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# ESSENTIALS

By Jean Toomer

*DEFINITIONS*  
*AND*  
*APHORISMS*

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TO MY FRIENDS  
IN AND NEAR CHICAGO

**TO MY FRIENDS  
IN AND NEAR CHICAGO**

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TO ONE THOUSAND NUMBERED COPIES,  
OF WHICH THIS IS NUMBER**

## FOREWORD

*THIS volume is a collection of definitions and sayings bearing on the nature and forms of human existence—some three hundred crystallizations in words of observations and understandings which have arisen in me during a five year period.*

*For me, the lines contain the gist or heart of the matter; and this is why I call them Essentials. Not the full heart, to be sure; but, I hope, something of it.*

*With few exceptions I have left each line as it originally formed. I have added no fillers. I have, however, attempted to organize the book so that in addition to having independent meanings the lines might have some measure of meaning in relation to each other.*

*The totality conveys accurately though not completely my world-view. To this extent it can be said to express my philosophy of life.*

J. T.





# ESSENTIALS



## I

**Man is a being potentially able to act with reason according to value.**

**Values and meanings, though intangible, are held by everyone consciously or unconsciously as the most real and the most important.**

**The moral functions are efforts towards the realization of true ideas and true aims.**

**These are my first values: Understanding, Conscience, and Ability.**

**Conscience, the heart of the human world, still beats feebly in our sense of decency.**

## II

**“Essence-shame is man’s lever on himself.”**

**Shame of a weakness implies the presence of a strength.**

**He who feels ashamed of slavery can win freedom.**

**He who feels ashamed of ignorance can attain knowledge.**

**He who feels ashamed of nothingness can be.**

### III

**We should have a strong and vivid true sense of actuality. We should have a strong and vivid true sense of potentiality.**

**We should have a strong and vivid true sense of ourselves as wholes, made up of both actualities and potentialities.**

**I would call this last mentioned sense a sense of oneself. Also, I would call it a sense of reality.**

**Modern man is losing his sense of potentiality as regards himself. Hence he is losing his sense of himself and of reality.**

**We are lopsidedly concerned with actualities.**

## IV

**The desire to be has become the desire to belong.**

**We can belong to things, not to ourselves.**

**The open conspiracy: "Let's do outside things; inside things are too difficult."**

**I am not being; I am the obstacles to being.**

**I am responsible for my own realization.**

## V

**Our aim is to spiritualize the actual and to actualize the potential.**

**A symbol is as useful to the spirit as a tool is to the hand.**

**We have many reformers, few transformers.**

**A man's worth can be measured in terms of his ability to evoke in the essence of a male the wish to be man, to evoke in the essence of a female the wish to be woman.**

**It is often necessary to intensify one's weaknesses, and the will to overcome them, both at the same time.**



## VI

**We must not expect one act of liberation, one note of transformation, to produce a whole new being.**

**It takes a well-spent lifetime, and perhaps more, to crystallize in us that for which we exist.**

**The growth of a human being is a dynamic symphony of forces playing in this field of force that is ourselves.**

**We start with gifts. Merit comes from what we make of them.**

**All beings find it difficult to merit growth beyond growth.**

## VII

**Man must add to Nature. Effort is that which is added.**

**The aim is not to measure effort but to make it.**

**Most of our consciousness is based on and arises from idea. We must have consciousness based on and arising from effort and from realization.**

**Realizations are kinds of experience in which reason, feeling, and sense blend with intensity and crystallize. They contact reality, and give rise to new understandings, new feelings, and new abilities.**

**Beings develop normally in proportion as they realize true aims.**

## VIII

Productivity is my first aim.

I struggle that I may not die through life.

He is soil no longer fertile for me to plant in.

We must husk off even friends—to make way  
for new friends.

Growing is a stern taking and eliminating, as  
relentless as life itself.

