

PART ONE

**DISCOVER YOUR
INNER TOOL**

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THE ADVENTUROUS HOBBIT

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The gem cannot be polished without friction, nor man perfected without trials.

—Confucius

The Hobbit is a tale of adventure. It is also a story of personal growth. At the beginning of the tale, Bilbo is a conventional, unadventurous, comfort-loving hobbit. As the story progresses, he grows in courage, wisdom, and self-confidence. *The Hobbit* is similar in this respect to *The Lord of the Rings*. Both are tales, J. R. R. Tolkien informs us, of the ennoblement of the humble.¹ Both are stories of ordinary persons—small in the eyes of the “wise” and powerful—who accomplish great things and achieve heroic stature by accepting challenges, enduring hardships, and drawing on unsuspected strengths of character and will.

What's the connection between an adventurous spirit and personal growth? How can challenge and risk—a willingness to leave our own safe and comfy hobbit-holes—make us stronger, happier, and more confident individuals? Let's see what Bilbo and the great thinkers can teach us about growth and human potential.

A Hobbit's Progress

Hobbits in general are not an adventurous folk—quite the opposite. Hobbits “love peace and quiet and good tilled earth”; have never been warlike or fought among themselves; take great delight in the simple pleasures of eating, drinking, smoking, and partying; rarely travel; and consider “queer” any hobbit who has adventures or does anything out of the ordinary.²

Bilbo is an unusual hobbit in this regard. His mother, the famous Belladonna Took, belonged to a clan, the Tookes, who were not only rich but also notorious for their love of adventure. One of Bilbo's uncles, Isengar, was rumored to have “gone to sea” in his youth, and another uncle, Hildifons, “went off on a journey and never returned.”³ Bilbo's remote ancestor, Bandobras “Bullroarer” Took, was famous in hobbit lore for knocking a goblin king's head off with a club. The head rolled down a rabbit hole, and thus Bullroarer simultaneously won the Battle of Green Fields and invented the game of golf.⁴

In contrast, the Bagginses, Bilbo's father's side of the family, were thoroughly respectable hobbits who never did anything unexpected or adventurous. The conflict between these two parts of Bilbo's makeup is frequently played out in *The Hobbit*.

Gandalf noticed Bilbo's adventurous Tookish side when he visited the Shire in 2941, twenty years before the events described in *The Hobbit*. The young Bilbo impressed Gandalf with his “eagerness and his bright eyes, and his love of tales, and his questions about the wide world.”⁵ When Gandalf returned

to the Shire two decades later, he found that Bilbo “was getting rather greedy and fat,” but he was pleased to hear that Bilbo was still regarded as “queer” for doing odd things like going off for days by himself and talking with dwarves.⁶ When Bilbo says good morning to Gandalf and dismisses adventures as “nasty disturbing uncomfortable things” that “make you late for dinner,” Gandalf realizes that the Baggins side of Bilbo’s personality is winning out.⁷

Bilbo’s inner Took is rekindled, however, by the dwarves’ treasure song and Gloin’s slighting reference to him as “that little fellow bobbing and puffing on the mat.”⁸ Bilbo reluctantly agrees to join the dwarves’ quest and finds himself in an adventure that proves to also be a quest for his own true self. Quite early in his perilous journey, Bilbo realizes that “adventures are not all pony-rides in May-sunshine.”⁹ He is constantly fearful and dependent and often thinks regretfully of his cozy hobbit-hole with the kettle just beginning to sing.

On several occasions he is saved by sheer luck. Gradually, however, his confidence and courage grow. Alone and unaided, he is able to outwit Gollum, escape from the goblins’ cave, and free his companions from both the Mirkwood spiders and the Elvenking’s fortress. When the Company arrives at the Lonely Mountain, it is Bilbo who discovers how to open the secret door, and only he has the courage to walk down the dark tunnel to face the terror of the dragon. “Already,” we are told, “he was a very different hobbit from the one that had run out without a pocket-handkerchief from Bag-End long ago.”¹⁰

