THE WONDERBOX

Curious Histories of How to Live

ROMAN KRZNARIC

PROFILE BOOKS

This paperback edition published in 2012

First published in Great Britain in 2011 by
Profile Books Ltd
3A Exmouth House
Pine Street
Exmouth Market
London EC1R 0JH
www.profilebooks.com

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset in Palatino by MacGuru Ltd
info@macguru.org.uk
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 84668 394 7
eISBN 978 1 84765 445 8

Contents

Preface

How should we live? This ancient question has a modern urgency. In the affluent West, society is changing faster than we can adjust to it. Online culture has transformed how we fall in love and nurture our friendships. The demise of the job for life, and rising expectations of finding work that broadens our horizons as well as pays the bills, have increased our confusion about choosing the right career. Medical progress has given us longer lives than ever before, and we are left wondering how best to spend the precious extra years we have been granted. Ecological crises are posing new challenges for ethical living, from where we take our holidays to how we think about our children's future. Moreover, the quest for consumer pleasures and material wealth, which obsessed us during the twentieth century, has left many yearning for deeper forms of fulfilment and meaning. How to pursue the art of living has become the great quandary of our age.

There are many places to begin looking for answers. We can turn to the wisdom of philosophers who have grappled with the questions of life, the universe and everything. We might follow the teachings of religions and spiritual thinkers. Psychologists have developed a science of happiness, which offers clues for shaking us out of old habits and maintaining a positive outlook on life. Then there is the advice of self-help gurus, who often deftly wrap all these approaches into a five-point plan.

Yet there is one realm where few have sought inspiration for our dilemmas about how to live: history. I believe that the future of the art of living can be found by gazing into the past. If we explore how people have lived in other epochs and cultures,

we can draw out lessons for the challenges and opportunities of everyday life. What secrets for living with passion lie in medieval attitudes towards death, or in the pin factories of the industrial revolution? How might an encounter with Ming-dynasty China, or Central African indigenous culture, change our views about bringing up our kids and caring for our parents? It is astonishing that, until now, we have made so little effort to unveil this wisdom from the past, which is based on how people have actually lived rather than utopian dreamings of what might be possible.

I think of history as a wonderbox, similar to the curiosity cabinets of the Renaissance – what the Germans called a *Wunderkammer.* Collectors used these cabinets to display an array of fascinating and unusual objects, each with a story to tell, such as a miniature Turkish abacus or a Japanese ivory carving. Passed down from one generation to another, they were repositories of family lore and learning, tastes and travels, a treasured inheritance. History, too, hands down to us intriguing stories and ideas from a cornucopia of cultures. It is our shared inheritance of curious, often fragmented artefacts that we can pick up at will and contemplate in wonder. There is much to learn about life by opening the wonderbox of history.

We will be guided on our journey by a host of famous and sometimes forgotten figures, from a seventeenth-century astronomer to a former leader of the Ku Klux Klan, from an early feminist firebrand to a Vietnamese monk who set himself on fire. They will escort us into unusual territory – the invention of the department store or the myth of the five senses. Their task will be to reveal the extraordinary variety of ways that human beings have approached crucial matters such as work, time, creativity and empathy. Our guides will help us question our current mode of living, and offer surprising and practical ideas for taking our lives in new directions.

'The principal and proper work of history,' wrote the seventeenth-century thinker Thomas Hobbes, is 'to instruct, and enable men by the knowledge of actions past to bear themselves prudently in the present and providently in the future'.[1]

Embracing this notion of 'applied history', I have delved into the writings of social, economic and cultural historians, anthropologists and sociologists, in search of the most enlightening ideas for dealing with the predicaments of living in the Western world today. While these scholarly studies have rarely been written with this pragmatic project in mind, they are bursting with insights for those who desire to lead a more adventurous and purposeful life. Just as the Renaissance rediscovered the lost knowledge of classical antiquity and revolutionised the arts and sciences as a result, we must unearth the hidden ideas for good living that have been buried for so long in the past, and create a revolution of self-understanding.

