

**THE GENESIS
OF
NOW
SELF EXPERIMENTS WITH THE BIBLE
& THE END OF RELIGION**

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Preface

Whaaaatttt???

Gary Weber

Growing up in the Appalachian coal fields of western Pennsylvania in a fundamentalist Methodist family, the Christian Bible as explained by our preachers, third-hand, manifested in my life as judgment, punishment, guilt, damnation, sin, and three unreachable deities, one of which was a total mystery.

The situation appeared hopeless, as “don’t”s were so numerous and omnipresent that transgressing was virtually assured. My fellow Christians seemed similarly doomed as their hypocrisy and many shortfalls made certain that we were on the cross-town express train to a Hieronymus Bosch painting.

Frightened, I attended many/all religious functions, studied the King James Bible fervently, and prayed often. For protection, my chest was covered by attendance medals hanging from medals, and I spoke at Good Friday “Words on the Cross” lay presentations.

However, it was clear that I wasn’t going to make it as my sins, like “lusting in my heart”, were many and, as evidence, my prayers hadn’t yielded demonstrable results, my life was very difficult and of so little promise that my high school principal told my parents that “Gary will never amount to anything”. So I gave up and became an agnostic because I didn’t have the courage to not make Pascal’s wager.

After many years, and sin-filled experiences, including nearly dying in a submarine accident as an agnostic, I was in graduate school desperately seeking a spiritual, non-religious practice that would alleviate my considerable suffering. What manifested serendipitously were Ramana Maharshi’s practices of nonduality, where the “I”, the apparent root of my suffering, was deconstructed and the focus was on “Be still (and know that I am God)” (Psalm 46:10). What manifested was the “peace which passeth understanding” (Philippians 4:7), the discovery that “the Kingdom of God was indeed within me” (Luke 17:21), and that “I and my Father are One” (John 10:30). I now deeply and directly experienced that which the King James Bible said was true.

As I work with Rich Doyle on nonduality and collaborate extensively with him, often involving copious amounts of sushi and green tea, I attended his perennially “sold out” university course “The Bible from a Nondual Perspective” which looked at the King James Bible from this very different nondual perspective, as what it was directly pointing to. Rich is a masterful and highly engaging teacher with so many awards that when wearing his medals he looks like an Olympic champion. His unfolding of this understanding is so skillful, effective and interactive that students, many of them Christians, find themselves understanding the Bible for the first time, sometimes with their mouths agape (a pun on self-less love, *agape*, one of Rich’s favorite Biblical terms and likely what some feel as well).

This book started from a student’s recording the classes on his laptop, and with my and other folks’ persistent urging, Rich getting them transcribed by our wonderful associate, Suzanne, and somewhat organized. However, as a tribute to Rich’s rhetorical training, philosophical insights, vast background of varied experiences and languages, and insatiable curiosity to discover the deepest truth in any text, it morphed into an experiential guide, rather than a mere restatement of familiar passages. It does teach you how to actually, personally, work directly with the Bible, sans interlocutor.

Rich found so much rich material in the first parts of the Old Testament that he focused his deep insights and understanding on those stories. This was doubly propitious as these were the very stories that are the most puzzling and intractable in the King James Bible, IMHO, even taken metaphorically, and they are the key elements of what we know as fundamental Christianity, which so many struggle with, including myself.

If you are a disenfranchised Christian who left for reasons similar to mine, or if you are someone who never really understood some of the most important and well-known concepts in the Bible, the world's best-selling and most published text, this book is for you. It is a fundamental repositioning of perspective on how one can look at those “whaaaatttt???” inscrutable passages, on an experiential, well-researched and scholarly basis and perhaps, for the first time, truly understand the King James Bible.

Intro: Oneness and the Biblical Code of Codes

...the Kingdom of God is within you. (Luke 17:21)

Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man... (Matthew 7:24)

The whole, indeed, being but a Scriptural experiment upon the soul, and therefore seeks for no implicit credit, because it is self-evident to them that will uprightly try it. (William Penn)

What if the King James Bible, the best-selling book of all time, has been misunderstood by almost all of its readers? What if instead of demanding obedience and belief, the King James Bible taught that liberation can be found only by each of us as we practice introspection, experiment and inquiry? This book argues precisely that despite selling hundreds of millions of copies, despite perhaps the most extensive scholarship ever devoted to any piece of writing, the Bible has been radically and catastrophically misunderstood and misused. Indeed, it just may be that we have radically misunderstood and misused the Bible precisely *because* it has sold so many copies and attracted so many scholars and interpreters. We have so many readers and experts working with this colossally powerful text that we become convinced that we know what the Bible has to say, and we avoid the sometimes difficult task of investigating the matter ourselves. Even worse, we take these interpretations to be matters of belief, when they are very much, apropos Matthew 7:24, something we must *do*. We settle for the interpretation of a priest or a minister or a scholar or a scribe, and we avoid the only authority with any real say in the matter: ourselves. For as Luke 17:21 suggests to us above, the Kingdom of God is not in *them*, but in each of *us* and it is only by carrying out a series of simple but profound experiments on ourselves that we might possibly find it.

Rather than suggesting that the Bible in its various forms offers a set of beliefs, this book points out a series of self experiments that will enable you to observe the effects on you, likely intended by both the Old and New Testaments. The effects are too remarkable to occur simply by accident, though the bards and scribes that composed these powerful scripts for hacking your brain may not have always known *why* their techniques worked, only that they *did*. These experiments can and will emerge from practices that are like recipes for dealing with the

incredibly diverse ingredients offered by the Bible. To keep the book from being endless, we will focus on the recipes that emerge when we begin to contemplate Genesis, the first but likely not the oldest book in the Bible. And, to continue the analogy a bit further, by experimenting with these recipes you become both the chef and the dish – the Bible is, above all, about transformation of the self by the Self.

It is this transformation of the self that is the very meaning of the Greek word *metanoia*, mistranslated by the King James Bible as “repent.” When, in the Gospels of the King James Bible, Jesus asks his audience to “repent”, he is asking all of us to experience a turnabout in our lives, a reversal of focus away from the external world to that Kingdom which feels very much “within” us. And when we do the sometimes difficult but simple work of looking within ourselves rather than to the world for our answers, we find that indeed “heaven” is not a release from suffering to be found after death for those graced enough to be without sin, but is available right here, right now, for all of us. Yes, just to be very clear, *I am reporting in no uncertain terms that what is referred to as “heaven” in both the Old and New Testaments is available to each and every one of us, right here and right now. When we live Now, bliss ensues.*

I do not ask you to accept this assertion, only to experiment with it. I am reporting the results of my own self experiments: that the Bible offers recipes for experiencing this release from suffering, this healing that is waiting for you right here and now, and all that remains is for you to listen to your own desire to be free of suffering, to dare to take it seriously, and to practice the techniques offered in the Bible. And to practice them again and again until you, too, experience this *metanoia*.

But I’ll offer a sincere word of caution: The effect of this experience can and will alter your life beyond belief. You just might experience a *metanoia* or transformation of yourself such as that described by the apostle Paul on the road to Damascus, in present day Syria. Paul was absolutely certain of his hatred for this strange new sect, “breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord.” A man of words, Paul (also known as Saul) went to the high priest in search of letters from Damascus so that he would know the identity of these heretics and “he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem.” In short, Paul followed the words of Jesus like a detective, such that he might hunt them down. But a funny thing happened on the way to Damascus:

...as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutes thou me? And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks. (Acts 9:3)

It is easy to miss the irony here: by intently and relentlessly following the words of early Christians, Paul suddenly became affected by those words and transformed. In contact with these words, Paul went on a journey, a difficult one, and in the light of day he was brought to his knees by the light. Paul did not require belief to be so transformed, only a journey to follow the words of the early Christians. This was not a slow dawning of conviction, but a sudden, irreversible and perhaps inexpressible change.

You may have noticed that this change takes place at the moment when Paul experiences the undeniable *connection* between himself and “Jesus whom thou persecutest.” What had appeared other, alien, the enemy, was now palpably and demonstrably internal to him. Indeed, practically speaking, Paul was indistinguishable from the Christians he sought – he became that

which he was persecuting. It was hard for him to “kick against the pricks.” The kingdom of God was within Paul, as it is within you. Might you discover it?

Now Paul’s *metanoia*, this radical change in perspective, was not just a shift in content. He did not simply shift from being a fan of one team to another. He did not simply change his opinion about Christians – he changed and became what he thought he despised. So drastic was this shift in point of view that Paul had *no view at all* for three days:

...and when his eyes were opened, he saw no man; but they led him by the hand, and brought him into Damascus. (Acts 9:8)

Let’s experiment by reenacting what Paul *did*. Rather than just reading these words, we must carefully and relentlessly *follow* these words if we are to be transformed. This does not mean we must journey to Damascus – like him, we must follow the words with intent and intensity. We must contemplate his words as ways of transforming our own consciousness – a yoga of words.

Our ordinary way of interacting with language is to consume or produce it – we consume our words, and sometimes spit them back out. Seldom do we allow ourselves to be transformed by words. Our mood might very well change, becoming happy, sad, enraged or sorrowful. But we do not become changed in our very essence in this exchange of words. For this, we must neither consume nor produce words in the usual way, but instead allow ourselves to be slowly carried along by them. We must contemplate them.

