Competent Promoters – Silas Göttle

I. Window to the World

“HEEELP!” A panicked shriek pierced the glaringly lit room as Pinzetta tried to welcome the newcomer with a friendly hug: “Don’t be scared! We won’t hurt you!” “Where am I? What is this cold light? And why are you all so hard and I’m so soft?” the newcomer stammered, trembling. “Shhhh, here, have a sip of water first and take a deep breath,” Pipetta said, trying to calm her. “See? You feel much better already, don’t you? And you know what? Your question about why our bodies are so hard but yours is so soft has a lot to do with it. You see, you can do something we can’t!” “Really?” the little one managed, her eyes wide. “Yes! You have lots of tiny openings in your skin that are like little windows or doors through which valuable goods can be moved. That way you always pick up on what’s going on around you, and you can never really get bored. Strangely enough, at some point someone started christening all the members of your family, that is, everyone who has these little windows, with the name ‘Cellula.’ But if you ask me, that was total nonsense, because a ‘cellula’ actually means a closed room without windows where criminals are locked up. Oh well.”

II. The Cell School

Cellula still had most of her windows closed, because, like every morning, the strange glaring light was beating down mercilessly on her sensitive membrane. “Good morning, dear class, and welcome, Cellula!” a warm voice called, pulling the still sleepy group out of their dreams. “We’re very happy that you’re so curious and that you want to get to the bottom of life’s big questions together with us here at the Cell School. But first things first. To begin with, I’d say, the class should please introduce themselves.” “Hey, we’re Leuko, Myo, and Neuro! We’re animal cells. Behind us are Xylemo and Phloemo! – Plant cells! Nice to meet you, welcome!” “Hey, what’s up, hope you’re doing well! I’m Bazillus and I’m one of the prokaryotes!” “Hi, I’m Cellula... I don’t even know where I should sit yet…” No problem, little one. I’m sure you’ll make friends in no time! Why don’t you just sit in the front row, there’s still a seat free there!

III. Autoclaving, a Key Skill for Every Cell

“Congratulations! You can truly be proud of yourselves, because you have learned quite a bit during our time together: You have gained fundamental knowledge about yourselves and cellular existence that qualifies you to study at the University of Life. But one last intermediate stage still lies ahead... the so-called ‘autoclaving.’ What on earth does that mean… Well, ‘auto,’ as you know, means ‘self,’ and ‘clave’ comes from ‘clavis,’ which means key. So ‘autoclaving’ means roughly something like ‘finding the key to the self.’ “Always this forced linguistic artifice,” Cellula mumbled over to her friend Neurona, shaking her head. “They use the ancient languages like a construction

kit and invent highly polished, complicated artificial words for things that are actually quite simple. And how often do they lead us astray with them?" – "Hardly as often as they create funny coincidences and double meanings!" Neurona replied. "So for every cell it is important," the dean continued, "to have a key. By that I mean you must be able to open yourselves up, but also to close. Sure, those are the basics, but the crucial point is the way you do it, for example the choices you make. Be open to new things, but protect yourselves from what harms you. From my own experience I can tell you: the best key is music! It makes the membranes vibrate, which ensures that you stay receptive. The admission requirement for the University of Life is the successful completion of a music course of your choice. So, I wish you much success and all the best on your journey ahead!"

IV. The University of Life

A generous academic quarter hour late, Cellula squeezed into the packed lecture hall. At the lectern stood an already graying old nerve cell whose impulsive voice visibly seemed to electrify the audience: "…and the majors at the University of Life are genetics, metabolism, reproduction, and communication. You can rest assured: We will keep you continuously supplied with material. But the goal of your work at our institution lies in the independent exploration of yourselves. This place is meant to serve the free development of your personality. There is tremendous potential in all of you! Where do your individual abilities lie? How far can you go if you know how to use them optimally? I know that a seemingly insurmountable gap appears to separate us natural scientists from them, but don't shy away from our colleagues in the humanities from communication research. Although they unfortunately have only an inadequate command of the universal language of mathematics, they can help you gain a deeper understanding of the world… With that, I wish you a great start to your studies, and whatever you do, don't lose your glucose in the first few weeks!"

