, honest, deep looking. And I want to talk about something that we ordinarily don't talk about with each other, particularly we don't talk about it in polite company. What I want to talk about is the gap between our expectations and reality.

I say that you and I live inside that gap, that there's a chasm, a gap between what you and I expect of life and what life really is. And I'm not talking about some kind of a fantasy gap. There are lots of fantasy gaps where people have some fantastic notion of what ought to be. I'm not talking about the gap between your dreams and reality. I'm talking about the gap between what you and I have a right to expect of life and reality. So that chasm, the chasm between what you and I have the right to expect from life and what we actually get from life.

So you and I have the right to expect our relationships to be deeply nurturing and really fulfilling. And for the most part, they're not. That's tough stuff to say. It's difficult to look at your friends, people you care for, people you love, and admit that that's true and accuse them of it being true for them as well.

But I'll be damned if it's not true that there is a gap between what you and I have the right to expect in terms of fulfillment, in terms of nurturement, in terms of beauty in our relationships and what we actually get out of the relationships.

Yes, I know you get along and I know it's good and I know nice things have happened and I know that your relationship is totally justified. I'm not attacking you on the basis that your relationships are unjustified.

I'm attacking us, and it's not an attack, it's an attempt to open our eyes, to get us beyond our arrogance, to just tell the truth about the fact that we live in this gap. The gap between what we really have a right to expect.

You and I have a right to expect our relationships to be fulfilling, profoundly fulfilling. You and I have a right when we go to work for an organization, when we move from an individual expression to an organizational expression, we have a right to expect our affiliation with that organization to empower us to make an even bigger contribution than we could as an individual. We have a right to expect that being a part of the organization will enlarge our sense of having expressed ourselves, of having been that which we know we are, and by God that ain't the way it is.

People go to work for corporations, for organizations, and find out they got to give up a piece of themselves. They got to trade in the sense of fulfillment, of self-expression, fulfilling their self-expression for a paycheck, and for security, and for a title, and we got a right to expect that it would be otherwise. There is an enormous gap, and your life and my life reflects living in that gap.

You and I are the way people would be if they lived in that gap, for the most part. That's the way we are for the most part, like we would have to be if we lived in a gap between what we have a right to expect and reality. You know, we would do, and be, and think, and talk, and interact, and feel like people felt if they lived in that gap.

You know, we got a right to expect certain things from the government, and we don't get it. Not fantasies. We have a right to expect certain things from the practice of our religion, and for the most part, people don't get it, what they have a right to expect, and it's all over the place. There is a gap, and it's a no-kidding gap.

Something is missing. It may be in front of our noses. It may not be around at all, but something is missing. This gap in which you and I live, this gap which life is a reflection of, tells clearly something is missing, and what we're providing is not allowing it to show up. It ain't gonna show up on this train. It ain't gonna show up in a place like you and I have been. You get it? What's missing is not gonna show up where you and I are. If it was going to show up where you and I are, it would have done so.

This is tough, nasty talk, and it's very closely aligned to this question, do I make any difference?

So I want to interact and start to open up some possibilities, no answers, just open up some possibilities for looking for yourself, for doing some experimenting, moving around, looking over your shoulder, taking a look up above and down below, to get down underneath.

So I want to ask a question, and I'm going to ask the same question in a number of different ways. The question is, where is the future? See what is missing is going to show up in the future. I want to know where the future is.

Now I'm going to tell you what the answer that most people will give, in my mind, the future lives in my mind. That has as much power as saying the future lives in my elbow. I want you to see that that kind of a relationship to the question doesn't make any difference. I know the answer the future lives in my mind is plausible and sensible and logical and rational and realistic, but it doesn't make any difference. Can't you see that the answer doesn't give you any power?

I'll ask it in a different way. Same question really, just a different form. Where is what isn't? Where is what isn't? Now don't tell me it's where it is, because it isn't there. Now it'll be there when it's what is, but I want to know where it is when it isn't.