His decision to continue walking down the tunnel when he hears the dragon’s rumblings “was the bravest thing he ever did.”¹¹ When Bilbo returns with a beautiful two-handled cup he stole from the dragon’s hoard, he is acknowledged as “the real leader” in the dwarves’ quest.¹² Later, when Bilbo risks his life and unselfishly gives up the Arkenstone in an effort to prevent a fratricidal war over dragon-gold, the Elvenking praises him as “more worthy to wear the armour of elf-princes than

many that have looked more comely in it” and later lauds him as “Bilbo the Magnificent.”¹³

After the Battle of Five Armies, the dying Thorin Oakenshield recognizes Bilbo’s growth in moral stature, remarking that there “is more in you of good than you know, child of the kindly West. Some courage and some wisdom, blended in measure.”¹⁴ And when Bilbo recites a bittersweet homecoming poem upon his return to the Shire, Gandalf exclaims, “My dear Bilbo! Something is the matter with you! You are not the hobbit that you were.”¹⁵

In short, *The Hobbit* is an adventure tale in which an ordinary and distinctly nonheroic person is morally ennobled by confronting and overcoming challenges and dangers. But how is such a transformation possible? Let’s consider what some of the world’s great philosophers have said about the linkage between challenge and personal growth.

Bilbo’s Growth in Wisdom

Men shall learn wisdom, by affliction schooled.

—Aeschylus

Humans can grow in various respects: physically, emotionally, spiritually, artistically, and so forth. Merry and Pippin grew physically—they became several inches taller—after drinking the Ent-draughts in Fangorn Forest. But in Bilbo’s case we’re talking about moral and intellectual growth. In traditional philosophical terms, Bilbo grows in both *wisdom* and *virtue* as a result of his adventures. The term “philosophy” derives from Greek roots meaning “the love of wisdom.” So to help us get our bearings, let’s start by asking: What is wisdom?

Not all philosophical and religious traditions conceive of wisdom in the same way. A Zen Buddhist’s definition of wisdom won’t be the same as that offered by a Hindu or a

Southern Baptist. But we needn't be stymied by specific theoretical disagreements. Nearly all philosophical and religious traditions agree that wisdom, whatever it is precisely, consists of deep insight about living.¹⁶ A wise person understands what's important in life, keeps lesser things in proper perspective, and understands what's needed in order to live well and to cope with the problems of life.¹⁷ Wisdom comes in degrees. Gandalf is wiser than Elrond, and Elrond is wiser than Bard. But however, exactly, we define wisdom, it's clear that Bilbo is wiser at the end of *The Hobbit* than he was at the beginning. How did this occur?

Philosophers have noted two important ways in which challenging experiences can make us wiser: they can *deepen our self-understanding* and they can *broaden our experiences*. With Bilbo, we can see both factors at work.

The first step toward becoming wise, Socrates (ca. 470–399 BCE) said, is to realize how little you know. “Know thyself” was his mantra. Socrates saw that people tend to have inflated views of themselves. They tend to be overconfident and imagine that they know more than they do or that they are better in some way than they really are. People who think they're already wise and good won't be motivated to pursue wisdom and goodness. So the first and most important step toward becoming wise, Socrates declared, is to engage in fearless self-examination.

We should constantly be asking ourselves the following: Do I really know this, or do I only think I do? Could I be wrong? Could I be guilty of wishful thinking? Am I living the life I want to live? Am I walking the walk I talk? What are my true talents and abilities? How can I live most meaningfully and authentically? Only in this way can we root out our self-deceptions, discover our true potential, and discern where our greatest talents and opportunities lie.

Philosophers and religious thinkers have long pointed out how one particular kind of challenging experience, pain and suffering, can deepen one's self-understanding. Pain, said

C. S. Lewis (1898–1963), can curb our pride, teach us patience, steel us against adversity, teach us not to take life’s blessings for granted, and remind us that we were “made for another world.”¹⁸ Pain, he noted, is God’s “megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”¹⁹ God’s attitude to humans, said the Roman philosopher Seneca (ca. 4 BCE–65 CE), is that of a stern but loving father: “‘Let them be harassed by toil and sorrow and losses . . . that they may acquire true strength.’ . . . God hardens and exercises those he approves and loves.”²⁰

In *The Hobbit* we see Bilbo slowly growing in self-understanding. As the story opens, he reacts to Thorin’s forebodings of danger by shrieking like “an engine coming out of a tunnel” and “kneeling on the hearth-rug, shaking like a jelly that was melting.”²¹ On his journey to the Lonely Mountain, he encounters many dangers and suffers greatly through cold, hunger, sleeplessness, fear, and fatigue. Slowly, he grows in self-confidence and discovers hidden strengths, including an unsuspected talent for leadership.