Learning from history is, on one level, about identifying the most compelling of our ancestors' ways of living and adopting them ourselves. Yet it is also about recognising the many ideas and attitudes that we have – often unwittingly – inherited from the past. Some of these are positive and should be welcomed into our lives, such as the view that immersion in the wilds of nature is essential to our wellbeing. But we have been bequeathed other cultural legacies that could be doing us enormous harm, yet which we scarcely spot or question, such as a work ethic in which we consider leisure time as 'time off' rather than 'time on', or the belief that the best way to use our talents is to become a specialist in a narrow field – a high achiever rather than a wide achiever. We need to trace the historical origins of these legacies which have quietly crept into our lives and surreptitiously shaped our worldviews. We may choose to accept them, understanding ourselves all the better for it, or we may reject them and cut ourselves free from an unwanted inheritance, ready to invent anew. That is the sublime power we wield when we have history in our hand.

All history is written through the eyes of the author, who filters the past by selection, omission and interpretation. This book is no exception. It does not cover the entire history of love, money or any other aspect of the art of living. Instead I draw on those episodes which seem best to illuminate the life struggles that many of us face on a daily basis. In the chapter on family,

for instance, I concentrate on the history of the househusband and family conversation, partly because they give insights into difficulties I've had in my own life. My choices of historical focus are not, however, purely personal, and reflect a judgement of what may be most useful to people who feel perplexed – or just plain curious – about how to live, and who have the space and opportunity in their lives to make changes.

The following pages are a homage to Goethe's credo 'He who cannot draw on three thousand years is living from hand to mouth.' I examine the last three millennia of human history, from the ancient Greeks to the current day. While looking mainly at Europe and North America, I also turn to other areas of the globe for inspiring approaches to the good life, including Asia, the Middle East, and amongst indigenous peoples, whose contemporary cultures often reflect ancient ways of being.

This book seeks out the connections between the past and the present, creating a bridge of the imagination that can help us deepen our relationships, rethink how we make a living, and open us to new ways of exploring both the world and ourselves. It is time to lift the lid of the wonderbox and discover what history can reveal about how to live today.

Nurturing Relationships

1

Love

The man immortalised as St Valentine would be shocked to discover that he has become the patron saint of romantic love. His story is obscure, but he appears to have been a priest near Rome who was executed for his Christian beliefs in the third century. A feast in his name was first held in 496, and for most of the next millennium he was venerated for having the power to heal the sick and crippled. By the late Middle Ages, his fame rested on being the patron saint of epileptics, especially in Germany and Central Europe, where artworks from the period depict him curing children of their seizures. He had nothing to do with romance until 1382, when Chaucer wrote a poem describing Valentine's Day, celebrated each February, as a time when birds – and people – would choose their mates. From that moment on, his reputation as a healer started to fade, and his annual feast day turned into an occasion for lovers to send each other amorous verses, and village youths to play frolicsome love games. Valentine's Day was transformed again in the nineteenth century, when it became a commercial extravaganza fuelled by the birth of the greetings card industry and the arrival of mass marketing. A Valentine craze broke out in the United States in the 1840s: within just two decades retailers were annually selling close to 3 million cards, chapbooks and other love trinkets. Today, 141 million Valentine's Day cards are exchanged worldwide each year, and 11 per cent of courting couples in the US choose to get engaged on 14 February.[1]

The way that St Valentine has been converted from a herald

of charitable Christian love into a symbol of romantic passion raises the larger question of how our attitudes towards love have changed over the centuries. What did love mean in the ancient world, or during the chivalrous age of Chaucer? How did the ideal of romantic love develop and shape what we now expect from a relationship? These are the kinds of questions which would have intrigued the French nobleman François de La Rochefoucauld, who in the seventeenth century proclaimed, 'Few people would fall in love had they never heard about it.'[2] He understood that our ideas about love are, at least in part, inventions of culture and history.

Most of us have experienced both the pleasures and sorrows of love. We might remember the burning desire and shared rapture of a first affair, or have taken comfort in the security of a long-term relationship. Yet we may also have suffered from feelings of jealousy and the loneliness of rejection, or have struggled to make a marriage flourish and last.