When we work with words in this yogic way and do not simply consume them, questions are raised. We might ask, for example, where do these words come from? Who is speaking them? These questions may, at this point, seem pointless or nonsensical. Yet the slower we go, the less we think we understand. Why would Paul, for example, at the moment of his *metanoia*, be unable to see? Acts, the book in the King James Bible where this report appears, suggests that the men who journeyed with him were not so afflicted... they “*stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man*” (Acts 9:8). No mention is made of the light that seems to have enveloped Paul. Was it, then, an inner light, found within Paul and only Paul, just as the Kingdom of God can be found within you, and not without? The 17th-century Quaker William Penn writes of the qualities of an *inner* light within all of us:

First, it is that which men ought to examine themselves by. Secondly, it gives a true discerning betwixt good and bad, what is of God, from what is not of God. And lastly, it is a judge, and condemned or acquitteth, preproveth or comforteth, the soul of man, as he rejects or obeys it. (Primitive Christianity, Chapter IV)

Penn writes of this “inward power” as a human faculty we are born with, as real as hearing, seeing, touching, tasting and smelling. It is not the same as these senses with which we view the world, because instead of giving us information about an object or an event in the world – what it sounds like, looks like, feels like, tastes like, smells like – it instead yields a view we can have of *self awareness*. It is “that which men ought to examine themselves by.” Franklin Merrell Wolff, a mathematician and philosopher who was interested in the nature of mathematical intuition – how can we know but not perceive the infinite? – called this “introception.” Contemporary neuroscience sometimes calls this “mindfulness,” our capacity to observe our own thoughts and feelings rather than identify with them. It is literally an “extrasensory” – not based

on our senses – perception that Penn devoted his life to exploring and sharing. Pennsylvania, the one-time English colony and now U.S. state where I live, was founded by Penn, the outward effect of this “inward power.” The linguistic yoga I will share with you potentiates, strengthens and refines this inward power, a power of discernment you have had all along. It is nothing other than the power by which we tell the difference between truth and untruth.

We should greet this claim for an extraordinary capacity such as this “introception” with skepticism. While we accept that vision and hearing, for example, exist for most of us, most of the time, we might view the claim for the existence of this inner light with the same incredulity we might reserve for unicorns. Penn does not ask us to believe this fantastic claim, but instead suggests that we can search out and find this inward power ourselves. It is, in Penn’s words, an “experiment.” And this capacity to look at ourselves in truth, rather than in a mirror, works by disclosing the *difference* between phenomena that are unchanging and those that are transient. For Paul, the relentless persecution of Christians disclosed the difference between who he thought he was, and who, in truth, he was.

One way to think about this is to consider the difference between the idea we have of ourselves, and what we are. If we work slowly with this, we might see that the idea we have of ourselves is just that – an idea. Nothing was more “Saul” than the certitude that he was not a Christian. By experiencing the voice of Jesus, as internal to himself, Saul “lost” this sense of self.

The world of objects – stones, rocks, the desert, his entourage – momentarily disappeared for Saul such that he might be able to behold his own inner world, the world of consciousness where we spend all of our time even as we look to the world of objects as “reality.” Paul’s *metanoia* consisted precisely in no longer taking the things of the world to be the ultimate reality, but instead to begin seeing who it was that was taking all of this in, and to feel out and experiment with this apparently unchanging reality within him. And while the “world of things” appears fragmented and multiple, separate from each other, in his *metanoia* Paul was united in spirit with his putative enemy, Jesus. What appear as opposite in the world of things, are unified in the domain of consciousness discovered through introception. Later in the book of Acts, Paul, transformed, speaks of this immaterial domain of God:

God that made the world and all things made therein...dwelleth not in temples made with hands...For in him we live, and move, and have our being. (Acts 17:24, Acts 17:28)

As Paul suggests here and seems very much to have experienced on the road to Damascus, once it is seen, one simply cannot close one’s eyes to this inner light, for it is not seen with the eyes but very much IS our being. Paul’s *metanoia* shut his eyes, however briefly, to the domain of things, and opened his mind to the light of consciousness within him. In the modern and post-modern period of human history, with the spectacular and sometimes tragic transformation of the material world – the world of plane crashes, politics, iPhones, surveillance video, continually mutating terrorism, uncanny driverless cars – it can be harder than ever for humans to even realize that this inner world has any reality. So convincing is this external reality that we never wonder who is beholding it. Looking within, we discover that we are not who we think we are: instead of the flux and change of our material selves and the ideas we have of those material selves, we are the cosmic capacity for any and all of that to come into being – the Genesis within you.

In my experience and in interaction with students, I have seen the Bible act as a kind of software for profound transformation, but only if we encounter its radically simple and profound message on our own. Under no circumstances can we take anybody’s word for it – we must do the

difficult but joyful labor of experiencing this incredible truth for ourselves. Scientist John Lilly called this practice “programming and metaprogramming the human biocomputer,” and I can tell you from humble but extraordinary experience that this practice is transformative. I’ll tell you a bit about my own *metanoia* so that I speak not as one of the scholars, but one who has authority (Matthew 7:29). For everything offered here is based on experience. I had my own Damascus, an opening into self exploration so extraordinary that I have spent the last fifteen years slowly, in fits and starts as well as gentle, continual progress, making sense of it. I search for words that might prove helpful and clarifying in sharing what I have very much seem to have learned.

Jungle Metanoia

Many people talk, few of them know. (Led Zeppelin, “Dazed and Confused”)

Picture yourself on a boat on a river, an outboard motor buzzing you toward a jungle lodge in the Upper Amazon. Slathered in Deet, sleepless, you can’t help but notice the birds.

You aren’t here for the birds, or as part of a group tour, here to focus their binoculars on the vanishing species of the Amazon. Compelled by an unlikely turn of events, you have signed on for a journey into the rain forest in quest of hallucinations. Ayahuasca, a potent psychedelic mixture of plants used for thousands of years, is your latest research topic, now that you are post tenure at a Big Ten University known more for its football than its leading-edge military and scientific research. Why were tourists traveling down to South America to drink a concoction they could brew on their own with ingredients legally acquired over the Internet? What role did the music and the healers and the context – the rainforest during a planetary extinction event – play in the effects of this concoction? “Go to Peru, drink Ayahuasca, report back, and be clever about it.” Astonishing, you think to yourself, the kinds of jobs a man can have in this 21st century. Are you the luckiest human alive, or what?

It’s not that a university or a think tank or a grant was sponsoring this research. Far from it. Only the most incredible of coincidences – undeserved grace, you might indeed call it – had made possible your journey to *la selva*, the glimmering green rain forest jungle where you were to record an audio documentary on Ayahuasca tourism.

But in *la selva* you really can’t stop noticing the birds. It is not just that they are everywhere, as thick in the skies as the piranha in the Yanayacu River. The birds seem to have an inkling of something. There’s a palpable sense that they are tuned into something very simple and fabulous that you have forgotten. What is it?

And the kingfishers with their blued crests swooping aren’t the only ones who seem to be goading you to remember. There’s Norma, the ageless shaman in her Technicolor feathered crown, with the black cookpot and forty-five years of practice brewing and healing with Ayahuasca, whistling four hours of seemingly telepathic songs, *icaros*, that accompany and guide the Ayahuasca drinker on their journey. There’s Adonai, the Rosicrucian Quechua speaker from an enormous river village appropriately named Texas, chanting shamanic battle songs in Latin, and the three-toed sloth that falls out of the tree next to him when he utters the word “asthma.” There is Ayahuasca herself, *mamahuasca*, a liana, a vine that weaves itself into your consciousness in gorgeous, healing but difficult-to-accept visions. And there is you, playfully but seriously assuming the role of a special agent for Gaia, in contact with a no-nonsense teacher-plant who does not suffer fools like you gladly even as she introduces you to love, gratitude and

compassion. And there is the rainforest herself, in a mute, soundless hum, subtly and continuously nudging you along in your quest to remember.

The drink is strong, much more powerful than you could have prepared for. There is no possibility of controlling it. Surrendering, you begin to remember “*I am...*” And the remembering doesn’t stop. Deep within, in flight from the visions and the terror, searching for the stability of truth in the maelstrom, you observe that behind all the conflict and turbulence, you are – unchanging, without problems or potential.

The voice of the Ayahuasca had asked, as if to challenge me, “How do you want it to go?” How *did* I want it to go? Looking, searching for what it was I wanted, somebody wondered over just what he had done, traveling down to the Amazon, deep into the jungle, with a young son and wife back home. The voice spoke again, “You don’t think that was your idea coming down here, do you?” In question after question, and answer after answer, I slowly but inexorably released my long-accrued and encrusted ideas of who and what I was, and glimpsed instead, what I am, and what you are.

Opening to, remembering, realizing and actualizing this truth is difficult, everyday work, but through it I have been healed of life-long severe asthma that was one of the defining conditions of my life. Asthma was in some way who I was, and yet now it is gone, and I remain, experiencing a different world. Gone too is the whole body eczema that would crack me open, make me bleed and practically vibrate with pain. And while I went to Peru as a fiercely and intensely secular being, I came back with an equally intensive and ever growing inkling of the grace and gifts of the divine. All of this happened because one night in Peru, I remembered *what* I am. More precisely, I realized *that* I am. I had been so focused on the content of experience, that I had overlooked the sheer miracle of being at all. I got a glimpse of the unfathomable gift of being. And I learned *that* I am only when I took a long and sometimes terrifying look within myself, systematically letting go of what I thought I was.

