Things that don’t work properly

I don’t believe I am alone in saying that small things, trivial things like toilet seats that won’t stay up and handles that swivel round instead of opening doors, are in fact a serious impediment to happiness. Perhaps some people are less affected by this than others. It is possible that I am in a minority, or alone. But I doubt it. The sense of annoyance induced by malfunctioning or inadequately designed things can accumulate into an abandonment of any hope. It is the reverse of Freud’s pleasure principle, more a futility principle. I am not alone, because there are websites devoted to this.

You probably have examples popping into your mind, unless you are one of the lucky ones who can go through life impervious to the failure pollution that entangles the built environment. A crossed thread on anything that is meant to screw together is a good starting point (I know, having mentioned Freud, anything to do with screwing is walking on eggshells), such as the cap on a tube of toothpaste, or the plastic knobs that tighten the legs on a tripod, or bolts inside the engine bay of a car. The latter, from personal memory, is associated with impossible tasks undertaken at taxing angles within confined spaces with sharp edges and stinging oil and bitter cold and numbed fingers, nut weakly held in place by index and middle fingers, negotiated into place and at last turned sufficiently in the thread to engage, only to jam at three turns due to the crossed thread. “The car is a right off then?”.

Don’t worry, I am not going to list everything that I know to be faulty. I will however suggest a sub-set within this universal set of things. There are objects that don’t work properly and there are objects that have a knack. At the heart of a knack is the transcendental moment we conquer a faulty thing and rebirth it as a functioning thing. A knack can involve pulling up slightly on a door handle to enable smooth opening and shutting or spitting on a coin to induce a vending machine to accept it, or pushing down on the toothpaste cap to override the soft plastic thread that is crossed. The tools required for the knack are ingenuity and creative ideation. The materials (if indeed any materials are needed) include, but are not restricted to, string, tape, wire, oil, sandpaper, and glue. This offers hope to anything that doesn’t work. It is at fault or broken until we find the knack. The older you are, the more likely you are to be surrounded by things that need idiosyncratic intervention to make them work. Even if there is no deft little trick to bring a faulty thing to life again, not all is lost. Most things that fail in their original function can be repurposed, often as sticks or weights or containers.

It doesn’t have to be a thing, as such. It can be a process that doesn’t work. There is no fault with a six-inch nail, no fault with a pin hammer, no fault with an eight by four sheet of eighteen-millimetre-thick chipboard. But when one tries driving a six-inch nail through eighteen-millimetre-thick chipboard with a pin hammer, the sound alone is sickening. The hollow echoing of board flopping back and forth under the insubstantial impact of a tiny hammer aimed at a massive nail which advances at a fraction of glacial progress upon each piercing contact is, deflating. These are not things that don’t work properly, this is an exemplar of misunderstanding things that have purpose. It is the opposite of a knack. It is a disinclination, an incapacity, a lack.

So far, I have obsessed about the built environment. I am not certain that it is possible for humankind to make anything that is not natural, so I am not saying that there is a distinction between objects that have been made and objects that occur as the result of any non-human activity. Human-made is a synthesis of naturally occurring material, be that reed to make baskets or uranium to make nuclear weapons. But there does seem to be a glaring divide between the forces of nature and the sustainability of human endeavour. The processes of nature are rampant, chaotic, violent, impartial. Nature evolves and adapts and through a myriad of miniscule experiments, edges forward with unceasing assertion. Humans seem arrested physiologically, with aching backs and irritable constitutions. But we have compensated through making things and dreaming of new things and trying to make those new things. In our minds, we make things that progress us as intelligent animals, things that extend our physical capabilities and assist our brilliant minds at an exponential rate. But we still make things that don't work properly and don't last. And why would they? Things in nature don't work properly, only the process of evolution itself works properly. In fact, the constant breaking of things in nature is the basis of nature's defiance.

Physical healing is fundamental to the resilience of living organisms. It isn't necessary to start listing the types of injury, disease, or malfunction that plants and animals endure, nor is there capacity in this short piece of writing to go into any detail about the ways in which living cells regenerate and replace dying or damaged tissue. We need only dwell on the fact that organisms can repair in ways that inanimate objects generally can't. Yes of course, we wear out as we age, and all living organisms will reach a point at which the DNA switches off. But a bicycle will wear out and cease to work unless we, the owner, intervenes and repairs or replaces parts. We need to maintain the bicycle, oil it, check the chain tension, tighten brakes, mend punctures, recharge the lights, wipe the paint clean and empty the basket occasionally. Humans augment their physical limitations through making things, but in consequence must subscribe to a lifelong schedule of servicing and reparation. Archivists in museums perfect procedures for the preservation of fragile artefacts, rare things in climate-controlled environments that require round-the-clock care. Conservationists guard buildings against weather and seismic intervention. We do all of this with heartfelt conviction, but in terms of a geological timescale, our efforts are nothing more than a fleeting and futile gesture along the unstoppable path of entropy.

There are examples of materials that have some self-healing properties, such as concrete that can repair cracks autogenously and paint that can fill its own scratches. But the real issue is that we deliberately make so many things that don't last long and are not intended to last long. At a philosophical level, single-use objects represent something synthetic that performs its lifetime task without failure. At an ecological level, it is reckless.

Things that have been designed and made to work properly will still fail, that is fine because we can and should repair them. The problem with so many things made this century is that we can't repair them ourselves. Devices are generally sealed and even if we find a panel that can be removed, we'll read "No User Serviceable Parts". The entire notion of 'spare parts' seems distant. The novice, tracing the fault and buying the spare part to fix the machine is all but gone. Is this just milky-eyed nostalgia? No, it is a growing issue of disenfranchisement that we face as we progress into an age of artificial intelligence and smart objects. If we are lucky and have enough money, we will replace the things with new things, not because they

have crossed threads or cracks, but because the software has become obsolete. If we don't replace them, we don't exist.

I can't leave it there. I am thinking about the perseverance of humans and wondering what the knack for rebooting obsolete technology might be. My mind has wandered, and I have slipped into a post-technological age where ubiquitous black glass-fronted things lie silent and inanimate, their minerals at rest. But I can hear music. It is a child rotating a twelve-inch vinyl record around a hazel stick with the spike of a dry holly leaf amplifying the voice of Etta James in the bright midday sun. The child has found the knack.