See I want to know where relativity was before Einstein. I want to know in what domain Einstein had the function to get relativity. I want to know where is what isn't now. Where is what's missing? Where is it?

Now one of the things I want you to take a look at is that nothing is missing for a dog. There's nothing missing for a dog. Dogs don't have anything missing. So what's missing is not in perception. The future is not in perception. It's not in a picture. Dogs have perceptions and pictures.

So where is a chair? Where is a chair a chair? See this is just a bunch of sticks and fabric. Where is it a chair? And the words are very precise. Where is it a chair? Where does it show up as a chair?

So I'm going to suggest something, not like an answer, but like a space, to open up a space for you to move around in and check things out, look it over and look at, you know. So this is not an answer. This is really a question. I want people to understand it's a question. So what I'm doing is creating a question. So don't listen to it like an answer because as an answer it's not worth anything.

Lots of people have tried this on as an answer. It's not worth much as an answer. It has some power and value however as a question.

So I'd like you to take a look at that the future exists in language, not mere words. When I say language I don't mean words. I mean I don't not mean words either, but I don't mean only words.

See let me show you the language chair. My sitting down is actually an interpretation that this is a chair. What you just saw was me languaging chair.

I want you to see that that this is interpreting this stack of wood and fabric as a chair. I want you to see that it's actually language in action. So I mean something a little broader than words, bigger than syntax. I don't mean linguistics. I simply mean that there's a distinction of the possibility of being in language that doesn't exist without language.

I'm suggesting that being is in language. I didn't say things are language. I said being is in language where being shows up is in language.

Not like an answer. I'm not giving you an answer. It's like a possibility. It's like opening something up.

See it begins to shatter your whole notion of reality and your relationship with reality and begins to give you a whole new space in which to function when you start to understand that being lives in language.

So like if I show, I'm told by anthropologists, if you show a primitive tribesman a photograph, he does not see an image of himself. What he sees are black and white spots. So is there a photograph there? Is there a photographic image there? Is there an image of the tribesman? The tribesman's got all the equipment that the anthropologist has got. Ah, the anthropologist says he doesn't understand. So the anthropologist then explains photography to him by saying there's this paper in here that's light sensitive and the light bounces off your body and comes through the little hole in the camera and is focused on the paper and everything that's out there is here. See this is representative of you and the tribesman looks at the photograph again we're told and says yes I see the black and white spots and I understand they represent me but I don't see myself there.

So where is the image? I didn't say where's the outlines of the image. I said where is it? Where does it live? Where does that image live? So I'm asking you to open up a domain of possibility, an option for yourself that the image lives in language.

Now you notice that you didn't get any thinner with that information or sexier or younger therefore must be unimportant.

We'll see if it makes a difference. I didn't ask you to understand what I said either. I mean it's perfectly okay with me if you do understand it but I didn't ask you to understand it.

So I want to do a little analysis. I want to take a little deeper look. I want to see if we can see down underneath something. So I want to kind of see where things are. Where are things? Where do things show up?

Well one of the places that things clearly show up is in our concepts. We have concepts about things. So there's this conceptual domain. I mean everybody in the room knows what I'm talking about when I say cat even though there are no furry things going meow in the room. But everybody knows what I'm talking about when I say cat because the cat has a kind of existence as a concept and we communicate conceptually with symbols and representations. So I can symbolize a cat by saying I can symbolize a furry thing that goes meow by saying cat. I can symbolize a furry thing that goes meow by saying cat and everybody quote knows what I'm talking about.

So we've got symbols and representations. It's a level of communication. This is the world in which we explain things, in which we justify things, in which we figure out things. And it's a very very useful and important world. As a matter of fact almost everything that you and I would call the good life was generated out of a lot of competence in this world. Western civilization, the developed world is really a function of a lot of competence in this world.

But everybody knows that a cat is not a black thing, a black furry thing. So we know that things are not only concepts but there is also the presence of things. And most of us are smart enough to be able to tell that being in the presence of something is different than being in the concept of it.