And even after this *metanoia*, it was only with many years of meditative practice, self-inquiry, and ravenous reading that this transformation has stabilized, so that each and every day I awake with a love for the cosmos and the divine that leaves me speechless and astonished. Each day, a new challenge. Each moment, a surrender to the Now.

To be sure, there are challenges. But the Now, by definition, is always here, always available to be found. Within the coming and going of past into future, each of us seems to miss the persistent and unchanging aspect of reality that we might simply label Now, for that is precisely when and where we can find this unchanging core of reality. Moses famously paused to look at a burning bush, and noticed something unchanging within it.

And the angel of the LORD appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed. And Moses said, I will now turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt. (Exodus 3:2-3:3)

Now most of us are probably at least vaguely familiar with this example of a miracle in the desert: a bush in flames that is not consumed. We are probably so focused on the strange fact that the fire does not consume the bush, that we do not pause to consider what this means. But we must slow down, even pause to notice what Moses noticed: Moses noticed something *unchanging*. Our senses work through the dualistic perception of the difference between this and

that, but here in Exodus, Moses pauses before the unchanging. Is this not the true miracle, that Moses noticed the unchanging aspect of reality behind appearance?

We might think that Moses got all the luck. Where is our burning bush? I have spent 53 years on this planet and never seen a bush in flames, let alone a bush in flames that do not consume. But what if we had constant access to this unchanging aspect of reality, and that we had it Now? What if rather than relying on our senses to perceive the changes in sight, sound, smell, touch, we could simply look directly at our own experience to find something eternal and unchanging? The unchanging is right in front of us. The unchanging *is* us. If we focus our awareness not on the past – things done, undone, things regretted, things we miss – nor on the future of things that just may be if we play our cards right or when the going gets apocalyptic, we will discover something unchanging, not the object of memory nor of anticipation: Now.

It is increasingly tempting to simply be silent before the awe I feel before this unchanging truth. In many ways, stillness and silence and radiant joy seem like the most appropriate response to this unfathomable, obvious grace. Yet even if I am speechless before this change I have been graced by, this story and book are offered freely in the off chance that you, too, might remember what you are by learning to look within in the ways suggested by the word-yoga found in the Bible. Remembering what and who we really are, though, involves unspeakably hard work, and the turbulence of unpredictable change. One day you are what you think you are, and the next, you can seemingly become, a little at a time, truth itself.

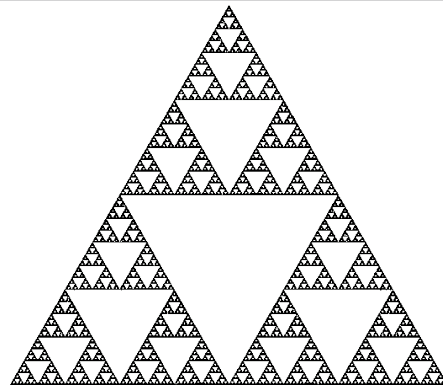
The Oneness of Pre-sweetened Breakfast Cereals, Shag Carpet and the Sound of One Bag of Potato Chips Opening

In a nutshell, what is this truth? Simply put, the world is One, and you are part of it, rather than apart from it. While the world appears to be made up of different parts – computers, books, hair dryers, pre-sweetened breakfast cereals, snowflakes, internal combustion engines, creeks, celebrities, books about the Bible, to name a few – it is in fact All One Incredibly Dynamic Self-Aware and Interactive Unfolding of Space-Time. And once we feel, understand, experience and welcome this Oneness, we see that our world is not a thing at all, but a vibrant, self-aware, living and dynamic reality that includes, necessarily, our uniqueness. If we ourselves are aware, it is only because the world itself has this capacity for reflection – we are a reflective part of the world, not islands of awareness separate from each other and the planet. Each of us has probably experienced this – inspired before the vastness of the ocean, transported by music, infused with love – but our “ordinary” consciousness covers up this truth with its own take on reality, just as we often forget our dreams upon awakening.

And these versions of reality that pull us down from the awe inevitably revolve around ourselves. Contemporary neuroscientists who study brain function have tracked the operation of our “Default Mode Network,” ordinary self-referential consciousness, and it is here that our thoughts of “I” and “me” seem to emerge. Our brain loves to turn reality into a story, with ourselves as the main character. And while it is only a tiny portion of our minds, this “narrative mind” has an outsized effect on us, so that by the time we reach adulthood, and probably before, we come to believe that we are all characters in a story deep in conflict with each other, separate from each other rather than aspects of a whole.

Again and again, the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments, induces us to awaken from this dream of separateness and remember that we are One. It does this not simply by putting this truth into words – such as John’s 17:23’s “I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one” – but by dramatically acting out, and asking us to practice and feel the irreducible Oneness of the world. *Oneness is an implicit as well as explicit meaning of the Bible.* This book will offer recipes and techniques from the Bible for experiencing that Oneness. How you interpret and respond to this is necessarily up to you, for to encounter this Oneness you must manifest and respect and cultivate your uniqueness – your local re-enactment of the Oneness of the Cosmos.

Many disciplines in contemporary science, you may be surprised to know, are in accord with this notion of Oneness. Ecology – the science of the environment – has long argued that the divisions between living things are less crucial than their interconnections. Physics, too, suggests that the whole universe is somehow non-local, with unmistakable but paradoxical connections between the most distant particles in the cosmos.



Are You in a Fractal Relationship with the Divine?

This book will argue that just as Copernicus taught humans to slowly accept that the Earth revolves around the Sun, contemporary science, globalized living conditions and newly resonant spiritualities will slowly persuade us that we are all unique, interconnected and equal aspects of One, and only One, Being. That Oneness is available through an introspective focus on Now. While the present moment can seem like a transient gateway from the past to the future, if you learn to observe the nature of the present moment without telling stories about the past or the future, you will experience the continuity of Now. Try it now. Keep at it.

What effects will this cosmic and collective comprehension of Oneness induce in humans? In showing us that the Earth whirls around the Sun rather than the other way around, Copernicus dethroned us from our role as the main cosmic characters, and so perhaps we embarked on a frenzied story centered on the material world, looking to everything and everywhere but our own experience for truth. In losing our feeling of being at the center of things, we sought to “ground” ourselves in material action. But might we once again, as if repeating a chorus of a song or a line in a fractal, discover that we are deeply important and unique aspects of the cosmos – once we realize our true nature as uniquely interconnected, and not separate, cosmic beings? The great paradox you will work through in this book is that we can only discover this fundamental unity of the world on our own, as individuals, together.

You should be skeptical of this claim. Oceans of ink have been devoted to writings about different codes embedded in the Bible. We have numerologies of the Bible that find secret patterns available only to those with the proper decoder ring, computer program, church. Teachers past and present have claimed that the Bible is literal, that it is allegorical, that it is revealed truth, that it is a text based on other texts that were themselves transcribed from oral tradition. We have seemingly endless commentaries on the Bible ready, willing and able to tell us what it all means. Yet this is in a way fortunate, because the crowd of perspectives leaves us to our own devices for our experience and understanding of the Bible. The neuroscience is helpful because it confirms that these recipes found in the Bible can and do work to change the very processes by which the brain seems to function, but the neuroscience cannot, under any circumstances, do this metaprogramming work for you. Like Paul, you must have your own vision, and not somebody else’s. Again, Luke 17:21 put it this way: The Kingdom of God is within *you*. The Bible has been a victim of groupthink, and only you can sort it out. As a Hollywood blockbuster trailer might put it, “This Time It’s Personal!” The long history of biblical interpretation has been like a cosmic and rather bloody game of tag, and, for historical, technological and even evolutionary reasons, you’re It.

Two Ways to Oneness: Agape and Metanoia in the Purloined Bible

“If it is any point requiring reflection,” observed Dupin, as he forbore to enkindle the wick, “we shall examine it to better purpose in the dark.” (Edgar Allan Poe, “The Purloined Letter”)

Whatever I say, nobody gets it. It’s too simple. (Kabir)

You would be right to ask how it is that this Oneness Code has been missed by nearly all of us. We look to the Bible for moral imperatives, and we seem to find them. We look to the Bible for ways to judge others, and we find those too. We might think, then, that the Bible is a kind of mirror for our own minds - we find very much what we are looking for. There is definitely some truth to this proposition, and it is indeed part of the power of the Bible as a text that it reflects back to us our own nature when we read it.

Yet there are limits to this mirroring. No matter how hard I try, I probably couldn't convince you that the Bible is really about pink dish washing liquid, or the sound that a bag of potato chips makes as it opens, or the barefoot feel of recently raked shag carpet in the 1970s. So there are plenty of things – the list approaches infinity – the Bible is NOT about, but it is most definitely about Oneness. And once we begin to perceive Oneness, we indeed perceive all of these aspects of the world – the sound of one bag of salty snacks opening – as beautiful and deeply interconnected facets of the world.

It's not as if we haven't, collectively, looked for meaning in the Bible. Yet, as the ingenious Detective Dupin in Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Purloined Letter" put it, "Perhaps the mystery is a little too plain." Our minds crave complexity, and complexity requires division, discord, the juicy chaos of human drama. The 14th-century poet Kabir says it in a way that baseball sage Yogi Berra might appreciate: "Whatever I say, nobody gets it. It's too simple." In order to even read something and satisfy the ravenous maw of our narrative mind, we usually crave division, strife and separateness. We binge watch dramas without resolution, ready for the next episode. A glance (make it a brief one) at a newspaper or a website will remind you of this obvious fact: We want characters to root for or against, and story lines that wind towards the triumph of "our" characters and the vanquishing of the "others." Stories like this are the brain's equivalent of a crispy, salty snack – we can't have just One.

