

# Remember: To Live!

## The Philosophy of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

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Written by Daniel Spiro

### I. Introduction

“The great Goethe.” Those words roll off the tongue, and not merely because of the alliteration.

Words like “great” and “genius” could aptly be used for but a select number of artists – for Michelangelo, say, or Shakespeare. In the United States, the works of those artists have been incorporated into popular culture as the epitome of visual and linguistic beauty. By contrast, on these shores, Goethe’s work remains largely unread and rarely discussed except among college students, most of whom develop a healthy dose of amnesia shortly after graduation. Why, then, is there such unanimity about his greatness among all who have allowed him to touch their souls?

“The best German book there is.” So said Nietzsche in reference to a work associated with Goethe. But it was not Goethe’s *Faust*, his supposed masterpiece, nor his *Sorrows of Young Werther*, the novel that made Goethe an instant 18<sup>th</sup> century celebrity as one who painted a picture of human desire run amuck. Nor was it *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, Goethe’s splendid philosophical novel, though a virtually unknown work in modern day America. Nietzsche was referring instead to Johann Peter Eckermann’s biography entitled *Conversations of Goethe*, a German version of Boswell’s *Johnson*. Eckermann was 31 when he met the 73-year old sage of Weimar, and wrote about the musings that Goethe shared with him during the last nine years of his life. Reading the mature Goethe’s reflections truly does resemble watching a man reach the top of Everest and proudly look downward. It is difficult to imagine a human soul that experienced more varied forms of inspiration, engaged more brilliant minds, and soaked up more wisdom than Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. That is because Goethe rarely spent a day without heeding a simple lesson: remember to live!

Not simply “remember to persevere.” Nor even “remember to enjoy.” But remember to *live!* To contemplate the world around us. To express ourselves based on our own unique perspectives. To find the holy throughout all of nature, and not simply on ground that has been labeled as sacred by mere mortals. To make a positive difference in the lives of others – be they professors, students, or ordinary citizens. To be a person whom one doesn’t so much notice, as *behold*.

I, for one, am incapable of reading a poem, play or novel by Goethe without marveling at the person who created it. Here was a genius who let us into his heart and his sometimes-

tortured imagination, and did not simply hide behind his art or his science.

Yes, Goethe was and is great. But forget the concept of greatness for a moment. And forget certain conduct in Goethe's personal life that was anything but exemplary. Concentrate instead on his philosophy and his literature. I think you will find that what is particularly fascinating about Goethe is what he has to tell us about how to be *good*.

Goethe was a man of considerable political power. He thought of himself also as a scientist. And he has long been recognized as a writer of remarkable poems, plays and prose. But to me, Goethe is above all else an ethicist. Perhaps the man himself would cringe at that statement. He once told Herder's fiancé that "since he lacked all virtues ... he intended to go in for talents instead." Still, one cannot deny the brilliance of so many principles that can be derived from his life and his work. He points us in a direction. He shows us all how to live and thrive as good men and women – whether we're great or not. Indeed, perhaps it is more honorable to live in the example of Goethe *without* possessing his genius, than it is to walk the earth knowing that you're capable of writing *Hamlet*, painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, or putting Mephistopheles in his place once and for all.

## II. Goethe's Religion and His Relationship to "Saint" Spinoza

Goethe, in my view, is but a link in a chain of thinkers who ought truly be thought of as religious -- as *spiritual* in their own ways -- but whose religion involves negating as much as affirming, and doing so with passion. In each case, what they negated was the dogma of the clergy, which is precisely why these thinkers are so often thought of as the epitome of *irreligious*. What they affirmed was nothing other than life itself.

Goethe's self-association with heretical figures might have begun with the martyred Bruno, whom Goethe read in 1770 when he was but 21 years of age. It continued with Spinoza, a man whom Goethe referred to alternatively as "our old Lord and Master" and as "our saint." Notice the use of the first person plural, for Goethe knew that he was philosophizing from inside an intellectual tradition, despite his reluctance to associate himself with any institutional faith. The chain picked up numerous links in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, as men like Lessing began to question the conventional wisdom of the Christian Church. And we mustn't forget this tradition's most outspoken oracle, Friederich Nietzsche, the so-called irreligious nihilist.

These men dared to combat the ignorance that they viewed to be bred by theology, an attitude that encourages human beings to look for salvation in a realm that is distant both in time and place. Goethe, in particular, fought the emphasis on the future and on the heavens. Even when he used literary means to convey his philosophy, he made his point that the heavens are but a figment of our imagination. For where was it that the dead Faust attained his final home? Amidst mountains, rivers, rocks and forests.