Bilbo achieves a deeper understanding of the conflicting sides of his makeup and realizes that he wants more out of life than simply comfort, good pipe-weed, a well-stocked cellar, and six meals a day. At the same time, he doesn’t develop a swollen head and get delusions of grandeur. After all his adventures and heroic deeds, he stills thinks of himself—and gratefully so—as “only quite a little fellow in a wide world after all.”²²

There is another way in which Bilbo becomes wiser: his eyes are opened by travel and a wider range of experience. Philosopher Tom Morris points out that taking a philosophy class can be like an Outward Bound experience for the mind. Students of philosophy find themselves on an intellectual adventure in which the great philosophers serve as native guides: mapmakers of the spirit who can broaden their horizons, guide them to exciting vistas, enlarge their imaginations, warn them of potential pitfalls, and teach them essential existential survival skills.²³ Many writers have noted that travel

and adventure can also have paradigm-shifting, life-altering consequences.

The hobbits of the Shire are insular and provincial; they know and care little about the wider world of Middle-earth. Bilbo, though more adventurous than most hobbits, initially shares many of the limited and confining views of his fellows.²⁴ Like his hobbit friends and neighbors, he places great value on respectability, routine, comfort, and the simple bodily pleasures of eating, drinking, and smoking.

In the course of his adventures, Bilbo comes to realize that there are weightier concerns and higher values in life. He experiences heroism, self-sacrifice, ancient wisdom, and great beauty. Like the crew of the starship *Enterprise*, he encounters “new worlds and new civilizations,” sees wondrous new sights, and meets peoples with very different value systems and ways of life. When he returns to the Shire, he is able to see it with new eyes and is better able to appreciate both its limitations and its unique charms.

When all is said and done, he finds that he has “lost the neighbours’ respect” but has gained much of greater value.²⁵ By the final pages of *The Hobbit*, we find the contented and cosmopolitan Bilbo “writing poetry and visiting the elves.”²⁶ Truly, he is not the hobbit that he was. His adventures have made him wiser.

Bilbo’s Growth in Virtue

Too often, comfort gets in the way of inner reckonings.

—Lance Armstrong

Bilbo doesn’t just grow intellectually, however; he also becomes a more virtuous, or ethical, person. Through his adventures he becomes more courageous, more resourceful, hardier,

less dependent, and more self-controlled. His decisions to spare Gollum's life and to replace the keys on the belt of the slumbering elf-guard suggest that he has become more compassionate.²⁷ His choice to give up the precious Arkenstone in an attempt to broker peace, his refusal to take more than two small chests of treasure home with him (all of which he later gives away), and his donation of the priceless *mithril* coat to the museum at Michel Delving indicate that the "rather greedy" Bilbo has grown more generous and less materialistic.²⁸ Philosophers have noted two ways in which challenging adventures can promote moral development, one quick and one gradual.

Sometimes big moral transformations can occur rapidly, even instantly. These major ethical changes often take place when something shocking or traumatic occurs in our lives. A loved one dies, we're involved in a nearly fatal accident, or we wake up in the gutter—and we reevaluate our lives and make up our minds to change. In many cases, as the American philosopher William James (1842–1910) noted in his classic, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, such transformations have a religious impetus. On Christmas Eve, Ebenezer Scrooge was a grumpy and mean-spirited old miser; on Christmas Day he was the soul of generosity and good cheer. But sudden and radical ethical changes need not be religiously motivated.

Rapid ethical makeovers are rare in Tolkien's writings, but there are some notable examples. Pippin undergoes one after his terrifying encounter with Sauron when he foolishly peers into the Seeing Stone of Orthanc.²⁹ Prior to this experience and Gandalf's stern rebuke, he is thoughtless and immature, constantly exposing the Fellowship to danger through his carelessness. Afterward, he is radically changed. He offers his service to Denethor, serves in Gondor's Tower Guard, saves Faramir's life, slays a troll at the Battle of the Morannon, plays a key role in the scouring of the Shire, and later serves for fifty years as Thain of the Shire.