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle noted that a good drama requires fundamental conflict, and, to be sure, the Bible offers these dramas, some more complicated than others – Abraham and Isaac, Moses and the Pharaoh, Jesus and the Pharisees – but what if these conflicts pointed not only to discord, that junk food of the brain, but to unity, the backdrop against which all of the conflict occurs? While the conflict in any good drama gets our attention, it presupposes a unity that has at least apparently been broken, threatened, lost, or compromised. For the Bible, in all of its translations, offers a transcendental simplicity right in plain sight: What is apparently divided is in fact One, and suffering is the direct result of actions or ideas that pretend otherwise. Even the suffering, therefore, is, like the shag carpet, part of the One. To realize this, no understanding of all of the sentences in the Bible is sufficient. Instead, you must practice the techniques offered in the Bible and, for example, love thy neighbor with all of your heart. And *how* can we do so? Becoming selfless, sacrificing our own apparent interests, we become One with them. How is it that we can continually overlook what is right in front of our nose? Poe's story just might help us understand.

In "The Purloined Letter", a high minded investigator is baffled by the case of a stolen letter. The story focuses on something like a WikiLeaks for the nineteenth century, as information about a high placed individual has found its way into the wrong hands, and the police are thwarted in their quest despite their certain knowledge of both the thief and the location of the letter. The police undertake a thorough search of the thief's hotel room, searching every nook and cranny of his dwelling for the valuable and damning letter.

What can Edgar Allan Poe teach us about how to read the Bible? Despite its name, which means simply "book," what we know as the Bible is a collage of texts brought together and

translated through processes and conflicts that took place over thousands of years. The King James Bible – whose open-minded and clear-eyed reading this book will help you begin – was itself the product of 47 different scholars charged with a task that was deeply political in nature: The translation, arrangement and design of an English language Bible acceptable to a 17th-century English king.

The Bible, then, can seem fragmented, full of nooks and crannies for secret meanings. It features the ancient erotic love poetry of the Song of Solomon, the high cosmological drama of Genesis and creation, the rhythmic invocations that “all is vanity” of Ecclesiastes, the wise, radical simplicity of the Sermon on the Mount, and the spectacular heavy metal *sturm und drang* of Revelation. Psalms gives us poetry and stillness, Job the suffering of illness, natural disaster and loss. Luke gives us our most extensive history of the life of Jesus, John the inspired mystical poetry of a prophet. In short, as the advertisements for the Yellow Pages used to put it, “If it's not in here, it doesn't exist.”¹

The Bible itself, in any of its translations and compilations, would seem to speak of anything but Oneness: It is itself a kind of collage or mash up of different genres, texts and authors that records the conflict and fragmentation that are its history. This was indeed the challenge posed by the sheer diversity of living things to the mind of Charles Darwin, and perhaps is the very challenge the Bible poses to each one of us: to perceive and experience actual unity within the apparent chaos. For Charles Darwin and his lesser known co-author Alfred Wallace, *conflict* was the key to understanding the sheer diversity of living things. By focusing on a natural fact – the ongoing and widespread competition for survival and reproduction – Wallace and Darwin were able to perceive and model the underlying unity of evolution. The closing paragraph of Darwin's 1859 text encapsulates this discovery of unity in conflict and apparent chaos. Note the verb with which he begins:

*It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us. Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved. (Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*)*

1 We can even agree with self-declared atheist Richard Dawkins when he writes that the Bible is “just plain weird, as you would expect of a chaotically cobbled-together anthology of disjointed documents, composed, revised, translated, distorted and 'improved' by hundreds of anonymous authors, editors and copyists, unknown to us and mostly unknown to each other, spanning nine centuries.” Let the weirdness of the Bible transform you!

In this, the final notes of a veritable symphony of argument and evidence, Darwin offers readers a practical textual yoga for achieving this fundamentally *unifying* perspective on nature. Just as contemporary yoga – a word that means simply “unity” in Sanskrit – teaches us to bend and stretch our physical bodies for health and spiritual unity with the divine, so too can direct work with texts teach us to focus our attention toward the perception of unity. Close analysis of this passage will reveal a bending of our attention from multiplicity – the apparent world of different and separate things – towards Oneness of immutable “laws acting around us.” By learning about Darwin's textual yoga, we begin to learn the similar but distinct techniques by which the Bible seeks to instill Oneness in us. How does Darwin's textual yoga work? Notice that I am not asking you to summarize what Darwin is saying, but to slowly observe how Darwin turns our attention to Oneness.

By focusing our attention on and asking us to *contemplate* a tangled bank, our minds are thrown into conflict. When faced with a tangle, we wish to find order, and Darwin slowly offers us that order in a stepwise fashion. First, we are confronted with layers – plants that “clothe” the bank, lending it the appearance of a tangle that Darwin is going to proceed to tease out. We hear birds singing, calling for bird attention as well as ours, until our attention is snared by the “flitting” insects of uncertain number. From the level of visual appearance our attention is led underground, beyond the world of light, to the earthly domain of the (literal underworld of) worms. Our mind swims with the layers and diversity of forms, creating the desire for the order Darwin then offers us. What had appeared multiple – life, death, plants, insects, birds and worms – becomes perceivable as an overall grand unity.

Notice that we cannot perceive this unity with our senses, but must instead contemplate the apparent diversity of living things into their unity with a “view” that looks beyond the conflict reported by our senses to a more fundamental scale on which they can be integrated together: natural selection. By offering recipes for the focusing of our attention on unity rather than discord – the *metanoia* experienced by Paul on the road to Damascus, the experience urged upon all of us by John the Baptist and Jesus in the Gospels – the Bible, too, offers us a way of perceiving and acting upon the fact of our Oneness with each other and the cosmos. What appears as a death sentence early in Genesis is in fact a declaration of Oneness: “From dust thou art, and unto dust shall you return.” So too does Darwin find in the pressures and facts of death – natural selection – the very engine for the creative diversity of living things. Feeling this oneness, we become continuous with the dust, and with each other – dancing in space-time from (space)dust to (space)dust. As a result of this *metanoia*, not only do we love our neighbor as ourselves, we can't even avoid it if we try.

We can even begin to feel this *metanoia* by being in the presence of the Bible itself. We may come to this book feeling that the Bible is important because, well, it is *the Bible*. If we visit, for example, Independence Hall in Philadelphia, we can feel a power based not so much on the place itself but rather on what we think occurred there. This “historicity” represents one aspect of the power of the Bible: Our history is so deeply entangled with different readings of the Bible that any notion that we can separate ourselves from its content and influence is a dangerous fiction. One way or another, we all have to reckon with the power of this text - it is now part of a global cultural heritage. Absolutely no belief in the truth of the Bible is necessary to recognize its significance – it has a power beyond belief.

This well-nigh magical power of the Bible makes it extremely difficult to read scripture from the perspective of what a 14th-century Christian treatise calls the *Cloud of Unknowing*. This text – like Darwin's about 500 years later – asks us to contemplate in order to experience a unity:

this time with the divine. This “book of contemplacyon” taught readers that it was only by *not knowing* the divine that they could in fact encounter the unfathomable scale, grace and strangeness of divinity. Here what we think we know blocks us from what we can know, and the very richness and diversity of human inquiry into the divine can yield a wide variety of impressions that we “know” anything at all. “Contemplacyon” consists precisely of emptying ourselves of what we think we know about God, as our necessarily finite ideas and concepts of God are just that: concepts and ideas. By working to forget what we think we know about God, we open ourselves to the possibilities and enormity of what Is.

This “forgetting” depends upon practice and hard work. I do not ask you to believe this, but to try it. What we think we know, such as who “we” are, becomes what logicians call the “major premise,” the unstated assumptions of everything we think. Poe’s high-minded detective in “The Purloined Letter,” for example, “knew” that the thief would find a clever hiding place, a hollow bed post, a trapdoor behind a painting, a secret drawer:

We opened every possible drawer; and I presume you know that, to a properly trained police agent, such a thing as a secret drawer is impossible. Any man is a dolt who permits a ‘secret’ drawer to escape him in a search of this kind. The thing is so plain. There is a certain amount of bulk – of space – to be accounted for in every cabinet. Then we have accurate rules. The fiftieth part of a line could not escape us. After the cabinets we took the chairs. The cushions we probed with the fine long needles you have seen me employ. From the tables we removed the tops. (Edgar Allan Poe, “The Purloined Letter”)

This exhaustive search – which, along with probing tabletops with needles, extended to searching “the rungs of every chair in the hotel” – came up empty. The problem, though, is that a “properly trained police agent” is trained precisely to search out secret spaces. The training is governed by an assumption that that the purloined letter, once stolen, would be hidden away. This major premise was precisely what the thief was counting on. In the middle of the room, in plain sight, a letter approached the appearance of trash. This letter

was much soiled and crumpled. It was torn nearly in two, across the middle – as if a design, in the first instance, to tear it entirely up as worthless, had been altered, or stayed, in the second. It had a large black seal, bearing the D– cipher very conspicuously, and was addressed, in a diminutive female hand, to D–, the minister, himself. It was thrust carelessly, and even, as it seemed, contemptuously, into one of the upper divisions of the rack. (Edgar Allan Poe, “The Purloined Letter”)

The letter was hidden in plain sight, and, being in plain sight, did not attract the attention of searchers. The letter could not be found because it was not hidden.

