

Make a wish, or even indulging on a whim

One morning Ciro walks into the church, kneels and prays, “San Gennaro, help me please. I have no job, hear my prayer ... let me win fifty million in the lottery.”

A fortnight later, dishevelled and with his eyes red from crying, Ciro returns to the church, “San Gennaro, you haven’t heard my prayer and I’m in an even worse state ... Now I’m in the hands of a moneylender! I beg you, let me win one hundred million in the lottery!”

Another fortnight goes by and Ciro, now at the end of his tether, is once again kneeling before the statue of the saint.

“Oh San Gennaro of mine, I beg you, please hear my prayer! Let me win a thousand million in the lottery, otherwise I don’t know what I’ll do ... I’ll have to kill myself.”

Ciro sobs as he stands up, makes the sign of the cross and is shuffling towards the door of the deserted church when he hears a cavernous voice echoing between its walls:

“Cirooooooo ...”

“Oh my God, who’s that? Is that really you, San Gennaro of mine?”

“Yes, Cirooooo, it is I ...”

“Speak to me, San Gennaro!” Ciro exclaims breathlessly and with his eyes bulging.

“Hey Ciro, are you going to buy this bloody ticket or not?”

This old Neapolitan joke has found a very clever way of expressing the same concept to which Epicure had dedicated a much more concise, even brusque sentence:

It is vain to ask of the gods what a man is capable of supplying for himself.

Epicure, *The Vatican Sayings*, LXV

As always, Epicure’s words are very profound and if we study them closely they reveal their three-dimensional quality: the fact that in Greek μάταιον (*màtaion*) means at the same time “useless”, “mistaken” and “crazy” doesn’t leave much room for adding anything else ... The notion that there is nothing crazier (*màtaion*) than a effort made in vain is fascinating

and instructive for us neurotic contemporary readers, but it was obvious back in that epoch: today the attitude of those who decide to blame the San Gennaro of the moment rather than feeling themselves to be in command of (and responsible for) their own existence in many regards is decidedly common. It's even considered worthy of respect and compassion.

It may well be *màtaion*, but in the throes of the vortex of the thousands of chores that infest our days – and perhaps also the feeling of inadequacy that lies in wait for us in every situation – it's easy to forget that for many small and big wishes we are each of us perfectly able to do off our own bats what is necessary in order to realize them: χορηγήσαι says Epicure, choosing a verb that recalls the figure of the χορηγός. The *choregòs* in classical Athens was the person who dealt with the expenses necessary for setting up the theatrical productions that would then be presented to the entire population during the festivals of Dionysus. Each year the eponymous archon selected three to assist each of the poets in the competition: these private sponsors were chosen from among the richest men in the city, because they were able to take on the considerable economic commitment without receiving in return anything more than substantial recognition and the importance of an undiscussed social prestige. It appears that the *crème de la crème* of Athenian society vied with one another to take on the task.

And us? Are we really so unaware of the fact that our own abilities can give us energy to face life, an energy equal to the means that Pericles – little more than twenty years old, but already flying high – in 472 BC was able to provide for Aeschylus for the premiere of his *The Persians*?

How can we see these abilities, so as to avoid wasting time praying on bended knee before the statue of a saint, a parent, a boyfriend to whom we stupidly (which is to say, pointlessly) grant the status of the gods? How do we find a way out of the blind alley of expectations and the everlasting resentment in which we are no longer able to choose and achieve what we want in a straightforward way? And above all, how did we end up in this blind alley without even realising it?

In defending ourselves we can only call on one person to testify: our dear old aunt who, bless her, has always had her heart set on teaching us since we were babies to be respectable little people. Her lesson is that wanting things isn't nice, let alone asking for things: "Those who want don't always get!", she reminds us every day; "Waste not, want not!" And so forth.

Young children know perfectly well what they want: she wants the red car, so if you change it surreptitiously with the yellow one then all hell breaks loose; he has no intention of saying hello to the baker he doesn't like and he gets into a right state if we ask him to give his favourite superhero to his friend as a present or to wait until tomorrow to go the fairground: "Now, Mum!" If they're crazy about Nutella, they'll certainly find a way of climbing up to the top shelf to get it.