Like other religious people, Goethe deeply hoped for a better world, but he did so without praying to a miracle-generating deity. As he once said as a young man in reference to prayer, "I am not enough of a liar for that."

Before delving into the depths of Goethe's distaste for theology, let us note at the outset that he was as a general matter an extremely positive person. His religion was that of the moment. And his chapel, his hallowed ground, was all of the *earth*. To be a disciple of Goethe is to love nature as the divine. It is to strive for perfection, for the absolute, while at the same time recognizing and taking pride in one's humanity. It is to accept frustrations and even death as the price that must be paid to make the world ever exciting, ever challenging, ever young. Nietzsche is famous for saying that "Whatever doesn't kill me makes me stronger," but truly, he was merely voicing what Goethe must have thought many times.

While Goethe lived in the moment, he was intoxicated by the eternal. Think about Faust's deal with the devil: the devil could have Faust's soul, but only after Faust experiences a moment of such deep bliss, such pure satisfaction, that he would will that this moment last for an eternity. Such is the intoxication to Goethe of the feeling of deep, lasting satisfaction. Goethe lived for the epiphany, but not just for any epiphany. It must have seemingly eternal significance, not mere momentary pleasure. By contrast, the devil, Mephistopheles, lacked the cultivation to take pride in a life of good deeds and knew only short term thrills. Goethe's Mephistopheles represented pure reason insofar as it is fixated solely on the temporal. But even Mephistopheles was well aware that experiences, however grandiose, however stimulating, are inherently meaningless as long as the glow they produce does not last. What Mephistopheles did not appreciate is that striving for deep eternal *satisfaction*, as opposed to temporary pleasure, is the only type of striving that makes sense. Goethe knew that as well as did his mentor, Spinoza.

Goethe borrowed ideas from many philosophers, Kant and Leibniz nearly foremost among them, but he held a special place in his heart for a certain Amsterdam Jew. Unlike Goethe, as we will explore later, Spinoza was beholden to no one. As such, he permitted himself to honor the Goethean ideal of following the truth wherever it leads. Goethe surely admired Spinoza for that quality, but it was not merely Spinoza's moral purity that attracted Goethe. Equally attractive was Spinoza's heresy. Spinoza was nearly universally reviled on behalf of the very Christianity that Kant and Leibniz so desperately tried to salvage. If Kant's metaphysics was a square peg, and that of the Church Fathers a round hole, darned if Kant didn't endeavor to make them fit together as well as possible. The same could certainly be said for Leibniz. But not Spinoza. He did away with reliance on Judeo-Christian mythology, he questioned the existence of human freedom as manifested in a willing ego, and he dared to refer to God as nature. In all of those respects, Goethe's philosophy harmonized with that of Spinoza.

"I am not anti-Christian, nor un-Christian, but decidedly non-Christian," Goethe said. He deeply loved Jesus as a moral exemplar, but despised Christian mythology. In 1831, a year before his death, he referred in a letter to the crucifix as that "sorry torture tree" which, to him, is "the most repugnant thing under the sun." Forty-nine years earlier, Goethe said of himself that he "could not be persuaded by an audible voice from heaven that a woman has given birth without a man or that a dead man has risen again; on the contrary I regard these as blasphemies against the great God and His revelation in Nature." Those latter words could just as well have been written by Spinoza. What could not have been written by Spinoza, whose literary skills were purely prosaic, was Goethe's *Prometheus*, a poetic, anti-theological manifesto of the highest ilk.

Cover your heaven, Zeus, with cloudy vapors, and like a boy beheading thistles, practice on oaks and mountain peaks – still you must leave my earth intact and my small hovel, which you did not build, and this my hearth whose glowing beat you envy me.

I know of nothing more wretched under the sun than you gods! Meagerly you nourish your majesty on dues of sacrifice and breath of prayer and would suffer want but for children and beggars, poor hopeful fools.

Once too, a child, not knowing where to turn, I raised bewildered eyes up to the sun, as if above there were an ear to hear my complaint, a heart like mine to take pity on the oppressed.

Who helped me against the Titans' arrogance? Who rescued me from death, from slavery? Did not my holy and glowing heart, unaided, accomplish all? And did it not, young and good, cheated, glow thankfulness for its safety to him, to the sleeper above.

I pay homage to you? For what? Have you ever relieved the burdened man's anguish? Have you ever assuaged the frightened man's tears? Was it not omnipotent Time that forged me into manhood, and eternal Fate, my masters and yours?