It's like you know when you go to for a walk in the woods and you see one tree and then you see another tree and then there's another tree and another tree and more trees and there's trees all over the place. Then all of a sudden you get to a place in the woods where you look up and there is a tree. An honest to god real tree. This is a tree. See that's different than a tree and another tree and another tree and another tree. Being in the presence of a tree is different than being in the concept of a tree.

Now most of us think we know that. That is to say most of us have the concept that there's a distinction between presence and conceptualizing but almost none of us really know it. See we're not in the presence of the distinction, we're in the concept of the distinction.

So when you and I say I love you to each other, what we should really say is listen I live my life inside the concept I love you and my feelings and my attitudes and my thoughts and my behavior and everything about me is that which can show up in the concept love and sometimes I know the difference between who I am when I love you as a concept and who I am when I love you as a presence because I know that the feelings even if they're somewhat the same feelings and the attitudes and the thoughts and the behavior and who I am in the presence of love is a lot different than who I am in the concept of love but you and I don't make that distinction.

So there is this thing called presence and the kind of human being that shows up in the presence of something is a totally different kind of human being that shows up in the concepts of things.

Now there's one problem with this domain first off to be in the domain of presence for something to be present instead of conceptualized you know for an idea to be present instead of conceptualized for a person to be present instead of conceptualized for your feelings to be present instead of conceptualized you got to be open most people don't have what it takes to be open because what it takes to be open is trust and you and I know people should not be trusted in fact most of what you and I call trust does not trust anyhow it's the concept of trust.

Trust that can be violated isn't trust, it's a concept, it says as long as you prove that you're trustworthy I trust you. In other words as long as I got evidence that you can be trusted I'll trust you. The day I don't have evidence that you can be trusted I don't trust you anymore that's not trust. True trust cannot be violated.

I tell you ,that it's not just semantics, it's not, what shows up in one domain is totally different than what shows up in the other domain and I'll explain it or rather show it to you.

See the one thing about which you can be sure is that people are going to violate your trust. You can write that sucker in stone because it is going to happen. Human beings are fallible and if you trust them to tell you the truth they will lie. They will. You will. I will.

Now if the trust is conceptual that is to say I trust you as long as you prove that I can trust you. I trust you to tell the truth and let's say I lie now you don't trust me anymore. So now I'm a guy who has lied who is not trusted and who isn't trustworthy. That's that situation.

Now let's say that you're able to create the presence of trust and in the presence of trust I lie. That means that the trust is still intact therefore what I did must have been a mistake A.

B. I'm still trusted and

C. I'm trustworthy.

Same stuff, two different domains. Who you are, what you are, this capacity which you have when grasped, when known as a possibility, as a domain of openness has enormous power and these distinctions which we're making up here opens it up.

Now here's the only problem with that. I mean that's pretty hot stuff really. You know if you could do something about bringing love present in your relationships who you are in those relationships and what your relationships are would be entirely different. If you could bring something present in your job like if you could get yourself there and the other selves that are there there. If people could actually be there at work something normally not present could show up. So this is pretty good just as it is.

There's only one problem there's a bad catch to it. So before I evoke a lot of hope I want to point out to you that all that is present devolves to a concept.

So you remember that time in the woods when you were in the presence of a tree and you remember that time in your relationship when you were in the presence of love but you and I remember that. You see we have the symbols or representations and the problem with those symbols or representations is that we look out through them at the presence of the next thing. They become a filter for our experience and this filtered experience reinforces the filter because it's consistent with and like the filter. The reinforced concept or filter begins to more fully filter or dominate the experience. The more dominated experience more agrees with the concept. The more powerful concept more dominates the experience. The more dominated experience more reinforces the concept. The more reinforced concept more fully dominates the experience and what you get is a vicious circle and that is where our lives show up... is in that vicious circle... where life shows up for most people is in that vicious circle.

That's what's available and anybody who tells the truth you know really honest to God tells the truth. Like if you really honest to God sit down and ask the question does my life make any difference I'll bet I know what the answer is. I'll bet that when you do it the answer is I doubt it. I'll bet that's the answer. The reason I'm willing to bet that that's the answer is that that's the only answer you can get in the vicious circle. The only answer that can show up in the vicious circle is I doubt it. You don't get the answer no.