## IX

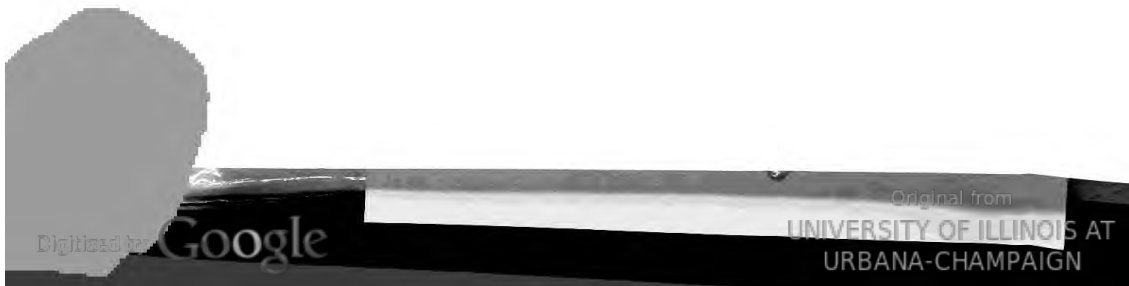
Let your doing be an exercise, not an exhibition.

Meet life's terms but never accept them.

Do now what you won't be doing an hour from now.

Reject compromises which give you nothing because they give you less than you want.

Those who seek peace too often find comfort.



## X

Abnormality arises from the wish to have something for nothing, to exist without effort.

Men are inclined either to work without hope, or to hope without work.

We apply to machines what we do not apply to ourselves.

Social ills are caused by man's wish to have results greater than his efforts.

If society, after conditioning people, gave each person what he wished, mankind would be lost.

## XI

**Man wishes, not the thing, but the appearance of the thing.**

**Wishes have no necessary relation to right functioning, but often are bent on just the reverse.**

**All our so-called functions are "showy," and we are exhibitionists in a more profound sense than ordinary psychology dreams of.**

**What most people mean by self-development is that which will make them appear as they wish to appear.**

**Man adjusts to what he should not; he is unable to adjust to what he should.**

## XII

Acceptance of prevailing standards often means  
we have no standards of our own.

Adjustment to the external world may mean  
maladjustment to oneself.

I think there is no evil in the human world  
save that which causes—to our modes of  
perception—the essential to be transient,  
the non-essential to be lasting.

This reversal, which occurs in many forms, is  
unholy, and the cause of most perversions.

We must know a force greater than our weak-  
nesses.

### XIII

We want to be free from the things we want.

Most of us feel we must be mentally fortified in advance of experience. This is one of the reasons why we are buffers rather than experiencers.

Life moves, things happen, when people care.

When people do not care, nothing can happen.  
There can be only events of inertia.

Caring alone produces events of force.



## XIV

We all have a certain "weight," a constant,  
which we must attach to something.

If we do not attach it, or, rather, if it does not  
attach itself to ideals, it attaches itself to  
non-ideals.

If not to illusion then to disillusion.

If not to what is valuable then to what is  
worthless; if not to essentials then to non-  
essentials.

This weight must attach itself to something.

## XV

We dislike criticisms of our weaknesses; for,  
when our weaknesses are touched we feel  
defenseless, helpless.

We hate to feel helpless.

We do not mind the weakness, as such, nor the  
criticism of it.

We object to the helpless feeling caused by  
such criticism.

In losing a false base we seem to lose all.

## XVI

**Fear is a noose that binds until it strangles.**

**We frequently have our hands tied in regard to what we really want. This is because often there is a denial opposed to the affirmation. We are unable to reconcile them.**

**The denial is often in the form of fear. We tend to take the line of least fear. We do not tend to take the line of greatest positive desire.**

**We fear to sacrifice lesser to greater values.**

**All our lives we have been waiting to live.**

## XVII

We do everything to forfeit, nothing to experience, what we really want.

Men are most active when evading real issues, most powerful when rejecting real values.

We love to sacrifice greater to lesser values.

Tell me the person's strongest resistance and I will tell you what he most wants.

As for what you usually do—everything save yourself demands it.

## XVIII

Everyone has at least an interest in finding an interest.

We are tired of not being intense.

Some people can endure so little so well that they appear to be satisfied.