We can navigate these difficulties of love – and enhance its joys – by grasping the significance of two great tragedies in the history of the emotions. The first is that we have lost knowledge of the different varieties of love that existed in the past, especially those familiar to the ancient Greeks, who knew love could be discovered not just with a sexual partner, but also in friendships, amongst strangers, and with themselves. The second tragedy is that over the last thousand years, these varieties have been incorporated into a mythical notion of romantic love, which compels us to believe that they can all be found in one person, a unique soulmate. We can escape the confines of this inheritance by looking for love outside the realm of romantic attachments, and cultivating its many forms. So how should we begin our journey into the history of love? With a cup of coffee, of course.

The six varieties of love

Contemporary coffee culture has developed a sophisticated vocabulary to describe the many options for getting a daily caffeine fix – cappuccino, espresso, flat white, Americano,

macchiato, mocha. The ancient Greeks were just as refined in the way they thought about love, distinguishing six different kinds.[3] This is the opposite of our approach today, where under a single, vague term we bundle an enormous range of emotions, relationships and ideals. A teenage boy can declare 'I am in love', but he is unlikely to mean the same thing as a sixty-year-old who says he is still in love with his wife after all their years together. We utter 'I love you' during intense romantic moments, while being able to casually sign an email 'lots of love'.

The inhabitants of classical Athens would have been surprised at the crudeness of our expression. Their approach to talking about love not only enlivened gossip in the market square, but allowed them to think about its place in their lives in ways that we can barely comprehend with our impoverished language of love, which in terms of coffee is the emotional equivalent of a mug of instant. We need to unveil the six types of love known to the Greeks and consider making them part of our everyday conversation. By doing so, we may be able to find relationships which better suit our personal tastes.

We have all seen those Valentine's cards with chubby little cupids fluttering around, shooting their arrows of love at unsuspecting people who instantly fall for one another. Cupid is the Roman version of Eros, the Greek god of love and fertility. For the ancient Greeks, *eros* was the idea of sexual passion and desire, and represented one of their most important varieties of love. But *eros* was far from the playful rascal we think of today. It was viewed as a dangerous, fiery and irrational form of love that could take hold of you and possess you. 'Desire doubled is love, love doubled is madness,' said Prodicus, a philosopher from the fifth century BC.[4] *Eros* involved a loss of control that frightened the Greeks, although losing control is precisely what many of us now seek in our relationships, believing that falling 'madly in love' is the hallmark of an ideal match.

In ancient texts *eros* is often associated with homosexuality, especially the love of older men for adolescents, a practice prevalent in fifth- and sixth-century Athens amongst the aristocracy. This was known as *paiderastia*, which in turn yielded one

of the most exotic Greek verbs, *katapepaiderastēkenai* – 'to have squandered an estate through hopeless devotion to boys'.[5] Yet *eros* was not monopolised by all-male relationships. The Athenian statesman Pericles was compelled by *eros* to leave his wife in favour of the beautiful and brilliant Aspasia, who became his live-in mistress, while the poetess Sappho was renowned for her erotic odes to women, including those from her native island of Lesbos (hence our word 'lesbian').[6] The power of *eros* also appeared in Greek myths, in which the exploits of the promiscuous gods – notably the males – are revealing of the cultural norms of classical society. Zeus made a concerted effort to satisfy his sexual passions, transforming himself into a swan to seduce Leda, into a snow-white bull to rape Europa, and into a cloud to have his way with Io.[7] Even Polyphemus, the bestial Cyclops in the *Odyssey*, suffered from his unrequited *eros* for the sea-nymph Galatea, although his choice of chat-up lines hardly helped matters: 'White Galatea, why dost thou repulse my love? Oh, thou art whiter to see than curdled milk … brighter than a green grape!'[8] The most visually striking evidence of *eros* in daily life appeared in the bawdy 'satyr plays' that followed the performance of tragedies during the springtime theatrical festivals in Athens. The half-men half-goats romped around with enormous erect phalluses strapped to their waists, peppering their talk with lewd jokes.[9] The pains associated with *eros* could clearly be quelled with light comic relief.