For the child the world is still sacred, up until the point when a part of our "education" trains him or her to pretend that there is no difference between what for each of us is special and what isn't. Day after day, year after year, almost all of us become very polite and if we're not polite then we feel terribly guilty, with our aunt's voice ringing in the background even when we've reached fifty: "No tantrums! You're naughty!"

Inside of us there is a place in which sometimes we feel ourselves to be monstrously unhappy or divinely happy at the most inappropriate moments, but we've learned how to suppress those feelings and we are increasingly unaware of them as we progress through our lives as adults. We know which are the desires for which it's worth struggling and trading our comfort for in the present, fully investing time and money: a promotion at work that will bring an avalanche of extra commitments and worries, the purchase of another bag that in truth we cannot afford, a holiday alongside a person that we've never really understood and with whom we haven't really had a good time for ages ... Isn't all this just the process of growing up?

After all, kneeling before San Gennaro we feel so small that you can see why, for one reason or another, we always forget to stop by the newsagent's to buy that lottery ticket, or whatever it represents for us: sending off a cv for our dream job, making a phone call rather than the usual emoji on WhatsApp, starting that course of African dance, welcoming into our lives those who truly improve them ... But maybe, if by chance everything went for the best and we won that first prize, with those bundles of cash in our pockets then we'd become selfish and unlikable, or even worse, *naughty!* And what would aunty say?

Perhaps this is why very often, continuously worried about comparisons ("See how good your brother is? He's eaten all his spinach ... ") or worried about missing out one day on something we truly love, we prefer to give up before starting. All told, we feel more at ease

in a difficult situation and when life presents us with an opportunity or a truly special gift, we're so ill-at-ease that we do everything we can to boycott it or free ourselves of it. If we're really forced to keep hold of them then we feel clumsy and we don't know how to make use of them: just like little Cosette in *Les Misérables*, when – after years of suffering at the hands of a family that treats her like a servant – she receives the gift of Catherine, the most beautiful doll in town, from her saviour, Jean Valjean.

Cosette placed Catherine on a chair, then seated herself on the floor in front of her, and remained motionless, without uttering a word, in an attitude of contemplation.

“Play, Cosette,” said the stranger.

“Oh! I am playing,” returned the child.

Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*

Or, on the contrary, we reach the stage where we close aunts in the closet and devour eighteen jars of Nutella one after the other, even if we know perfectly well that this *naughtiness* means we'll be ill for two days and that just halfway through the first jar we already feel sick. But you can't deny that it's a satisfaction anyway!

The figure of the *choregòs* evoked by Epicure is truly illuminating: if we abandon the moaning and ever-dissatisfied attitude of those who kneel before San Gennaro without ever buying a ticket, and manage to believe in our power to become the patrons and the producers of the show that is our lives, then we'll discover as a direct and logical consequence the sense of measure that is so dear to our philosopher.

Here we touch on one of the points of Epicurean teaching that have been most profoundly misunderstood for the longest time: the insistence on the theme of pleasure and desires has given Epicureanism a reputation for dissoluteness that is the exact opposite of what is actually written in the texts.

If you wish to make Pythocles rich, do not add to his store of money,
but subtract from his desires.

The request made to San Gennaro is by its nature an unbridled and *màtaion* escalation, much removed from reality, while the *choregòs* who has to set up the show with real money from his or her pocket has to carry out a thousand reckonings in order to find the right equilibrium between the splendour of the result and the concrete possibilities available (our “budget” of energy, trust, health, money, time ...). Unlike aunty, who normally tends to be a bit strict with her prohibitions, thinking she’s doing what’s best for us, the role of *choregòs* leads him or her to be both generous and measured at one and the same time.

It would be unthinkable to produce a truly compelling show without some unpredictable and over-the-top detail, but it’s obvious that this should be combined with the sobriety and elegance of the foundational structure. “Subtract from his desires” reminds us that we can happily indulge some whim without jeopardizing our nobility of spirit or putting our lives at risk ...