Thorin's deathbed conversion and reconciliation with Bilbo is another example of a Scroogelike sudden transformation

(foreshadowing Boromir's repentant death in *The Fellowship of the Ring*). Throughout *The Hobbit* Thorin is depicted as proud, greedy, and pompous. After he gains possession of the treasure, Thorin's pride and greed swell, and he nearly provokes a senseless war among the Free Peoples, who should be united. By nature, dwarves "are a calculating folk with a great idea of the value of money."³⁰ Moreover, Thorin is suffering from "dragon-sickness," a corrupting possessiveness that afflicts all who touch a treasure that a dragon has long brooded over.³¹ But even Thorin, as he lies dying, realizes "it would be a merrier world . . . if more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold."³²

Sudden moral transformations can occur, but they are rare and often don't last for very long. A more common and sustainable path to moral growth is through *habit* and *training*. Virtue, as Aristotle (384–322 BCE) noted, is a habit, an ingrained pattern of moral response. A person is truly courageous, for example, only if he or she has a fixed tendency or disposition to act boldly in support of important values, even at great personal risk.³³ Throughout human history, character building through habit formation has been the standard method of moral education.

Athletics provides a model of how this works. Suppose you want to become a world-class long-distance runner. There's no way to achieve it except through pain, sweat, and fierce determination. Great runners have great work habits. They're not born with the habits of perseverance, commitment, self-discipline, and resiliency—they work hard to achieve them. That's why the physician-philosopher George Sheehan speaks of running as "a path to maturity, a growth process."³⁴ We pursue excellence by forming good habits and testing our limits.

Aristotle's great insight was to see that ethical development usually occurs the same way. To develop the virtue of self-discipline, it's not enough to desire to be self-disciplined. We need to work at it, to develop good habits. As legendary basketball coach Rick Pitino says, "Good habits create organization

and discipline in our lives. . . . They become the rock, the standard of behavior that we must stick with so that we don't go off track."³⁵

We can see this process of ethical habit formation in *The Hobbit*. Bilbo's moral development takes place gradually, as he learns new things, finds himself tested, increases in self-confidence, and develops virtuous habits. As Bilbo becomes accustomed to being cold, hungry, and wet, he complains less and becomes tougher. As his comrades' spirits sag and his own remarkable good luck continues, he becomes more encouraging and hopeful—even quoting the Roman philosopher Seneca's famous saying "Where there's life there's hope" before Seneca existed!³⁶

As Bilbo repeatedly responds bravely and effectively in dangerous situations, his confidence grows and he develops the habit of acting courageously. As he finds himself willy-nilly forced to take the initiative, he becomes more comfortable in a leadership role and develops the habit of effective servant leadership. As he returns to the Shire, and "Eyes that fire and sword have seen/And horror in the halls of stone/Look at last on meadows green/And trees and hills they long have known," he learns true thankfulness for simple blessings.³⁷

Bilbo's adventures changed him, and these changes, as we learn in *The Lord of the Rings*, were permanent. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, there is a deeply moving scene in which Bilbo, in extreme old age, volunteers to attempt to destroy the Ring of Power. At Rivendell, where Bilbo has retired, Elrond calls a Council to determine what to do with the Ring. The Council decides that the Ring must be carried into the heart of Mordor and cast into the fires of Mount Doom, where it was forged. When Elrond notes that such an apparent suicide mission "may be attempted by the weak with as much hope as the strong," Bilbo speaks up:

Very well, very well, Master Elrond. . . . Say no more! It is plain enough what you are pointing at. Bilbo the silly hobbit started this affair, and Bilbo had better finish it,

or himself. I was very comfortable here, and getting on with my book. . . . It is a frightful nuisance. When ought I to start?

When Boromir, the mighty warrior from Gondor, heard this, he “looked in surprise at Bilbo, but the laughter died on his lips when he saw that all the others regarded the old hobbit with grave respect. Only Gloom smiled, but his smile came from old memories.”³⁸

In the end, Bilbo chose the path less traveled, the Tookish path, and this indeed made all the difference—to Bilbo and to all of Middle-earth. His fellow hobbits may have thought him mad, but Bilbo, to the end of his days, which were “very happy” and “extraordinarily long,” would have agreed with Theodore Roosevelt:

Far better is it to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs, even though checkered by failure, than to rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy much nor suffer much, because they live in the gray twilight that knows not victory nor defeat. . . . The highest form of success . . . comes not to the man who desires mere easy peace, but to the man who does not shrink from danger, from hardship or from bitter toil, and who out of these wins the splendid ultimate triumph.³⁹

The Road goes ever on and on, so grab your favorite walking stick and head out for adventure. And don't sweat it if you leave your pocket handkerchiefs at home.