Everyone can recount stories of having their soul pierced by *eros*. I was once lured by *eros* to move my whole life from Britain to the United States in rash – and ultimately failed – pursuit of a woman. Perhaps you were so infatuated with your first boyfriend that you had his name tattooed in Gothic script on your behind – and still bear the evidence. You might remember with mischievous delight making love in the open air of a Paris park on your honeymoon. Or you fell in love at first sight with your alcoholic English lecturer and embarked on a turbulent affair that ended in tears, or possibly children. Whether our memories of *eros* are full of sensual beauty or touched by tragedy, we can hardly imagine love without a strong dose of erotic passion and desire.

A second variety of love, *philia* – usually translated as 'friendship' – was considered far more virtuous than the base sexuality of *eros*. Philosophers such as Aristotle dedicated considerable brain power to dissecting the different forms of *philia*. There was the *philia* that existed within the family unit, for instance the closeness and affection displayed between a parent and a child, or the deep but non-sexual intimacy that could be felt between siblings or cousins tied together by the bond of blood. A utilitarian version of *philia* existed between people in relationships of mutual dependence such as business partners or political allies. If one person ceased being useful to the other, the *philia* could easily break down. We recognise such instrumental friendships in contemporary life, for example when people befriend influential work colleagues because it will aid their travels up the company ladder.

The *philia* most prized by the Greeks, however, was the profound friendship that developed between comrades who had fought side by side on the battlefield. These brothers-in-arms had seen one another suffer and often risked their lives to save their companions from being impaled by a Persian spear. They considered themselves as equals, and would not only share their personal worries but also display extreme loyalty, helping one another in times of need without expecting anything in return.[10] The model for this form of *philia* was the friendship between Achilles and Patroclus – who were allegedly also lovers – which is central to the story in Homer's *Illiad*. When Patroclus dies in combat, Achilles agonises over his body, smearing himself with ash and fasting, then returns to the battlefront to avenge the death of his comrade.

I remember in my early twenties sitting in a smoky Madrid bar with an old college mate, listening to him talk movingly about how much his friendships meant to him. And at that moment I had a revelation: I realised that I enjoyed little of the comradely *philia* that was such an important part of his life. I was rarely emotionally open with my apparently close friends – male or female – nor did I ever sacrifice much for them. My life was full of acquaintances but not many true friends. Since then I have

made an effort to bring more *philia* into my relationships. How much philial love do you have in your life? That is an important question today, when so many people are proud of having hundreds of 'friends' on Facebook or 'followers' on Twitter, achievements that I doubt would have impressed the Greeks.

While *philia* could be a matter of great seriousness, there was a third type of love valued by the ancient Greeks, which was playful love. Following the Roman poet Ovid, scholars commonly use the Latin word *ludus* to describe this form of love, which concerns the playful affection between children or casual lovers.[11] We tend to associate playfulness with the early stages of a relationship, in which flirtation, teasing and light-hearted joking are ritualistic aspects of courtship. This ludic approach to love was developed into an art form amongst the aristocracy in eighteenth-century France. Love was a game, full of secret letters, titillating risqué humour and risky rendezvous at midnight.[12] We see *ludus* today when youngsters play 'spin the bottle', which provides the prospect of a first, nerve-wracking kiss. Our most exuberant ludic moments often take place on the dance floor, where physical proximity to others – often strangers – offers a playful sexualised encounter that acts as a substitute for sex itself. One of the reasons Latin American dances such as salsa and tango have become so popular in the West is that they are suffused with this ludic quality that many people feel lacking in their lives.

In his 1930s book *Homo Ludens*, the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga suggested that the instinct for play was a natural human trait evident in all cultures.[13] The implication of his thesis, which is reinforced by the growing psychology literature on the importance of play for personal wellbeing, is that we should seek to nurture *ludus* in a range of our relationships, not just with our lovers or on the dance floor, but also with friends, family and colleagues.[14] Simply sitting around in the pub banteering and laughing with friends is a way to cultivate *ludus*. Social norms that frown upon adult frivolity have allowed few of us to retain the playfulness we had as children, but it may be just what we need in our relationships to escape our everyday worries,