As we learn from the words of Marie Kondo, the Japanese author who has taught millions of people throughout the world to tidy up their homes and their lives by relinquishing most of their superfluous objects, the first rule is to avoid throwing away that which we love very much and which belongs to us profoundly: the things that “still make our eyes gleam when we see them.”

Therefore the best criterion for choosing what to keep and what to discard is whether keeping it will make you happy, whether it will bring you joy.

Are you happy wearing clothes that don’t give you pleasure?

Do you feel joy when surrounded by piles of unread books that don’t touch your heart?

Do you think that owning accessories you know you’ll never use will ever bring you happiness?

The answer to these questions should be ‘no’.

Now imagine yourself living in a space that contains only things that spark joy. Isn't this the lifestyle you dream of? Keep only those things that speak to your heart. Then take the plunge and discard all the rest. By doing this, you can reset your life and embark on a new lifestyle.

Marie Kondo, *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying*
(Vermilion, London, 2011, pp. 48-49)

And so it's as though our interior *choregòs*, with his precious tunic, his slightly greying hair and his purse full of golden coin, before taking any crucial decision turns for advice to that most authoritative of consultants: the snotty-nosed, curly-haired little boy, his shoes covered in mud from jumping in the puddles and his wonderful half-toothless smile. Who better than him to be free to choose what sparks joy in our hearts? We need him to help make our show a unique spectacle.

Accompanied by these two guardian angels, we will be freer than ever to explore the world as we wish, because in the dialogue between the *choregòs* and the child the answer to a question is never taken for granted, but the objective is always the same: true happiness. We might surprise ourselves by deciding that all considered we'd rather forego another drink because we're more interested in getting to know the person sitting before us without having to dash to the bathroom to be sick; or that silver skirt that seems to match nothing else but fits us so well might just be the ideal item of clothing to wear every time we want to feel ourselves to be that little bit special

Our Epicurean whim has nothing to do with the idea of eating two kilos of french fries at lunch and dinner every day, but rather with the possibility of granting to the things we desire with all our heart the same importance that we give to the chores and tasks we take on, or to the desires of other people. Even when the *choregòs* decides that we prefer to forego a pleasure rather than plunging into anything and everything that stimulates our curiosity, this will be a choice and not a frustration.

This key, light years away from the unbridled hedonism that for decades has led us to collect objects and experiences that we had no need of, teaches us that it is only by

indulging our whims and kicking up a bit of a fuss that we can know ourselves profoundly, lifting one knee after the other from the ground as we stop asking for indulgence from San Gennaro, taking the reins of our lives in hand and becoming adults.

There's no denying just how difficult it is, for a parent or a teacher, to bring to fruition the abilities and the character of children without leaving them at the mercy of their own selves and without imposing an education so rigid that it blocks their most spontaneous development. But this is a theme that we'll leave to authors such as Steiner and Montessori, capable of a vision of childhood that is so developed that only today is it beginning to be spread on a wider scale.

It is enough for us to remember that sometimes a pinch of disobedience can change our lives and help us to preserve the vital and constructive spark of our most genuine selves. Just like that classmate who failed everything who at forty years of age is a splendid man and gives work to a fair number of people, before learning to use his magic lamp, the one that allowed him to realize his dreams and become a sultan who was loved by everyone, Aladdin too had been:

a careless, idle boy who would do nothing but play all day long in the streets with little idle boys like himself.

The Book of One Thousand and One Nights

And indeed, if he hadn't been so *naughty*, how would he ever have dared to go against his mother's wishes when she asked him to give the magic lamp away, terrorized as she was by the strange genie that had upset her with his imposing figure and his sudden extravagances? Inspired by Aladdin's story, Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen wrote *The Aladdin Factor*, a book dedicated to the art of making wishes, on giving voice to our freest and most creative side while overcoming the unavoidable resistances that we carry within ourselves. There is nothing more human than being intimidated by the genie of the lamp and his gifts: just like Cosette who didn't dare touch her doll, without thinking that usually even the most precious toys in town can't wait to get out of that cold shop window to be with and play with the kids, even if it means crumpling the lace of their fine clothes ...