Or did you think perhaps that I should hate this life, flee into deserts, because not all the blossoms of dream grew ripe?

Here I sit, forming men in my image, a race to resemble me: to suffer, to weep, to enjoy, to be glad – and never to heed you. Like me!

*Prometheus* was written in 1773. One year later, Goethe published *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, and it took Europe by storm. Storm and stress, you might say. Werther, the title character, epitomized the Promethean hero. He needed no snoozing Zeus to guide him; he needed only his own counsel. Whereas Saint Spinoza would follow the logic of his mind wherever it led, however, Werther would follow the dictates of his heart. And they led, of course, to suicide – both for that literary character, and for so many disciples around the continent who ate up Goethe's first novel with reckless abandon. Clearly, Sturm and Drang had its limits. Clearly, the human heart must not be the sole guide to happiness, let alone virtue.

At the same time Goethe was creating *Werther*, he was also beginning *Faust*, an intellectual play that would take him literally six decades to complete. How stunning it is to contemplate a man capable of conceiving both of those works at roughly the same time. This is made possible only because of Goethe's devotion to the idea of balance. We cannot remember to *live*, you see, unless we remember to experience and develop all of our faculties. Our imagination. Our sympathy. Our passion. Our reason. Our intuition. Our powers of observation. And, yes, those other faculties that mixed company prevents me from discussing in detail. Goethe, perhaps in contrast to his mentor Spinoza, experienced those faculties as well.

Indeed, it is in his faith in *all* of the powers of human nature, without concentrating so heavily on the faculties of reason and intuition, that Goethe begins to part ways with Spinoza. But that is hardly the only respect in which the pupil's philosophy consciously diverged from that of the master. Goethe also saw Spinoza's philosophy as imbalanced in the relative importance that it assigned to God, as against the individual. Spinoza's *Ethics* begins with God, or infinite substance, and ends with humankind's ability to contemplate such substance with an eternal love. In such a system, what room remains for the importance of the human ego? Goethe refused to see himself as a mere "finite mode" of infinite substance, a mere *part* of a great, unified Being. He viewed himself as a unique and creative whole, however interrelated he might be with other forms of nature.

So as not to fall prey to what he perceived to be Spinoza's overemphasis on the totality, Goethe borrowed from the philosophy of his fellow German, Leibniz. I'm referring to Leibniz's belief that the universe is composed of an infinite array of independent, eternal, spiritual beings, known as "monads," and exemplified by the human soul. Each such soul is a microcosm of the totality of nature, a universe unto itself, that acts as a type of mirror to the universe but with its own unique perspective. Goethe did not wish to deny Spinoza the existence of a macrocosm, or absolute, in which we all reside and which is itself omnipresent. But nor did he wish to discredit the cosmic importance of each discrete manifestation of that macrocosm. As with all walks of life, Goethe sought a balanced view between two poles. He wanted to practice the religion of Spinozism – the veneration for life, the appreciation of its unity, the recognition of the role of reason in controlling the passions, the acceptance that cosmic purposes, if they exist at all, are way beyond our ken. Dispositionally, however, he was very much tied to Leibniz. Goethe was an individual, a man aware of his own special place in the universe, and no philosopher, not even a saint, could erase that sense of self that gave Goethe the spark to light up a room, or a generation – indeed, perhaps the greatest generations in German history.

Still, at the end of the day, Goethe was a spiritual man. For himself he had pride; for nature, he had reverence. Indeed, for Goethe, nature and God are one. My favorite statement by the man was that "we are in nature-research pantheists, in poetry polytheists, [and] morally monotheists." Despite this linguistic flexibility, his true God was nothing less than Spinoza's. In 1823, he made the following Spinozistic statement to Eckermann:

People treat [religion] as if that incomprehensible and most high Being, who is even beyond the reach of thought, were only their equal. Otherwise, they would not say the *Lord God*, the *dear God*, the *good God*. This expression becomes to them, especially to the clergy, who have it daily in their mouths, a mere phrase, a barren name.

Spinoza often invoked the name of God, but stripped it of all the adjectives that remind one of a cosmic Santa Claus. In the Appendix of Part I of the *Ethics*, he wrote that "the laws of [God's] ... nature were so comprehensive as to suffice for the production of everything that can be conceived by an infinite intelligence..." In 1831, Goethe echoed similar statements to Eckermann: "Let people serve Him who gives to the beast his fodder, and to man meat and drink as much as he can enjoy. But I worship Him who has infused into the world such a power of production, that, when only the millionth part of it comes out into life, the world swarms with

creatures to such a degree that war, pestilence, fire, and water cannot prevail against them. That is *my* God!"