First Experiment: Practicing Beyond Belief

Belief is the death of intelligence. As soon as one believes a doctrine of any sort, or assumes certitude, one stops thinking about that aspect of existence. (Robert Anton Wilson)

Contemplate this: One of the first things we need to forget if we are to be able to be transformed by the Bible, which is hidden in plain sight, is *belief*. These days, belief is so fundamental to our understanding of the sacred that we use the word as a synonym for religion. But is belief the same as religion? Are religions fundamentally about belief? What do we do when we “believe” in a religion, and is this sort of belief encouraged by reading the texts of the Old or New Testaments?

You may notice immediately that my exploration here takes the form of a question. One of the first things we may be able to say is that belief is here, for us, together, the occasion for a question. And if we pause for a moment, we will notice that for most of us “belief” is the point at which our questioning is meant to stop. And yet if this were so, why would we read the Bible at all? How would we seek truth and happiness if the practice of religion involved first and foremost the *end* of any such inquiry?

Perhaps you are not interested in inquiry at all. Perhaps, like many of us, you want simply to be told what to do and you are looking to the Bible in order to be told how to act. This can seem a simple matter: Follow the Commandments. But what happens when we look to the Commandments and really read them? The King James Bible reads “I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt. Thou shalt have no other gods before me.” What are readers commanded to do here? The first part of this “command” is actually a declaration: “I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt.” “Egypt,” of course, meant “slavery” to the audience of these commandments, so it is important to remember that the very beginning of this commandment describes a pathway to freedom. This gives us the hope and expectation that these commandments are a continuation of that path to freedom. Yahweh likely did not free a people in order to enslave them. How to continue this freedom?

Next, we receive our recipe for freedom: “Thou shalt have no other gods before me.” This can sound like an imperative that is an obligation, an order that, if we violate it, condemns us as insubordinate, rebellious, disobedient. Yet if we actually *carry out* this command, we find that any violation of this commandment condemns us to slavery. How so? Reflect on this passage, repeating it slowly to yourself, with eyes closed. Don't believe it – just do it. Experiment with the feeling of holding nothing at all higher than God. This no more requires you to believe in God than thinking of a unicorn requires you to believe in unicorns.

*Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt have no other gods before me.
Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt have no other gods before me.
Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt have no other gods before me.*

What challenges to this unique status of God emerge in your mind?

Because we do not live in Ancient Greece or Rome, we probably do not struggle with the competition of, for example, the goddess Diana, whose festival was witnessed by the apostle Paul in the New Testament. But in the words of theologian Paul Tillich, “god” is that to which we trace our “ultimate concern.” Notice, then, that just as Darwin tunes our attention to the unity

underlying the “entangled” bank of nature, the First Commandment focuses our attention away from the conflict of this and that and toward the transcendent, the ultimate. To what do we, in our actions and our minds, accord the highest value?

Try the chant again.

Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt have no other gods before me.
Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt have no other gods before me.
Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt have no other gods before me.

While we may think the most magical word chanted here is the word “God” – powerful enough that diverse traditions have insisted on special conditions for the uttering of the name, if it is uttered it all – you may be able to feel the specific powers of that powerful word “me.” This commandment is asking us to bend our attention away from ourselves and towards the highest power we can imagine. If we are truly honest with ourselves – a difficult task indeed – we will realize that our ultimate concern is almost always our *selves*. The problem is, this concern is for naught.

Self Interest is Not in Your Self Interest

You now may be bracing for a lecture about how bad it is to be selfish, but nothing of the sort is offered here. In fact, if you practice rhetorical analysis – the textual yoga that unravels the relations between language and reality offered here that stretches back thousands of years through the Greek, Roman, Sanskrit and shamanic traditions – you will be able to feel the way that feeling bad about being selfish actually *grows* the self. Try chanting now.

I’m so selfish
I’m so selfish
I’m so selfish

Which part of the sentence seems to have the most power?

I’m so selfish
I’m so selfish
I’m so selfish
I’m so selfish, I even think this poem’s about me

Let the words impact you like the lightest puff of wind on the surface of a still pond. While each of us will have a slightly different response to this *repetitio* – the fancy Greek term for a repetition of words – most of us will find that the “I’m” is like the drain in a sink: All the energy tries to go there, even when we emphasize “selfish” or “so.” If this *repetitio* – or what the mestizo shamans of the Upper Amazon call *icaros* – were a poem, and it is, it would be all about the “I’m”. Even the *repetitio* is selfish!

The “problem” with being selfish, though, is that it is not possible. Just as Poe’s investigators *assumed* that the purloined letter was hidden, so too do we assume that something like an “I” exists to be selfish. We bemoan how greedy the self is, how unkind it is to others, how it even *others* others. We assume that it exists like potato chips, or shag carpet, or a Toyota Corolla. But does it? Or is the self a unicorn, an imaginary friend? Have we fallen in with a bad imaginary crowd that doesn’t even exist? Irish playwright turned prankster-mystic Wei Wu Wei summed it up in best:

*Why are you unhappy?
Because 99.9 per cent
Of everything you think,
And of everything you do,
Is for yourself –
And there isn’t one.*

(Wei Wu Wei, “Ask the Awakened”)

It may seem that Wei Wu Wei is just making a joke here, and of course he is. On the one hand, the joke resides in the punch line: “And there isn’t one.” If you look to your own experience – and this book is about nothing else but the practice of looking to your own experience with the help of the Bible – you will see that indeed, there is not just “one” self. There is your work self, there is your relationship self, there is your drunken self, your football self, your getting-dressed-in-the-morning-half-awake self. Start to catalog all of the different versions of your self, and you’ll realize that they are different enough, distinct enough, to make you ask: Which one is the real one? Will the real “self” please stand up?

And maybe you do have one self you feel is your “real” self. I am willing to bet it feels like a nasty, sneaky self, the one who you truly are. But guess what? That “real” self is just one of many, equally real selves, the one that shows up when we summon our “real” self. All of these selves are actually stories about who we are, in subtle but unresolvable conflict, and who would keep all the stories straight?

Contemporary neuroscience confirms this odd fact. While we all have the deep impression that some “I” behind the curtain conducts the show, this impression is just that: an impression. While it appears that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, of course it does no such thing. The Earth rotates on its axis and revolves around the sun. Nor, despite the evidence of our eyes, is the earth flat. The sense of being a self, separate in space from other beings and living in linear time, is a mirage of thought. It seems to be there, but if you try to find it, it just isn’t. Go ahead and look, and look again.

The freedom offered by the King James Bible is a freedom *from* tyranny, this tyranny of the mirage of self. We echo this freedom when we chant the prayer taught by Jesus – “thy will be done.” The *metanoia* taught by John the Baptist, Jesus and his disciples in the New Testament is very much a change in focus from our will to God’s. Strangely, we have no need to believe in this commandment to try it out – it is a recipe for Oneness. Practiced, it leads us on an inquiry into our state at any given moment. Are we placing the highest value on transcendence? What is that transcendence, for us? Notice that the location of our inquiry is not a commandment outside ourselves, but is instead a recipe for exploring our own nature. What do we value the most?

Some of you might protest that when we must explore and search for the truth of our existence, then we have not yet arrived, that we do not yet believe. All to the good. If any of us already knows their spiritual truth, then let them believe it. Back away from this book slowly.

But even to do this, we might wonder what “belief” really means. What do we believe in when we “believe”?

Beyond Belief

Reality does not change; it is instead the eternal screen upon which our cosmic drama is projected. (Ribhu Gita)

Etymology is the study of the origins of words, and although it is not a sure-fire guide to the current meaning of a word, it can tell us something about what words meant in the past. In this way, we sometimes can see how our relation to a word has changed. Etymologically, “belief” in English comes from “trust in God.” At first glance, this would seem to mesh with our common sense meaning of being a “believer.” We trust that God exists and even, perhaps, that we can *know* that She exists. But if we truly and totally practice our trust in God, would we have any beliefs of the usual sort? Would we have ideas about the nature and existence of God? Would we look to ourselves to reassure ourselves about God?

Taking our trust in God seriously, we can neither believe nor disbelieve, for to do so means that we are looking somewhere other than God for our knowledge and sense of certainty. When we declare “I believe in God,” we look to our own sense of certainty, or lack thereof. We look, then, not to God, but to that mirage of thought, the “I”. When we declare that “I believe in God,” we actually violate the very first commandment by looking first and foremost to an “I” that would be in any position to make any statement whatsoever concerning our Ultimate concern. There isn't one. Which self would be the one that believes in God? Which one feels violent towards other drivers?

Ironically, but unmistakably, when we say that “I believe that pre-sweetened breakfast cereal laden with marshmallows is the greatest human achievement,” we point to ourselves at least as much as the sweet crunchy goodness. When we point to ourselves, we find it difficult, if not impossible, to see What Is. Alfred Pulyan, a “mail order Zen master” from the 1950s who worked as an accountant while guiding many to the splendor of What Is, called this belief in the “I” the “penny that blots out the sun.” If we say “I believe,” then we enact our distance from God as much as our proximity to the divine. It's a good start, but many of us get stuck there – stuck in the quagmire of a belief in the “I” even when our goal is liberation.²

As soon as we assert our belief in God, then, we also tend to assert our distinction from God. For if you look carefully at what you mean when you say “I”, you can feel and observe that when we say “I”, that magical and even deadly word, we enact a separation between ourselves and, well, everything else. “Who wants a freshly baked chocolate chip cookie? I do!”