You don't get the answer no it does not make any difference unequivocally no because you've got that problem of those moments when you've been in the presence of something. Those kind of moments out of time when life was present that argue against an unqualified no.

But I want to get down to it with you now. No kidding. All the niceties aside.

When people ask that question—good people, bad people, nice people, nasty people, people in important places, people who are nice people to dogs, people who are nice people to people, people who made a lot, listen, people who made a lot of contributions, people who have a lot of people who love them and who care about them, people who lead lots and lots of people, people who don't lead anybody, hermits, men of God, women of God, etc., etc., etc., etc.—until you cover all of us—when you ask the question, does my life matter? Do I make a difference? The only possible answer in the vicious circle is I doubt it.

To get beyond the seemingly dead end we must look deeper into ourselves. We'll find there's another level of experience available to us, yet perhaps one more difficult to confront.

Now this is a place which, if the practicing philosophers are right, nobody wants to go. This is to begin to recognize yourself as empty and meaningless. This is to begin to take out the inauthenticity from the results and achievements of our lives and of our civilization. This is the place most of us don't have the guts to go. We're too busy proving that we got it made to take a look at the honest truth about the things we even hold most dear to ourselves. This is hard to come to. Frightening to come to.

This is a presence which most people cannot tolerate. Yes, they can hear about it. They can tolerate the symbols of it. They can tolerate the concept of it. They can tolerate the explanation. But they cannot be in the presence of their own insignificance and of the general insignificance that life is. They cannot tolerate the presence of it. It's as old as our civilization. On the tongues of honest men and women down through our civilization.

This is Cummings

"So what got him was nothing. And nothing's exactly what anyone living or somebody dead like even a poet could hardly express. What I mean is what knocked him over wasn't, for instance, the knowing your whole yes goddamn life is a flop, or even to feel how everything dreamed and hoped and prayed for months and weeks and days and years and nights and forever is less than nothing. That would have been something. What got him was nothing."

That really says it all.

It's not the nothing of failure. It's not winding up one day and having your life crash around you and having a sense that life is nothing because you're a failure. It's not even that your dreams and hopes and prayers for months and weeks and days and years and nights and forever is less than nothing. That would be something. It's just nothing. It is in fact empty and meaningless.

And I'm afraid, as far as I can tell, that until a human being can live in the presence of their own emptiness and their own meaninglessness, that that human being is always inauthentic. Always pretending. Always propping up. Always trying. Always efforting. Always extended. Always trying to get someplace. Never being any place. But always trying to get someplace. That's a profound thing.

Oh, at first it feels real bad. You mean all the struggling in my life, all the effort in my life, all the things I've tried, all my hopes and dreams and all that stress and strain was really all for nothing? Oh, terrible. You mean all those sacrifices I made for my children didn't really make any difference to my children? You mean all the times I was nice and I was good didn't really make any difference? You mean all my struggling and all that stuff I accumulated and all those diplomas and awards and all that agreement that people think I'm wonderful and all that stuff—you mean to tell me all that was for nothing? That it's really—oh my God—empty and meaningless? And that nothing makes a difference?

I've watched people go through real, real deep depression over that one. A lot of people.

But you see, in truth that's more inauthenticity. That's just more inauthenticity. It doesn't mean anything that it doesn't mean anything.

It's just that in the world which you and I live in, nothing truly meaningful, nothing that really makes a difference, can show up. We live in a vicious circle.

But you see, if you stick with that, you really get it. What you're left with is a kind of naked presence. A naked presence in which nothing is meant.

Nothing is justified. Nothing is prescribed.

You're just present. Not present as something. It's not the self you mean when you say I. It's just pure presence. Just being. Pure possibility. Emptiness. And that, as far as I can tell, is what a human being truly is. What a human being truly is is pure possibility. A clearing. An opportunity for something to show up.