Spinoza's too.

### III. Scientist and Artist

Just as Goethe can be considered a successor of Spinoza, he can aptly be called a predecessor of Buber. Goethe's life was a series of encounters, of dialogues. He excelled in dialogue with his fellow human beings, to be sure, which explains not only the nature of the literature he created but also the incredible number of German luminaries who are proud to have called themselves his friend. But as a true Buberian, he also excelled in dialogue with nature. He could not behold a leaf without meeting the leaf with respect, with awe, with fascination. Therein lies the source of Goethe's veneration for the physical sciences.

Field after field of science Goethe studied extensively. Anatomy. Botany. Optics. Geology. Meteorology. In his day, certain of his scientific ideas were taken seriously, at least by some. But in modern times, Goethe's approach to science might well be termed comical. He was not what we might call a quantitative thinker. "Separating and counting were not in my nature," he said about himself. Worse yet, he had a deep distrust for scientific instruments -- like the microscope and telescope -- and even for experiments. The apparatus he trusted most was the human eye. Man's senses," he said, are "the greatest and most accurate physical apparatus[es] that can be had."

In my view, Goethe's fascination with nature was not born of a desire to utilize it for human purposes. Instead, he felt compelled to treat it, in the words of Buber, as a *Thou*. The dialogue that he sought with all that he encountered was grounded in the attempt to perceive that which is eternal, that which is truly *beautiful*, in all of the earth's unique forms. As a scientist, Goethe was as much a Platonist as a disciple of Aristotle. He sought in every physical being to perceive an essence, or formative principle, that lies concealed in each individual and survives the flux of day-to-day life. His overarching goal was to locate the place of the individual thing within the connected whole that he called Nature or God. Thus, Goethe studied the leaf or the rock largely in order to comprehend the eternal laws of physical *and* spiritual nature that he concluded were apparent to those who observe with a gimlet eye. But Goethe didn't simply bring his eyes to the battle. He also took his imagination, his reason, his experiences, his intuition, his love. In short, he came prepared for an I-Thou encounter. Stripped of jargon, you might instead prefer to view Goethe approaching a leaf simply as one comrade conversing with another.

Goethe, the student of Kant, never believed that all of the eternal laws are knowable to the human mind. He was well aware that there is much about nature or God that transcends our limited capacities. But there were certain principles in which he held the deepest faith. One was the notion of polarity. Even before Hegel brought the concept to popular consciousness, Goethe saw the world as an interaction between opposites, between theses and antitheses, and he sought the syntheses that emerged from the dialectic. Color, for example, he perceived simply as an

interaction between the polar opposites of black and white.

A second principle adopted by Goethe was that of intensification. To Goethe, life is a process of striving, and specifically a striving toward the absolute. The result of adopting these two principles is that Goethe, the observer of nature, saw life as a process of constant oscillation and reproduction – always developing, always creating variety, always clearing out the old in favor of the new. This is how he lived his own life. Once again, Nietzsche captured well his mentor's philosophy when he said that "only those who continue to change remain my kin."

Always striving and always working toward a new synthesis. These concepts are key to Goethe's understanding of nature. They are also critical to our understanding of his approach to art. Goethe's essay, entitled "On Simple Imitation of Nature; Manner; Style," ranked three approaches to art from the lowest to the highest. He had in mind as a paradigm the visual arts, but if you don't mind, we will use his trichotomy to evaluate different levels of literature.

At the bottom is mere imitation - reproducing a thesis, if you will, without any appreciation for the value of confronting its opposite. This is certainly the level of the typical piece of pulp fiction, where the writer manipulates a mental cookie cutter the way a painter-by-the-numbers might manipulate a brush. At the next level, which Goethe called "manner," the artist creates a work that expresses his or her emotions. This is the level of a memoir written by a creative, angst-ridden teenager. The artist confronts the polarity between subject and object and demonstrates the courage of revealing one's own vulnerabilities, one's own humanity. The effort involved in so stripping yourself bare for all to see is indeed considerable. At the highest level, which Goethe calls "style," is the work of art that integrates the artist's personality with the acquisition of insight about the objects that s/he is depicting. This is the level of a *Faust* or a *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, both of which do not merely express Goethe's passions but also draw from his encounters with a number of his generation's most impressive intellects. Kant, Herder, Schiller, Schelling, Hegel. Goethe knew them all. And he soaked up their teachings as much as he did their predecessors, like Spinoza and Leibniz.