2 For the advanced hacker of spiritual evolution and avid experimentalist, try putting the emphasis of “I believe in God” on the last two words. “I believe *in God*.” How does that change the feeling?

Can I Be Still?

Fortunately, the King James Bible itself offers us some guidance for overcoming these paradoxes in our usual notions of belief. We could find many points of implicit guidance about how to read the Bible in the Bible. We could, for example, look to the story of Babel, where too much faith in the power of words as “names” led to radical misunderstanding rather than communication. Or we could look to Adam’s power to name the animals as an example of our awe-ful responsibility to language, a responsibility bestowed on us by God – our label for the power that bestows linguistic creativity. But in my experience reading and teaching the Bible, I have found that some very precise instructions from Psalms and Corinthians serve as powerful initial orientations to the reading of the Bible itself.

*Stand in awe, and sin not: commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still.
Selah. (Psalms 4:4)*

Even if you stop reading this book or the Bible itself here, right now, take this passage with you. If we really read this passage and practice it, slowly, we can find a complete recipe for how to read the Bible. Indeed, we can find a framework for how to live, with or without the Bible. But the fertility of this passage depends upon our practice of it, and not just our understanding of the words, still less on our belief. This simple point is fundamental to all of the passages and experiments we will explore together in this book. For despite the dated language here, our instructions are straightforward. We do not require special revelation or insight or salvation to practice these words. We must simply do them. We can no more generate stillness by reading these words than we can make brownies by reading a recipe. Let's make some stillness brownies.

First, “Stand in awe.” How do we do such a thing? TV host, video artist and standup philosopher Jason Silva says we have a “responsibility to awe,” which helps remind us just how precious awe is. Ordinarily, we think of awe as being instigated by something outside of ourselves. We gaze upon Mt. Rainier on a clear day, the Atlantic Ocean ravaged by storm, the synchronized dance of a multitude of fireflies and, if conditions are right, we feel awe. But where does the awe come from?

Again, moving slowly, we can begin to feel that awe is less located in the Grand Canyon or the Rocky Mountains than it is unleashed *within* us, as if these natural wonders were a kind of key for accessing what is already here, Now. Might we then be able to “Stand in awe” when we are in line at the supermarket, stuck in traffic, or brushing our teeth? Might we then also be able to stand in awe as the very condition for reading the Bible? If you are not feeling awe at even the most mundane drip of a faucet or taking of a breath, then you are not really paying attention. Part of “standing in awe” is to begin to be astonished at the existence of anything at all – the pure unfathomable gift of being. In awe, we become witnesses to the “I am.”

You probably noticed that injunction against “sin.” You may be suggesting that awe is all very well and good, like a fireworks display or a parade, but what about sin? For our purposes, which involve encountering what the Bible has to teach us about self-transformation, it is crucial to notice the sequence in which the steps of Psalms’ recipe for reading the Bible unfolds: It begins with awe, and suggests that if we will indeed stand in awe, and experiment with feeling the

overwhelming gift of being alive, then we will sin not. In awe, the mirage of the separate self dissipates: Who, then, would sin? In practice, I have found this to be the case. If we will experience the miracle of everyday ordinary existence – the wind blowing on the branches of a tree, the unknown story contained in a chipped mug from which you drink, the feeling of paper against your fingers as you turn a page – then the attractions of the self-aggrandizing work of sin and the desire to judge the sins of others become less compelling. The experience of standing in awe lacks nothing at all, and so the urge to supplement or fill experience with objects and activities fades away. With no (momentary) need for objects and activities, there can be no judgment, no sin: only awe.

The instruction continues from this brief recipe. For in reading this passage we get explicit instruction from the King James Bible itself about *how* to read the King James Bible: “Be still.” In other words, before we even come to the Bible for instruction, before we can even pretend to practice its teachings, we must first prepare ourselves. This does not mean we must read the Bible in a special place or at a special time, although these can be interesting and useful practices. Still less does it suggest that we need somebody else to teach us what it all means. But this passage is perhaps the necessary and sufficient interpretative framework for any spiritual path that includes reading the Bible, a practice I have found to be incredibly generative of peace and understanding: Be still! “*Be still and know that I am God*” (Psalms 46:10).

Being still, though, is harder than it sounds. We associate “doing nothing” with the utmost leisure, even laziness and sloth. But to really be still requires that we practice what is called in Sanskrit *shamah*, or “inaction.” By systemically putting our attention in the parts of our body that feel restless, for example, we can relax them and release tension. Becoming still in body can allow us to become still in mind, and it is only the still mind that is prepared for the teachings that the Bible, or any book, has to offer. Without stillness, we find only what we are looking for.

The good news, so to speak, is that if we will get still, then we will experience awe. In stillness, there is no boredom. The tiniest and most “insignificant” details become unfathomably gorgeous attributes of a cosmic work of art: The Universe. And you’ll know that you are noticing the universe when you begin to stand in awe. In stillness, the “I” has nothing to do, nowhere to go, and as it even momentarily disappears, it takes its feeling of separation with it. Awe is one name for the feeling of Oneness, the disappearance of the apparent separation between ourselves and Cosmos. Be still, and you will feel it. Is this the feeling of self-knowledge mystics have sometimes called “gnosis”? Experiment with this: Be still and know.

Who Loves?

For some of us, though, stillness is the achievement rather than a technique that comes readily to us. Keep trying! But if it is just too simple, we look for some other technique, and so in these instances, charity is called for when we approach the Bible. In Corinthians 13:1, Paul writes some of the most famous and eloquent words of the Bible:

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods

to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing. (1 Corinthians 13:1)

What is Paul saying here? Paul – formerly Saul, prior to his *metanoia* – was a man of great eloquence, and in some ways he indeed spoke with the tongues of “men and angels.” Paul was part of a long tradition of bards, poets, orators and rhetoricians who lived and died by words. Words were Paul's medium, which is one of the reasons we have Corinthians, or indeed churches, at all. But for Paul, the value of these words – *even as he writes* – are nothing at all without “charity.”

Charity is the translation of the Latin word *caritas*, which was itself the translation of the Greek word *agape*. Now this word is pronounced “Ah-Gap-ay,” but if we look at it as an English adjective, we will see that it coincidentally, serendipitously, means to “be in a state of wonder.” “Agape” describes the state of my mouth hanging open in wonder. Come to the Bible in wonder. “Agape” describes the position of your mouth when you stand in awe. You are open, aware but empty, devoid of thought, taking it in. The word “wow,” now degraded and used every day, nonetheless actually puts our mouth into this open and empty position. We must allow ourselves to be wowed by the Bible, our mouths agape.

And if we do so, reading slowly, we will learn that *agape* means the “highest form of love” in Greek. Why, then, was it translated as “charity”? By the 17th century, the era of the King James Bible, “love” had come to be understood in romantic terms. Even the great philosopher Spinoza defined love as having an idea of an external cause – we at least *think* we love *someone or something*: “Love is joy with the accompanying idea of an external cause” (*Ethics* Book 3, Prop. LIX). Love, in contemporary terms, is something we either feel, or do not feel, for another. But while “love,” to most of us, is comforting as well as fleeting, *agape* is something that dissolves, whether we like it or not, the very “I” that would have it. In *agape*, there is no self, and no other. In his first encyclical, Pope Benedict distinguished between *eros* and *agape*:

Even if eros is at first mainly covetous and ascending, a fascination for the great promise of happiness, in drawing near to the other, it is less and less concerned with itself, increasingly seeks the happiness of the other, is concerned more and more with the beloved, bestows itself and wants to “be there for” the other. (Pope Benedict XVI, “Deus caritas est”)

Thus rather than simply something we feel “for” another, love’s very effect is to dwindle us. Its effect is not so much external as internal. We become “less and less concerned” with ourselves, shifting our interest towards the well-being of another, until we find that there is no other at all, but only love.

And how might we practice agape? Can we even begin to know how to love another if we experience ourselves as separate from them? Acting out of love, we are emptied out of ourselves, agape, selfless. The Sufi Ibn Arabi notes that we unleash the divine within us when we love god: “Only God loves God.” We must come selfless to our reading of the Bible, or we should not come to it at all. Selfless, we *are* the tongue of men and angels.

Stairway to Heaven, With Stops for Gratitude, Compassion and Love

And yet, *how* to love God with all of our heart? Most of us, when we hear “commandment,” think “obedience.” We feel we are being told to turn over “our” precious lives to a “higher power,” and this can feel like something we wish to rebel against, reject, resist. If we feel this resistance, this gives us something to work with. If we think we need to “hand over our life to a higher power,” we get stuck. Just as “I am so selfish” can intensify the (false) feeling of being a separate self, so can the apparent demand to hand over our lives to a higher power intensify our feelings of being separate, powerful, and just fine, thank you: “I’d rather rule in hell than serve in heaven!” And so you find yourself ruling in hell, in apparent but continually frustrated control, right here. But remember, this sense of separate selfhood is a mirage. Or, at least, for the sake of experiment, play around with the idea that it might be a mirage. Don’t believe the mirage is a mirage – observe it for yourself.