Failing to achieve intangible satisfactions, we are compelled to accept tangible dissatisfactions.

Everyone secretly expects and looks forward to the coming of some great event which will gloriously upset him.

## XIX

**We shuttle back and forth between accepting the fact that nothing happens and rejecting this same fact.**

**With unwilling resignation we accept nothing happening; then, with an outburst of resolution, we try to make something happen.**

**Now and again something does happen.**

**Success often means increase of the illusion that we can make things happen.**

**Failure gives rise to disillusion, but it does not give freedom.**

## XX

Men try to run life according to their wishes;  
life runs itself according to necessity.

Stubbornness of inclination is often mistaken  
for free strength.

We no longer talk about theories; we talk  
about human functions. Yes, but we still  
talk about them.

Whose energy is released when a spring un-  
winds?

Man is a nerve of the cosmos, dislocated, try-  
ing to quiver into place.

## XXI

It is well to remember that the Past, though having meaning, cannot serve as an objective for contemporary man.

Each day, and all that it contains, must be a building in the present for the Present and for the Future.

This is no place for him who wants to make his past life better.

I also am an ancestor, a source, an initiator.

True initiative is a self-activating force which needs no sanction save that of awakened conscience.



## XXII

**A true individual belongs, on the one hand, to no less than himself; and, on the other, to no less than mankind and the entire human world.**

**He is not conformative but formative.**

**Individuals are able to create forms; they are force—in contradistinction to the inertia of the mass.**

**The emergent type of man is neither an emotional type nor an intellectual type; it is both in one, that is, a psychological type, capable of insight into and understanding of the human spirit or psyche.**

**This is a psychological adventurer: one who, having had the stock experiences of mankind, sets out at right angles to all previous experience to discover new states of being.**

## XXIII

I am told, "That has been done before." I answer, "Whatever I do has never been done before."

I am told, "That is not done. People do not think and feel and act like that." I answer, "Whatever I do is done."

It is your business into which pocket of your mind your limitations place a notion of me.

Two asses do not make an owl.

Deviltry is delightful but not satisfying. Saintliness is satisfying but not delightful.

## XXIV

**I am of no particular race. I am of the human race, a man at large in the human world, preparing a new race.**

**I am of no specific region. I am of earth.**

**I am of no particular class. I am of the human class, preparing a new class.**

**I am neither male nor female nor in-between. I am of sex, with male differentiations.**

**I am of no special field. I am of the field of being.**

## XXV

**In being I am equal. In being, I know only pure equality with other beings. In development I am either equal or inferior or superior.**

**I have an aim in life, which is: to function, to be able to function, rather than to mis-function or to appear to function.**

**It is as if I have seen the end of the things others pursue blindly.**

**The only man who can leave the earth to other men is he who has won himself.**

**With an appetite, a hunger for the whole earth, I can do no more than drink one glass of water and breathe two lungs of air.**

## XXVI

**I is a word, but the worm is real.**

**Who is superior among worms?**

**Men are starved in one half, spoiled in the other.**

**When one is developing, his acquired traits and values tend to diminish and disappear; while his essential traits and values tend to appear and grow forceful.**

**A genuine leader is a standard of excellence, having in himself a natural individual centre of functioning.**

## XXVII

We can be either lonely or Alone.

At the call to be eagles we cling to the ground  
like fence-posts.

People either feel they can fly or fear they will  
stumble. Rarely do we sense our ability to  
walk firm on earth.

We do not possess imagination enough to sense  
what we are missing.

Let us venerate him who has had the earth's  
high experiences.

## XXVIII

**We experience alternating phases of expanded and contracted consciousness, of increased and diminished being.**

**Depression is caused when we pass from a greater to a lesser state.**

**In the lesser state we experience the hell of absence.**

**Happiness is caused when we pass from a lesser to a greater state.**

**In the greater state we experience the heaven of presence.**

## XXIX

Each being should bring to the other pure crystallizations of becoming experience.

Human atmosphere is formed of the blood of the spirit.

Human relationships are matters of skill and art. We tend to treat them as matters of convention, or worse.