In his works of supreme "style," Goethe no longer comes across as bundle of emotions but as an intellect who can apply a world of life experiences by creating a moving, thought-provoking story. To a person who reveres nature – a realm of variety, of productivity, of ups and downs – what can be more godlike than the privilege of producing such a work of art? It's no wonder that art represents among the most eternal gifts one generation donates to the next. The Goethean artist, steeped in the moment – for how else can one be productive? – aims for eternity. Out of her imagination, emotions and insight, she strives to create a world that is but a microcosm of the Eternal in all its glory.

It should now be apparent why Goethe wrote: "Whoever has sciences and art, religion has as well; whoever lacks sciences and art, should in religion dwell."

#### **IV. Ethics**

Spinoza taught that human beings must be filled with positive, happy emotions if they

hope to have the power to defeat their baser inclinations. That Goethe practiced this ethic is evident from the incredible amount of energy that he brought to so many walks of life. For years, he exercised tremendous power over a theater, university and art school. In fact, he largely ran an entire German duchy. He was an avid scientist, as we have seen, a collector of books and natural specimens, and a creator of many thousands of drawings. He also risked his life on the field of battle. It was about Goethe whom, Napoleon, a fan of the *Sorrows of Young Werther*, once said “Voilà un homme!” No truer words have ever been spoken.

Goethe, you see, was a man par excellence. But he was not a saint. “Human, all too human,” his disciple Nietzsche might have said. We’re talking about a man who, at age 22, left his fiancé after she had been battling an illness and communicated to her by letter that their relationship was over. By the time she read the letter, he was gone! We’re also talking about a minister of government who threw his fellow philosopher Fichte to the wolves when Fichte was accused of atheism and threatened with expulsion from his post at the Jena university. Fichte’s sin, in Goethe’s mind, was none other than speaking intemperately about authority, and this sin Goethe simply couldn’t abide. His loyalty to academic freedom was strong. His loyalty to anti-theological principles equally powerful. But his loyalty to his boss, Carl-August, the Duke of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach, was perhaps strongest of all.

They call him the *great* Goethe and rightfully so. But if he’s a saint, then so are most of the bureaucrats in Washington.

If you want a model of moral purity from the relatively recent past, look beyond Goethe and toward Spinoza. But if you want a teacher of what it means to be a good man, if not a heroic one, voilà Mr. Goethe. It is as a teacher of goodness -- a *rabbi*, as it were -- that the man is at his greatest.

In order to appreciate this point, let’s consider two of his greatest works – *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* and *Faust*. *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* is largely a book about the silliness of fatalism. Its title character fell in a love with an art form that he felt fated as a child to embrace as a lifelong occupation. The art form was the theater and Meister, it turned out, was no Olivier. He could play a pretty fair Hamlet, but only because his personality was much like Hamlet’s. His talent, as he later learned, was severely limited.

Goethe never criticized Meister for loving the theater, or even for leaving the business world in order to give it a go as an actor. Meister, in fact, was presented sympathetically because he ultimately opened his mind to the truth about his own meager talents and the idiocy of holding firm to a childlike sense of fate. The truth, Goethe taught, is that life is essentially an array of chance events. But to those whose minds are open, as Meister’s ultimately was, various patterns can be discerned, and these patterns, when recognized, are what give our lives meaning and enable us to achieve enlightenment. Meister, for one, came to understand that art and creativity are wonderful, but his highest calling was love and companionship. And in that regard, he had a teacher without equal.

In the final section of *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, Meister found himself in a place known as the “Hall of the Past.” He was guided there by an androgynous saint, a heroic figure

whose name is Natalia, but whom the awestruck Meister often referred to as “the Amazon.” Natalia, in many ways, is to Goethe’s Spinozist deity what Jesus is to the Biblical God: an exemplar of holiness made manifest in human form. She is without a selfish emotional need. Nor does she pine for information, for facts. She comes not from the masculine world of the understanding, but rather from the feminine world guided by the voice of reason, that quiet, still voice best associated with intuition – with the ability to grasp the commonality between the subject and the object, between the lover and the beloved.

Natalia, that Spinozist saint, has but one overarching drive: whenever she feels some lack or need in the world, she experiences an irresistible impulse to find “some compensation, some means or form of assistance.” She personifies what is perhaps Goethe’s favorite line in all of philosophy, when Spinoza wrote that he who truly loves God cannot desire that God should love him in return -- only Natalia feels that way about everyone and everything.