First, notice the difference between “loving God with all of your might” and “handing it over to a Higher Power.” Two entirely distinct actions and effects are involved. “Handing over” involves bringing the “I’m so selfish” self into relief so it can carry out this all-important task of handing itself over. Not likely. “You’ll never take me alive, copper!” When we summon this selfish self, it manifests, at least as a feeling and a perception. But loving is a special kind of action that actually requires selflessness to occur. So rather than summoning the feeling of a selfish self for this action, this action IS the withering of the selfish self. Yes, love is all you need. As the 12th-century Tamil epic *The Periyaya Puranam* puts it:

*Life abiding in the tabernacle of flesh
Can sure attain its goal, the end of embodiment,
If it adores the golden feet of the Dancer*

But “love” is a fraught word for most of us, and it has all kinds of strings attached to it. We feel that certain conditions must be met for our adoration to occur. So start out with gratitude. We can feel gratitude without feeling grateful for anything in particular. We might call this “Gratitude-without-an-object,” and it is not being grateful for this or that, it is just being grateful.³ It is amazing, but we can feel deliberate gratitude. So go ahead, feel grateful.

The moment anything becomes an object of that gratitude - if you become grateful for your health, or your good looks, or your tremendous capacity to do crossword puzzles - gently release the object of the gratitude and feel the gratitude for gratitude itself. Wow, we get to feel gratitude!

Who is grateful?

Now when we have felt and felt and felt that gratitude which has no object, and perhaps looked for the self who is grateful, chased it like a mirage of blue water in the desert, we can feel compassion in a similar way. Not compassion for him or her, just compassion. We feel our fellow-feeling with all things. When a particular being – a child in Syria, a wounded animal – becomes the focus of our compassion, however noble, we release it and just feel compassion.

3 This phrasing follows the remarkable language of the sage and mathematician Franklin Merrell-Wolff. See his *Philosophy of Consciousness without an Object* and *Pathways Through to Space*.

Again, who is compassionate? Don't just ask the question in words: use your awareness to search your mind and your body for the location of this supposed "I". Where is it?

Now notice that we can practice the same way with love. Not love of corn bugles or peanut butter, just love. It is not even the love of love itself, just love, occurring. Who loves? Look and see!

Because we are biological beings that have hijacked this love for self-propagation, love involves so many attachments that it can be difficult to love without an object. This is why, believe it or not, the First Commandment, which seems to be about a "jealous" god – "Thou shalt have no Gods before me" – is actually an instruction in self-awareness. In order to avoid the attachment of loving this – green beans – or that – 1989 Honda Civics – Yahweh instructs us to love the most abstract and yet actual phenomenon in all of existence: existence itself. "Yahweh" in Hebrew means "I am that I am," or "Me, I'm Being Itself, Being." Not this or that aspect of Being – a being – but Being Itself. By loving Being Itself, but placing nothing higher than it, our love does not get attached to some subset of being, including our own, that is going to come into existence or go out of existence. If we love anything but Being – which exists as long as anything at all does – this disappointment will occur, and we will attach and suffer.

Yogi Berra's fictional uncle, Swami Blahblahananda, became aware of this when he noticed to his horror that his previous object of devotion, his bag of crunchy corn bugles, was empty. The bugles no longer existed. But what about Existence? Where did it go? By intently listening to the empty bag, Swami B tuned in to pure Being. The corn bugles disappeared, but where was Being? Does that come into being or go away? It just Is. Identify with that, hold nothing higher than that, find that within yourself, and you will be grounded in the extraordinary persistence of Existence itself. The sheer permanence, strength and unchangeable quality of Existence becomes your self understanding, rather than simply dishwasher, donut maker, cosmic dancer of dust to dust.

So ask yourself, throughout the day: Am I loving Being with all of my heart? And by loving Being with all of your heart – as opposed to giving it the cosmic keys to your life – your selfish self has nowhere to go, dissolving into the bliss of Existence loving Itself. That is the sound that emerges from the empty bag of corn bugles.

Spiritual Evolution and the End of Religion

*Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion too.
(John Lennon, "Imagine")*

So far, there hasn't been much in this book about churches, or temples, mosques, ashrams, chapels, tabernacles, zendos or other supposedly sacred places. But there: I went and mentioned them. What role should churches and other religious institutions play in your new or newly invigorated encounter with the textual yoga of the Bible?

That is of course up to you. But no matter what your spiritual background is – and all are intensely welcomed here as part of One deliciously diverse response to our capacity to be illuminated through the dwindling of our apparent self-interest – consider the fact that the teachings of the Bible are now thousands of years old. Where are all of the illumined ones? Where are the shining examples of selfless joy, humor and transcendence? Has our planet become less self-interested over the past two thousand years, or more so?

For a long time, I found it difficult if not impossible to even encounter the Biblical tradition because of the powerful legacy of the Conquest, the Inquisition, and judgmental fundamentalism – the apparent fruits of the institutionalized religion of Christianity. And if we review the impact of other global religions, it is hard to come to the conclusion that any of them have succeeded in transmitting the simple truths of selfless love and discovery of our true nature of Oneness. It has been suggested that the very definition of insanity is the repetition of a strategy that does not work, and in this sense institutionalized religion is a veritable (tax exempt) infrastructure of insanity.

This is not to say, of course, that there are not incredible people doing amazing things all around the world in each and every religion – there are. But the simple message of this book is that the teachings of the Bible are not about those people. The teachings of the Bible and the other global traditions of spiritual awakening are addressed to *you*. The moment we outsource our own spiritual fitness to another human being and the branded infrastructure they represent, we are lost, because we are looking for the Kingdom of God everywhere else than where, in my humble experience, it can be found: *Within you*. As I have suggested thus far, the textual yoga of the Bible as well as Buddhism (meditation), mystical Judaism, Islam (prayer), Vedanta (*japam*; ceaseless prayer) consists of a gymnastics of attention: We practice shifting our attention away from the constantly changing landscape of the external world toward our internal focus on the divine. The 14th-century Kashmiri poet Lal Ded begins a poem with these simple instructions: "My guru gave a single precept: draw your gaze from outside to inside and fix on the inner self."

While this may, at first, sound downright selfish, if you practice it, you will see that this is the beginning of responsibility. Nobody else can take your spiritual journey for you, and to the extent that churches and other religious institutions step beyond guidance and toward doctrine, we lose our way. Our spiritual adventure, always taken with others with whom we are deeply interconnected, must be our own. Shifting our attention from the external realm of our phone or

the news or even our thoughts of what others think of us, and turning it inward, is the path towards experiencing what is promised by Luke 17:21.

This is why the focus of the majority of this book will be on you and some passages in Genesis. This is where the actual *metanoia* magic happens. When enough of us take responsibility for our own spiritual adventure to discover our own paths in friendship but not belief, obedience or even initiation, the more the obvious obstacles to spiritual awakening that are our religious institutions will dwindle and assume a more appropriate role as guides to our collective, individual quest – the genesis of Now. There has been no more effective obstacle to human spiritual evolution than religion, and it is time for us to experience the end of religion.

“End,” here, has two meanings. On the one hand, I am indeed talking about the gradual cessation of religion as we know it. For the most part, the world has shed its dependence on monarchy as a recognizable leftover of feudalism, but we have been left with religious institutions whose ethos is still very much feudal. Large scale institutions such as governments, corporations, universities, hospitals and churches tend to seek their own interests first, with the communities of humans that live in and around them only coming into the picture as an afterthought or a marketing campaign. Anyone who has paid attention to any of these institutions knows this to be so. It should be clear that if we are to awaken to our true human potential – that is, to evolve – then these forms of collective governance and cooperation must serve individual interests, not the other way around. This is so precisely because such illumination occurs only to individuals uniquely discovering the truth. If it is only as a social species that we have survived, it is only as individuals that we can awaken to our true nature, together.

So, enough already. If religions have sought the evolution of humankind, and they have, at least in word, *they have failed*. Tax subsidies for religious institutions make no more sense than the public financing of sports arenas, those secular temples of sport. Sociologist of religion Ryan Cragan and his students have conservatively estimated that tax breaks for religion amount to over 80 billion dollars per year, with religious organizations owning over half a trillion dollars in real estate in the US alone. Imagine the economic impact of that subsidy if it were directed instead to transition to renewable energy and provide clean drinking water to the billions of humans currently without it. Ending religion as an institutional interface between humans and the quest for spiritual evolution could very well be the beginning of a global evolution integrating human beings into their ecosystems (renewable energy) and with each other (global standards of living.)⁴ Could this be the creative evolutionary genesis towards which the title of this book points?