We are stimulators, not satisfyers.

Whatever stands between you and that person stands between you and yourself.



### XXX

**Communication and communion both are lost arts.**

**Inferiority is one of our most prevalent feelings; respect one of our rarest.**

**This is a rare experience: to receive genuine consideration from a fellow being.**

**We make for ourselves fruitless unnecessary difficulties and then spend our lives overcoming or succumbing to them.**

**If sex is right, man, no matter how otherwise conditioned, gives some evidence of the great source from whence he came.**

## XXXI

Because of unbecoming human relationships  
the world stinks like an outhouse.

There is no love, no faith, no trust, but what  
the world calls forth to violate.

These are not dead; these are among the hope-  
less living things.

Far from loving all that breathes we do not  
love even those we do love.

Occidental romance has led to Freud.

## XXXII

Instead of wishing to be with people, to work  
and grow with them, we wish to use them.  
This is one reason why we hate each other.

We have two emblems, namely, the machine-  
gun and the contraceptive.

Most shots are thoughtlessly aimed at an  
entire person; hence, in attempting to  
eliminate a bad feature we often kill an  
otherwise good man.

If two contenders die, who profits?

We who have almost enough knowledge to  
separate the atom may fail to separate men  
from their antagonisms.

## XXXIII

The earth, to man, is an infected planet.

The human world wants to hear what is wrong  
with it.

It is satisfied with the diagnosis.

It does not want to make effort attempting a  
basic cure.

Man has a stubborn will to circulate poison.

## XXXIV

**The human fish is intricate and hidden; the appearances of his fins are deceptive.**

**According to what a man is called, so will people tend to respond to him.**

**Each of us has a so-called defect to which, in the eyes of our fellows and in our own eyes, we are reduced.**

**To see the other person's defect causes him to see your defect. The result: you and he meet on the plane of defects only.**

**Thus we down-grade human experience.**

## XXXV

Races are real; but, to men, races are prejudices.

Nationalities are real; but, to men, nationalities are prejudices.

Types are real; but, to men, types are prejudices.

The sexes are real; but, to men, the sexes are prejudices.

Man is a prejudice to himself.

## XXXVI

The human world is not yet born above the  
body.

Though our bodies are upright our spirits are  
still curled—or in chaos.

A child is a cosmos approaching adult chaos.

We can sense social form (a form superimposed  
over adult chaos); we have little or no  
ability to sense psychological form.

Our form is a malform, the form of chaos. Our  
organization is external. Inner unity, if it  
does exist, exists only as effort.

## XXXVII

**A teacher is one who brings tools and enables us to use them.**

**Practical intelligence is that which relates need, means, and object.**

**We cannot be given understanding. We can be rightly presented with proper material for understanding.**

**In this multiple simultaneous world words only dole out one thing at a time.**

**One may receive the information but miss the teaching.**



## XXXVIII

At best, education is a means of acquiring other people's ideas and habits.

At worst, it is a system of misfortunes. It is a systematic imposition of abnormalities upon normal being.

Each wrong idea kills one right instinct.

His knowledge may be your superstition.

Intelligence always is a voluntary contribution.

## XXXIX

**Let your own case prove the ignorance of others.**

**Be skeptical of everything save your capacity to make a fool of yourself.**

**No stupidity is so gross but what it finds some person willing to commit it.**

**Some stupidities are more amusing than most sense.**

**It is only half bad to be absurd in the face of the ridiculous. It is shameful to be ridiculous in the face of the significant.**

## XL

Each of us has in himself a fool who says I'm wise.

Most novices picture themselves as masters—and are content with the picture. This is why there are so few masters.

When I speak I am persuaded.

People mistake their limitations for high standards.

Ordinarily, each person is a cartoon of himself.

## XLI

**When he uses his mind he is intelligent; when  
his theories use his mind he is stupid.**

**It is easier to think for others than for oneself.**

**Your mind is quick in following itself, slow in  
following mine.**

**He who cannot imitate must remain a fool.  
But he who imitates may become either a  
monkey or a master.**

**Aim to use insanity as a means of developing  
reason.**

## XLII

Too often the mind goes on what should be  
a voyage of discovery only to return with  
no more than it started with.