V. The Promoter

Dear colleagues. After a good four years of intensive questioning and searching, it is not only the finally reached goal that makes me so happy. Along the way, I made several other discoveries about myself. Today I want to talk about one of them; I call it my personal "promoter," because it brought me to where I am today. Before I could even begin to suspect how my view of the world here at the University of Life would change, I was put into the music course, like all applicants. "Find your key," they told us back then. Well, music has never left me; to this day I passionately love playing the piano. But what is it that I actually like so much about it, I asked myself one day. Sure, music makes our membranes vibrate, which triggers a good feeling, as long as it doesn't get to be too much. That much we already knew back then in the course. But producing these sounds also triggers a good feeling, as anyone who makes music can confirm. This feeling is doubly good because it consists, so to speak, of two layers: First

comes the sensory stimulus of the music. Then, through so-called sensorimotor feedback, I suddenly realize: I myself was the one who triggered this sensory stimulus! And then I'm happy all over again, about myself. In a way, it's like a mirror: in what I have created, I reflect a part of myself. And if you like what you see reflected, believe me, that's almost the best feeling there is. Something is missing. You quickly ask yourselves: Is this really good? What would others think of my work? So as soon as you have composed something new, you don't just want to recognize yourself in it, you also want to present it to others, so that you ultimately feel validated by their reaction as well. Of course, you don't want them to just say: nice, great, awesome. You want atmosphere, people genuinely moved, emotion. Only that is the ultimate, meaning-giving proof that your art is truly good. What I want to say is this: We need our mutual feedback in order to know who we are. It's quite clear that much of it won't match your expectations. But that's good; it makes you think and gives you orientation. That's why feedback is our most important promoter, and I am firmly convinced that we can only grow together, through exchange!

VI. The Meaning of Life

"In this sense, let us raise a glass to my successful doctorate, a Dr. phil. in Communication Studies. I have to admit, I was always a bit skeptical of all these conceptual acrobats with their secret technical terms. But unfortunately it's hard to get around this phenomenon, because, as I just emphasized: sense – or meaning – arises from reciprocity, that is, from the fact that two things that meet are not identical to each other, but different. How we evaluate this sense is of course another question, one the ethicists should concern themselves with. What I would still like to point out, though: have you ever actually wondered why the word 'sense' has two meanings? On the one hand, we understand it as aesthetic sense, but on the other hand also that something has meaning, for example when we speak of 'the sense of life.' So on one side stands everything sensory, on the other everything conceptual. Whenever stimuli are taken in and synthesized into a new concept, our store of concepts grows a little bit, and we get even better at 'making sense' of what we perceive through our senses. Sometimes, in especially bright moments, for example when a long-missing connection has finally been laid, we celebrate this success and say: Yay, that makes total sense! This 'sense' then contains, so to speak, the whole path of insight, along with its aesthetic-emotional accompaniment. That's why, I think, we prefer to say 'the sense of life' rather than merely 'the meaning of life.' Okay, enough philosophizing. But you can see why this phenomenon of synthesis is constantly reflected in language, too.

VII. Competent Promoters

That evening, Cellula, Neurona, and a few other fellow students sat together for a long time in a small jazz bar near campus, listening to a live performance. "Do you know what makes jazz so special?" Neurona asked, stepping out into the clear night. "Shoot,"

Cellula replied. “They’re actually engaged in a constant feedback synthesis. Each instrument plays its part and at the same time serves the others as an interactive counterpart. But the individual players don’t just influence each other in isolation; they do so in relation to one another. They have a sense of the whole!” Neurona replied enthusiastically. “If only someone were as smart as you! Maybe we should loosen up our rigid concept-heads a bit and meet up to improvise. I think we could learn a lot from that, what do you all think?” Cellula suggested. “Then we’ll need a name, too!” someone said. “Hmmm, how about ‘Competent Promoters’?” A hearty burst of laughter rang out across the campus, and Pinzetta, who had just woken up, couldn’t hold back a little tear when she saw how big her protégés had grown.