NOTES

1. Humphrey Carpenter, ed., *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 235, 237.

2. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (New York: Del Rey/Ballantine Books, 2001), 1, 6; J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit: or, There and Back Again* (New York: Del Rey/Ballantine Books, 2001), 302, 304.

3. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (New York: Del Rey/Ballantine Books, 2001), 424.
4. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, 18.
5. J. R. R. Tolkien, "The Quest of Erebor," in *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-Earth*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), 323.
6. Ibid.
7. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, 4.
8. Ibid., 18.
9. Ibid., 33.
10. Ibid., 214.
11. Ibid., 215.
12. Ibid., 221.
13. Ibid., 273, 295.
14. Ibid., 290.
15. Ibid., 302.
16. Tom Morris, *Philosophy for Dummies* (Foster City, CA: IDG Books, 1999), 35.
17. Robert Nozick, *The Examined Life: Philosophical Meditations* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), 267.
18. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001), 137.
19. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001), 91.
20. Moses Hadas, trans., *The Stoic Philosophy of Seneca: Essays and Letters* (New York: Doubleday, 1958), 30, 38.
21. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, 17. The train whistle is one of many deliberate anachronisms in *The Hobbit*. For others, see Tom Shippey, *The Road to Middle-Earth*, rev. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 65–70.
22. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, 305.
23. Morris, *Philosophy for Dummies*, 22.
24. Tolkien says that among hobbits "only about one per mil" had any real spark of adventure. Carpenter, *Letters*, 365.
25. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, 2.
26. Ibid., 304.
27. Ibid., 87, 180.
28. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 235. Compare with Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, 304, where it states that "his gold and silver was largely spent on presents, both useful and extravagant." In Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, 287, however, we're told that Bilbo still had some of Smaug's gold eighteen years after he left Bag-End; Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 15. Gandalf notes that the coat's "worth was greater than the value of the whole Shire and everything in it." Ibid., 357; Tolkien, "The Quest of Erebor," 323.
29. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (New York: Del Rey/Ballantine Books, 2001), 218–19.

30. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, 213.
31. *Ibid.*, 305.
32. *Ibid.*, 290.
33. Tom Morris, *If Harry Potter Ran General Electric: Leadership Wisdom from the World of the Wizards* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 36.
34. George A. Sheehan, *This Running Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1980), 244.
35. Rick Pitino with Bill Reynolds, *Success Is a Choice: Ten Steps to Overachieving in Business and Life* (New York: Broadway Books, 1997), 98.
36. Hadas, *The Stoic Philosophy of Seneca*, 203. An earlier version of the maxim appears in Cicero. See E. O. Winstedt, trans., *Cicero: Letters to Atticus*, vol. 2 (London: William Heinemann, 1928), 229 (“a sick man is said to have hope, so long as he has breath”). Seneca ascribed the dictum to an unnamed person from Rhodes and condemns it as unmanly. Bilbo attributes the saying to his father, Bungo, and Sam says it was a common saying of his father, the Gaffer (Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, 348). The maxim may ultimately be traced to Euripides’s saying that “life hath always hope.” Euripides, *The Trojan Women*, trans. Gilbert Murray, in Whitney J. Oates and Eugene O’Neill Jr., eds., *The Complete Greek Drama*, vol. 1 (New York: Random House, 1938), 984. A similar saying is found in Jewish tradition: “For a man who is counted among the living, there is still hope; remember, a live dog is better than a dead lion” (Ecclesiastes 9:4).
37. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, 302. Tolkien must have felt much the same when, as a young British army officer in World War I, he returned from the killing fields of the Somme in November 1916 to recover from trench fever.
38. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 302.
39. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, 304; Theodore Roosevelt, “The Strenuous Life,” speech delivered at the Hamilton Club, Chicago, April 10, 1899, History Tools, <http://historytools.org/sources/strenuous.html>.