To understand a new idea break an old habit.

Only the plastic person can experience, for  
only he is able to form and to take forms.

Aim to encounter unknown difficulties that  
you may gain unexpected results.

By exhausting your ordinary surface force you  
will be compelled to learn to use your magi-  
cal deep force.

## XLIII

**It is only in conditions of fruitful stress and suffering that our real forces become active.**

**Without tensions a person is nothing. With tensions, he is strong just in proportion as they are strong, he is significant just in proportion as they are significant.**

**Few people experience true tensions, true oppositions.**

**We experience conflicts; what could and should be tension, what should be opposition, usually degenerates into conflicts.**

**A conflict wastes energy; a tension generates it.**

## XLIV

**An artist is he who can balance strong contrasts, who can combine opposing forms and forces in significant unity.**

**Real art demands the intense purity and wholeness of the very materials we artists often irresponsibly mutilate.**

**One must become a man before he can be an artist.**

**Far above a single talent I prize a multiformed man.**

**Art is a means of communicating high-rate vibrations.**

## XLV

Human society is organized not at the level of force but at the level of inertia.

In activity we go to sleep standing up. In leisure we go to sleep lying down.

Activity has become the mere accompaniment of over-production and over-consumption.

We move and hustle but lack rhythm. We have a sense of moving about; we have no sense of rhythm.

The world spins slow when it is empty. The slower it spins the more we cry for speed.



## XLVI

While the world produced by science, the technical industrial world, is growing more materialistic, science itself is growing more immaterial.

Fatalism in the East is expressed. In the West it is comparatively unexpressed.

But it is experienced by the people of both regions, for the basic conditions of life are similar in both.

The West no less than the East feels bound by an unyielding yoke.

Morality is the determination not to be determined.

## XLVII

**While an increasing number of materialists are committing suicide because they believe they have no soul, an increasing number of spiritualists are going crazy because they believe they have one.**

**The existence of the body, like the existence of the soul, is a matter of belief.**

**The assumption of existence rests upon an uninterrupted and unchallenged series of pictures.**

**If all is belief, then wisdom consists in selecting the most fruitful belief.**

**We sleep: who profits by our dreams?**

## XLVIII

Science is a system of exact mysteries.

Materialists are hedonists who have not yet told themselves what they are living for.

This is a spiritual squid: a person groping towards "spiritual truth," no eyes, all feelers.

To domesticate an animal means to reduce its behavior so that it can do no more than a man.

The church fights the evil caused by a social scheme of which it is a main part.

## XLIX

The candid Scientist: "We know there is something to know, but we don't know how to know it."

The candid Educator: "We know there is something to educate, but we don't know how to educate it."

The candid Physician: "We know there is something to cure, but we don't know how to cure it."

The candid Artist: "We know there is beauty, but we don't know how to capture it."

The candid Business Man: "We know there is something to sell. Watch us sell it!"

## L

Walt Whitman's average man has turned out  
to be Babbitt.

Now that we have the term "racket" we can  
see how much business is business and how  
much business is racket.

The problem is not how to put life in business  
but how to put business in life.

The "full garage" means the empty person.

Democracy is the opportunity to skin anyone  
more stupid than oneself.

## LI

Man is a breeding place of problems.

People are stupid not because they do a thing  
but because they repeat it.

Since I was stupid enough to get in this, then  
in it I must grow wise enough to get out.

We learn the rope of life by untying its knots.

“It” contains too much of life. I would reduce  
It to I.

## LII

The strength of personality can be known by  
sensing how much it resists dying.

Unless a man dies consciously he will die.

There are eighteen hundred million living men.  
Living men must bury eighteen hundred  
million dead men.

More than one must go up or all will go down.

Man has no chance but the right one.