“You have never been in love?” Meister asked.

“Never – or always!” Natalia replied. The answer depends on whether one defines love strictly as eros, as pining for what one does not have, or in the more spiritual sense of the word. One thing that Natalia surely loved in that spiritual sense was the Hall of the Past, the final resting place of her beloved deceased uncle. There, she accompanied Meister with flowers, the very same that her uncle especially enjoyed. Meister was expecting a gloomy tribute to the dead, but what he saw instead was a world of light – of architectural triumphs, of brilliant and various colors ... in short, of art at its finest. In the words of Goethe:

Across from the entrance, on a magnificent sarcophagus, stood the marble effigy of a distinguished man, his head resting against a pillow. He was holding a scroll in front of him which he appeared to be reading attentively. The scroll was so placed that one could read the words written upon it. These were: *‘Remember to live.’*

One of Judaism’s leading sages, Rabbi Hillel, was asked if he could summarize the whole Torah while standing on one foot. He replied “What is hateful to you, don’t do to your fellow man – that’s the whole Torah and the rest is just commentary. Go then and learn it.” I suspect that if Hillel were alive today and asked to summarize Goethe’s philosophy while standing on one foot, he could be even more succinct: “Remember, to live! L’Chaim!”

When I think about living, really *living*, I think about experiencing breathtaking beauty. Heart-wrenching pain. Romance that makes you melt from head to toes.

You name it. Faust lived it. Every day, a new adventure. He’s talking to the devil one day and feasting his eyes on Helen of Troy the next. Whatever his heart desired, he experienced. And yet, none of it could truly satiate him. How could it? He was the product of Goethe, an alter-ego, if you will. And if Goethe learned one thing from his precious study of nature it was that once a natural being stops growing, stops changing, stops *striving* to achieve its potential, it dies.

Natalia was goodness personified. But Faust was goodness dramatized. The fact is that after his wager, he lived a great life by the standards of many. But not his own. He still felt a lack, a need. Perhaps had Goethe lived to be 142, instead of 82, he could have spent another sixty years writing about Faust's incredible experiences. But Goethe presumably knew that it was time for him, the writer, to die. So somehow, he had to figure out a way to end his masterpiece and kill off its title character by finding an experience, a moment, that Faust would will to be eternal.

Ultimately, like Natalia, Faust realized that any egoistic greatness – indeed, *any* egoistic pleasure trip – is meaningless. But what was not meaningless was serving others. What was not meaningless was being *good*. For truly, taken from the standpoint of eternity, as Spinoza would say, what is more relevant: the quantity of our talents, or the quality of our heart and our values?

Here are the words of the older, wiser, Faust. And no sooner did he say them then he experienced what was necessary for the devil to end his earthly existence on the spot:

There is a swamp, skirting the base of the hills, a foul and filthy blot on all our work. If we could drain and cleanse this pestilence, it would crown everything we have achieved, opening up living space for many millions. Not safe from every hazard, but safe enough. Green fields and fruitful too for man and beast, both quickly domiciled on new-made land, all snug and settled under the mighty dune that many hands have built with fearless toil.

Inside it, life will be a paradise. Let the floods rage and mount to the dune's brink. No sooner will they nibble at it, threaten it, than all as one man run to stop the gap. Now I am wholly of this philosophy. This is the farthest wisdom goes: the man who earns his freedom every day, alone deserves it, and no other does. And, in this sense, with dangers at our door, we all, young folks and old, shall live our lives. Oh, how I'd love to see that lusty throng and stand on a free soil with a free people. Now, I could almost say to the passing moment: Stay, oh stay a while, you are beautiful. The mark of my endeavors will not fade. No, not in ages, not in any time. Dreaming of this incomparable happiness, I now taste and enjoy the supreme moment.

I've certainly written enough to know that I can never be half the poet, playwright or novelist as Goethe. And I've lived long enough – longer than Spinoza, in fact -- to know that I will never experience anywhere near what Faust was able to experience before he finally had his epiphany. But certain things I can envision – such as what it would be like to stand on a free soil, with a free people. Not subduing them. Not converting them. Not even preaching to them. Just learning with them, as one of many. Sharing our thoughts about nature: human and otherwise. Expressing ourselves through art, and appreciating the artistic expressions of others. And above all else, learning as a people to discern the sacred even in what appears to be the mundane.

This was the dream of Faust.  
And this can be our reality.

Whether we are noticeably great.  
Or merely in touch with what it means to be good.