You and I are not what we've inherited, what's been thrust upon us, what we've been taught, what we've figured out.

You and I are not our strategies and our manipulations and our little stinking plans, because at the bottom of all of that is really nothing.

None of that makes any difference.

And when you get down to the pain of being nothing, you're left with the pure naked presence. And in that presence an incredible possibility is born. That presence becomes a window. And that presence is also another linguistic domain, not like the other two. And it's showing up breaks the vicious circle.

So from this place of being empty and meaningless, from this place of just being like possibility, a new domain is made possible. Namely the possibility of being the place where things show up.

The possibility of taking a stand.

The possibility of creating.

The possibility of bringing forth.

You see, you as a place in which something which isn't can show up. You as the place in which the future can show up. You as the place in which what is missing can show up. You become. You are the clearing in which things show up. When you take a stand in that clearing, your stand becomes the place for whatever you're standing for to show up. You don't become it. It's it. But you become the place in which the photographic image can be present.

In order to begin to illustrate this point, Werner reads a letter by e.e. cummings written to a high school student who asked about becoming a poet.

Says "a poet is somebody who feels and who expresses his feeling through words. This may sound easy. It isn't. A lot of people think or believe or know they feel, but that's thinking or believing or knowing, not feeling. And poetry is feeling, not knowing or believing or thinking. Almost anybody can learn to think or believe or know, but not a single human being can be taught to feel. Why? Because whenever you think or you believe or you know, you're a lot of other people. But the moment you feel, you're nobody but yourself. To be nobody but yourself in a world which is doing its best night and day to make you everybody else means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight, and never stop fighting. As for expressing nobody but yourself in words, that means working just a little harder than anybody who isn't a poet can possibly imagine.

Why?

Because nothing is quite as easy as using words like somebody else. We all of us do it. We all of us do exactly this nearly all of the time. And then whenever we do it, we're not poets. At the end of your first 10 or 15 years of fighting and working and feeling, you find you've one line of one poem. You'd be very lucky indeed.

So my advice to all young people who wish to become poets is: do something easy, like learning to blow up the world—unless you're not only willing but glad to feel and work and fight till you die.”

Then he goes on with the forward:

“does this sound? It isn't. It's the most wonderful life on earth. Or so I feel.”

You see, this domain does not exist by inheriting it. It does not exist by having it shown to oneself. Being shown—listen—being shown that domain does not make any difference.

This domain in which a difference can be made comes into existence by its own act. T

hat is to say, one brings forth. Bringing forth. One does not discover bringing forth. One is not shown bringing forth.

One does not fall into the presence of bringing forth.

One does not meditate oneself into bringing forth, or therapize oneself, or train oneself, or any other thing. The only way that that domain becomes available—this domain of taking a stand—not, not getting into a stance, not taking a position.

See, taking a position is like a resolution. Taking a stand is like opening up a possibility.

So to take a stand for that it makes a difference.

Listen.

To take a stand for that it makes a difference does not give evidence that it makes a difference.

The stand doesn't stand on evidence. When one takes a stand, that's not like becoming resolute or taking up a position.

The stand is not based on evidence.

It is not based on feeling.

It is not based on revelation.

It's based on nothing.

It has no legitimacy. It has no justification. It has no right. It has no explanation. It is simply the place where what you've taken the stand on can appear. It becomes the space of the presence of that on which you took the stand. And even its presence will not provide evidence or proof.

So I want you to—I want to get clear that this domain is not like given to you.

The society does not turn this over like the society turns that over.

You don't get this by being born like you get that.

You get this if and only if you create it. You take the stand for it.

So it could be said, in this possibility of possibilities, that who you are is the taking a stand. That you are the stand you take. Don't try to follow that, because it doesn't make any sense following-wise.

You're interested in the future?

I'll tell you about the future. It will look like the past, only different. Because a future brought out of the vicious circle will certainly be different, but it will be a product of the vicious circle. This train will wind up where it's headed.