## LIII

**A running man cannot take a new direction.**

**This work is for those who are conscious of the  
need of a key to their own life.**

**“Man never sees himself.”**

**Most needs are relative to bits of time; the  
need of consciousness is relative to all time.**

**To observe oneself is to conceive a new direc-  
tion and a new being.**



## LIV

**Men do not take impressions; impressions take men.**

**We are, it is said, creatures of impulse. We can become beings of form.**

**Being-effort is a self-activating force which needs no sanction save inner necessity.**

**I aim to form within myself a natural individual centre of functioning.**

**We must learn to bring into consciousness the meanings that have formed and ripened in our essence.**

## LV

**Existence is in terms of long-distance objectives.**

**We must learn to use time as a curative agent.**

**A person's way of life can be modified; it is difficult to change his nature.**

**A man is not as much as he feels he is, but he is as much as he feels.**

**We do not have states of being; we have states of dreaming.**

## LVI

We should have right senses and instincts as to our functions in life. Our bodies should have sensibility.

We should be capable of polarizing corresponding beings, and of being polarized by them.

We should have feeling. We should have taste, and the ability to discriminate. We should have intelligence.

We should have a standard of excellence, values, and a real purpose.

We should have a living spirit and the ability to spiritualize experience.

## LVII

**Religion is that which relates one to oneself  
and to all other existences.**

**Participation depends upon similarity of vi-  
brations.**

**Why am I, immersed in cosmic force, forceless?**

**My breathing is the Great Breath broken into  
nostrils.**

**If we have faith we wish to be able to prove  
or disprove by realization the faith we have.**

## LVIII

**Man is a cross. The realization that man is a cross is uniquely human.**

**We do not suffer: seldom does our essence suffer; but pride, vanity, egotism suffer in us.**

**We are reluctant to accept the idea of having to suffer impartially.**

**It is comparatively easy to suffer for everything save normal being.**

**From a feeling of real helplessness there is born a feeling of real helpfulness.**

## LIX

**To realize responsibility is to realize with one's whole being that each individual is responsible, first, for the right process of his own existence, and, second, for the right processes of all surrounding existences.**

**True faith includes a feeling of certainty that man is basically normal; that, given right efforts and favorable conditions he can develop normally.**

**Doubt includes a feeling of certainty that man is basically abnormal.**

**Only those who cannot be inhuman will be human.**

**Disillusion is not a synonym for freedom.**

## LX

The objective is that which is. The subjective is man's dream about nothing or about the objective.

From dreams we talk to each other about reality.

Whatever is, is sacred.

The value of a thing must relate to what it does. All things are real according to their functions.

We cannot begin to conceive of that Intelligence which can understand and order a universe of potentialities.

## LXI

**We who talk of knowledge of the universe  
cannot sense the nature of an apple.**

**We assume that because we have the label we  
have the understanding.**

**We are hypnotized by literacy.**

**A change of terms does not necessarily imply  
an increased knowledge of reality.**

**There is a great difference between clear words  
and clear understanding. Words are pos-  
sessed by everyone; few use them clearly;  
knowledge, coupled with conscience, is  
life's highest prize.**



## LXII

**Perceptions of reality are man's main food.**

**Each person at least once in his life rises to  
be a major critic of mankind.**

**The true critic is a critic of meanings and of  
values.**

**True ideas and true values grow strong in pro-  
portion as they are affirmed and realized  
by beings.**

**The science of life consists in deriving signifi-  
cance from all possibilities.**

## LXIII

**There are only two things in the universe:  
significance, and the possibility of under-  
standing it.**

**A partial recognition of futility is not enough  
to destroy our conceit in what we habitu-  
ally do.**

**The realization of ignorance is the first act of  
knowing.**

**The realization of mechanicality is the first  
step towards freedom.**

**The realization of nothingness is the first act  
of being.**

## LXIV

The need is to find a method for developing  
essence and perfecting being.

This is one life: there must be one way of  
living.

If man were living as becomes him, then just  
this living, all life, would be the way.

We who are in the universe act as if we were  
not.

It is our task to suffer a conscious apprentice-  
ship in the stupidities and abnormalities of  
mankind.