In order to train ourselves to rediscover the courage to ask ourselves what we really want and need, forgetting what aunty or the advertisers think, *The Aladdin Factor* puts forward a very instructive old game: take a notebook and make a list of one hundred and one wishes. Whoever tries to do it will find unfortunately – with rare and fortunate exceptions – that we’ve now learned so well to silence our inner child that we no longer know what to ask for: the idea of having a space dedicated specifically to kicking up a fuss, however innocuous that fuss may be, both thrills us and intimidates us at the same time. We list ten or so things enthusiastically before finding ourselves staring at the ceiling while we remember that the plants need watering or that we should read that interesting article we’d put aside two weeks ago... With any luck in a month or so, even a year, we might finally manage to write the number 101. At this point we will no longer be surprised by the speed and the series of incredible coincidences with which the things we ask for actually appear (bringing us back once again, unfortunately, to those numbers!). Nor will we be surprised by the poetic splendour of our desires, of their weighty lightness and their wonderful simplicity. Suddenly we feel like taking a look at the initial pages once again just to cross out energetically the very first entries in the list: only now do we see that they weren’t really dictated by our desires, but by external conditioning. We began with “I want to become president of the United States” and ended up with “I want to gaze up at the stars over the sea while I squeeze my loved one’s hand”: which of those two will make us happier?

So it’s inevitable we come to realize that by kicking up a fuss in order to “subtract desires” as Epicure suggested (to his good fortune words such as “optimize” or “focalize” hadn’t yet been invented, but that’s more or less the concept), we will have made Pythocles a rich man and full of luxuries – the ones that are more real and less stereotyped.

Thanks to an instrument of such power, for example, our esteemed bank manager might decide to forego an hour or two of overpaid consultancy work so as not to miss rehearsals with his band, now that he has finally decided to pull his old electric guitar out of storage. Of course, this choice won’t be without consequences – he’ll have to do without a designer tie, and it won’t be so easy to take the family out to a five-star restaurant to celebrate the success of the first concert in the pub down the road. He might even be forced to say hello to some old friend, unable to resist the spark he’d seen in his eye as he pulled the guitar over his head, ready to go on stage... But then these days it’s increasingly easy to find excellent

trattorias with reasonable prices, and for a son to see his father as a happy and gratified human being may well prove to be more nourishing than roast quail at fifty euros a portion.

Apropos of rock stars, while we grant ourselves an hour away from the social networks to sit comfortably on the sofa and add a few new points to our wish list, once we've turned the lights down low and lit our perfumed candle, what else can we listen to but Paganini's *Capricci*? Wonderfully mad, unpredictable and overwhelming just like the pulsions of the heart when we allow ourselves to listen to it, these musical masterpieces were brought into the world by a true rock'n'roll genius. The greatest violinist of the 1800s played with such transport that every time he got up on stage he ended up breaking his strings such was the impetuosity of his bow: often the only string that survived was the "G" string, but he never let himself be discouraged and managed to conclude his concerts playing that one alone. One evening, at the Carignano Theatre in Turin, after a particularly moving performance, the king asked him for an encore: the artists, physically and emotionally drained, dared to reply with a lapidary and capricious riposte that went down in history: *Paganini non ripete!* Literally, "Paganini does not repeat!"

And yet it's important to remember that his wild and rebellious nature didn't prevent him from being very consistent in the study of music and in daily practice of his instrument: this allowed him to maintain his natural talent on an excellent technical foundation. Indeed, recent studies have suggested the idea that the secret of Paganini's incredible virtuosity was Marfan syndrome, a rare disorder that affects the connective tissue of the hand, making the fingers particularly long and flexible.

And even us, in our own way, when we really have managed to subtract from our desires the more genuine ones out of the millions of fancies and expectations we're bombarded with, we can hope to achieve the rare pleasure of realizing that in the purse of golden coin of the *choregòs*, among the indispensable instruments for "achieving on our own" whatever makes our eyes light up, we'll find everything that we are, including all those instruments that for a long time we'd considered as being defects and afflictions, as Buddhism has taught for thousands of years.

After all, when you pick up an old, dusty brass lantern and you give it a good rub to clean it, who does the genie that appears there in the reflection remind you of?