This is the domain of getting out in front of the train and being able to lay track in front of the train. Everything else is just going from the right side to the left side and back again.

See, any idiot can walk the path when shown it. But in this domain there is no path. The path is made by the walking.

You're literally out in front of life.

Life is happening in your wake. And that takes courage. And it takes openness. And you see, if you hear what I'm saying to you like an answer, what I've said to you hasn't made any difference.

Because nothing in this domain is ever going to make a difference. Even if you're inspired, that isn't going to make any difference either. No difference.

Oh it will oooohh you for a while. Then you go back into the vicious circle and you begin to doubt it. And to get it back you have to be trusting. Open. Trusting. That's hard. But to really master it you need to be willing to create. To bring forth. You need to be willing to take a stand. But you can't create and you can't bring forth unless you take the stand that you are the stand you take. Unless you create that you can create.

So this does not have a point.

This does not get summarized.

But I do want you to know that it's clear to me that this thing called life was designed to work. Real clear. And I've examined the breakdowns very carefully. I know about the breakdowns. I've examined them carefully. I've had a lot of opportunity to examine them. Been able to get very deeply into people's lives. I've been privileged to be deeply inside the workings of countries and organizations. And I've studied a lot about society and its working. And I know there are breakdowns. It's real clear to me. It's also clear to me that every one of the breakdowns is the planet on which we live trying to work.

A couple of quick things.

This is a quote again from Czesław Miłosz.

He says: "for many of my contemporaries the devil is the inventive, coldly logical mind, as well as the creator of technological civilization by which we are increasingly elevated and oppressed. For me, however, the responsibility for our misfortunes is not born by intellect, but by intellect unenlightened, insufficiently rational-not non-rational-cutting itself off from those gifts of ours, grace or attachment to value, by whatever name, from which it should be inseparable."

This is from Critical Path, Buckminster Fuller's most recent book. It's from the introduction.

"This book is written with the conviction that there are no good or bad people, no matter how offensive or eccentric to society they may seem. I am confident that if I were born and reared under the same circumstances as any other known humans, I would have behaved much as they did. I don't have any good or bad people. You and I didn't design people. God designed people. What I am trying to do is to discover why God included humans in universe. I'm trying to find out what God permits us progressively to know and preferably to do if we human beings are to continue in universe."

So I think that what Bucky is trying to say is that this sucker is designed to be like you and I have a right to expect it to be. And he is committed to discovering what's missing. And the breakdowns, when you begin to see what's missing, are simply what's in the background coming forth, letting us know what needs to be handled.

Living life at the level of taking a stand demands of us certain attributes. Werner Erhard talks about what is possibly the most fundamental of these in this last section.

This domain exists by virtue of the quality called courage. And if trust is difficult, courage is way more difficult. Oh wait. I mean real courage. I mean existential courage. I don't mean—I mean courage where when it's all over nobody knows you were courageous. Where there's no credit for it. We don't even look good when you do it. That's the kind...that's what I mean by courage. No evidence. No feelings. Just courage. There ain't a lot of that around.

I'm going to read you some more quotations.

This is, uh, by Amelia Earhart. No relation. She said:

“Courage is the price that life extracts for granting peace. The soul that knows it not knows no release from little things.”

This is, uh, from, uh, Pablo Casals, being reported on by Norman Cousins in his book *Anatomy Of An Illness*.

“Cousins met him for the first time in Puerto Rico just before Casals' 90th birthday. By then the maestro had a number of infirmities that made it difficult for him to address, to walk, to breathe, even to unclench his fingers. Yet several times Cousins saw the affliction simply drop away at the piano and the cello, at the approach of some young people making a film. “because he knew he had something of overriding importance to do.”

Now quoting Casals. He says:

“The answer to helplessness is not so very complicated. A man can do something for peace without having to jump into politics. Each man has inside him a basic decency and goodness. If he listens to it and acts on it, is it giving a great deal of what the world needs most. It is not complicated. But it takes courage. It takes courage for a man to listen to his own goodness and act on it.”

Dare we be ourselves. This is the question that counts.