But on the other hand, there is another meaning of the “end” of religion that is even more vital than this ending of the institutional domination of the life of the spirit. More vital than this freedom *from* religious authority – a freedom upon which the United States was founded – is the freedom *to achieve the goals of religious awakening*. “End” here means the *goal* of religion, and while we must take a good hard look at the power of religious institutions and their entanglement with our political and corporate structures, the goal of these institutions remains. Has the spate of atheist tracts by such supremely rational thinkers as Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and others made a logical error in mistaking religion for spirituality? Novelist Aldous Huxley, in his

4 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonkblog/wp/2013/08/22/you-give-religions-more-than-82-5-billion-a-year/>

1943 text *The Perennial Philosophy*, suggested that the goal of awakening to the spiritual basis of all existence is in fact the “highest common factor” of all the world’s religions. This common core of all religious quests is all too often hidden by the sheer multiplicity of beliefs and diversity of institutions and rituals. Just as for Darwin, where the sheer range of living things pointed to the underlying unity of physical law, the diversity of religious practice masks a unity of experience. Nineteenth century American writer Henry David Thoreau writes that:

The solitary hired man on a farm on the outskirts of Concord, who has had his second birth and peculiar religious experience... may not think it true, but Zoroaster, thousands of years ago, traveled the same road and had the same experience; but he, being wise, knew it to be universal. (Thoreau, Walden)

If we ourselves discover a truth, we often mistake the path by which we come to a truth for the truth itself. Thoreau's solitary man, in the throes of his powerful religious experience, does not realize that there are many paths to illumination distinct from his own. As his own path, it feels like the only path. For Thoreau, who famously retreated into a cabin outside Concord in order to get still, Zoroaster somehow realized the universal nature of this quest. Zoroaster, a Persian sage from the second millennium BCE, seems to have realized that this urge and experience of illumination was not specific to him but universal to all humans, and this occurred to him more than a thousand years before the appearance of Jesus. As the great teacher J.K. Krishnamurti put it, “Truth, being limitless . . . cannot be organized.”

If we study the dizzying array of human cultures around the world, many of them now vanishing, hybridizing and globalizing, we will see that all of them must somehow fulfill the human need for protein. All of them must find reliable sources of water. Tubu women travel the Sahara desert for days, with their attention keenly focused on the number and nature of the ridges formed by sand dunes, themselves forged and carved by the rhythm of the desert winds. Without this keenly focused attention and the navigational capacity that emerges from it, the Tubu would never find the precious and scarce wells of water scattered across the Sahara, and they, and their culture, would die.

But if all cultures must find water, there is no universal method for doing so. The remarkable diversity of world cuisines is testimony, too, that no single path to a healthy diet exists. We are grateful that different cultures have coaxed different flavors out of their respective ecosystems; the world is eminently more delicious for it. Krishnamurti again: “...Truth is a pathless land.”

So, too, is the human quest for what Huxley called “the Divine Ground,” universal and yet particular. After combing through all of the written global traditions, Huxley teased out four aspects of the Perennial Philosophy – the continual human quest for the transcendent that is at the foundation of all spiritual traditions. While the differences between, say, Judaism and Islam are important, precious, and can seem vast, beneath the differences of the world's spiritual cuisines there is a deep and meaningful four-fold unity. This makes the seemingly unending conflict between these religious traditions – yet another facet of religion’s failure – all the more tragic. As often happens in extended arguments, it would seem the participants no longer really understand what it is they are fighting about.

Are You Experienced?

In this context, it seems unlikely that members of different religions are going to be able to bridge the apparent differences of their traditions through the usual means of deliberation and discussion. But the Perennial Philosophy offers something much more persuasive than argument: experience. While Huxley's four-part description *looks* like it is simply a map of world traditions, it is in fact an experimental recipe for achieving the states that it describes. Intriguingly for our purposes, it at no point relies upon belief. If literary critic Joseph Campbell offered, with the Hero's Journey, a schematic basis for all stories – the monomyth that undergirds everything from Beowulf to Star Wars – Huxley brings the universal journey toward transcendence into clear relief in a way that we can test for ourselves. As we review each aspect of the four facets of the Perennial Philosophy – our spiritual DNA as a species – experiment with them by testing them against your experience. Does each characteristic ring true?

Given the apparent conflict between different religions, it is convenient that the first aspect of Huxley's distilled essence of the Perennial Philosophy is this very distinction between appearance and reality. While reality may look one way, the Perennial Philosophy suggests that this is an illusion. The Sanskrit traditions, such as the *Bhagavad Gita*, call this *maya*, the Biblical book of Ecclesiastes, “vanity.” For most of us, most of the time, seeing is believing. But Huxley is careful to describe the four “doctrines” of the Perennial Philosophy – the universal roadmap for spiritual transcendence – not as objects of belief, but as truths to be experienced. If belief can be usefully defined as the affirmation of a fact for which we can have no evidence, Huxley is asking us to learn how to observe a fact for which there is overwhelming evidence. Can we observe that appearance is not reality?

Consider, for example, the coffee cup on my desk. It certainly looks real. It is solid to the touch, holds a liquid without leaking, and does not suddenly disappear when I observe it. It persists in time, and therefore seems real to me. It is even my favorite mug – something about the shape and the handle induces me to use it each day, clean it, and return it to its shelf, and fill it again.

But if by real we mean “unchanging,” then my mug is by no means real. Close inspection reveals that it has tiny chips on its base. Even if it were without blemish, we all know that mugs and other fragile objects are truly and actually always about to break. In short, the mug is transient. It is only my senses that convince me that there is something unchanging and actual about the mug. The mug, like us, comes from dust – clay – and to dust it shall return. It does not even make sense to say that the mug will be “defeated” by time, since its very nature as a mug is to be in time, always about to chip, always about to crash to the tile floor and give rise to one of my favorite words: *smithereens*. *The reality of the mug is that it is not real.*

And if we use the tools of modern science that we have accumulated since the 17th century, things get curiously and curiously. Often we use the word “real” to mean “material.” What we mean when we say real is not “unchanging,” but “material.” But does this advance the reality of the mug any further? The mug, like us, is in fact composed mostly of empty space. From there, it gets even weirder, for if we focus in on the material that does compose the mug –

the protons, neutrons and electrons – we find that they are tendencies to exist rather than actual “things.” What appears to be real, the mug, just isn’t.

Now you may be thinking this is an awfully high standard for reality: “unchanging.” But if we now turn away from the mug and towards ourselves observing the mug, you might see that this is in fact our ordinary meaning of “real.” What do we mean, to ourselves, when we say “real”? It is not some invented philosophical meaning for the sake of an argument, but is instead that unchanging foothold we crave. Always and everywhere, we are looking for something to hold onto, to serve as our anchor, our rock. And our senses tell us that if we wish to find something unchanging, we should find something material – something “concrete,” something “solid.” Yet over and over, again and again, the mug eventually crashes to the floor and smithereens. Clearly, whatever matter is – and physicists are involved in the ongoing and fascinating inquiry to explore that very question – it is not *real* in the sense that we are searching for.

But what of the searcher, the one in quest of the real? While every object we attempt to hold on to eventually reveals itself to be transient and unreal, one aspect of our experience is persistent and unchanging: the quest for the unchanging is persistence itself. It is this quest that is real, unchanging, and yet it is not to be found in the external world, but only in ourselves. Huxley turns our usual perspective inside out, claiming that what we take to be the real world in fact grows out of or “manifests” from something else altogether:

...the phenomenal world of matter and of individualized consciousness – the world of things and animals and men and even gods – is the manifestation of a Divine Ground within which all partial realities have their being, and apart from which they would be non-existent.

This claim can seem absurd, fantastic and bizarre if we do not test it, and test it again. This can seem to be merely Huxley's wish, another world outside of the entropy and decay we know all too well. But if we inspect not the world but our own experience we will find that indeed, while the world is ever changing, subject to growth and decay, there is something in us that is unchanging, even frighteningly so. Can you find it?

Notice that thus far I have not argued for the reality of this unchanging aspect of our own being, but have instead asked you to look for it. This points to the second aspect of the Perennial Philosophy, as summarized by Huxley:

...human beings are capable not merely of knowing about the Divine Ground by inference; they can also realize its existence by a direct intuition, superior to discursive reasoning. This immediate knowledge unites the knower with that which is known.

If we go slowly, we can see that this second attribute of the Perennial Philosophy actually follows logically from the first. If material reality is transient and constantly subject to (sometimes catastrophic) change, then we will look in vain for anything real – what Huxley labels “the Divine Ground” – within it. No amount of argument or reasoning – themselves part of and constrained by the continual change of material reality – will lead us to it. Only the discovery of the searcher might reveal an unchanging reality, and nothing is closer to us than the searcher. Along with many other traditions, Huxley nods to the Sufis, where Nasruddin, a mythical and comical

teacher, is riding to and fro at great speed, seated on the back of a donkey. A passerby finally inquired into Nasruddin's frenetic pace:

"Mullah, mullah, where are you going at such great speed?"

"I am looking for my ass!"

From the perspective of the Perennial Philosophy, we are all indeed searching hither and yon for the ass upon which we are perched. That which we are looking for is, as the Chandogya Upanishad put it, the "treasure beneath our feet," or, as Nasruddin might put it, his purloined, missing donkey. Our urge is not to find some "thing," some object, but to finally discover the subject – that Ground from which everything emerges. When we discover that we are that which we seek, the knower is known, and the searcher is found. This is unfathomably good news, because we do not need to seek out any distant mystery or special place to discover the truth, but must instead turn our attention toward ourselves and our true nature.

Here Huxley is pointing to what the Kashmir Shaivist text, the *Shiva Sutras*, labels in Sanskrit *Caitanyamatma* – what we experience as "consciousness" is in fact identical to God. The knower becomes known. This may sound outlandish and even heretical, but it is crucial to recall that it is not the phenomenal ego that is identical to God – e.g., Donald Trump merely seems to have the idea of himself as God – but that Donald Trump's incredible capacity to imagine himself as a phenomenal being emerges from the spark of divinity within him, and within all of us. The Perennial Philosophy suggests that Everything is nothing but a manifestation of the Divine Ground, and that the more we can come to accept that, the more we will experience, and not just conceptualize, that this includes ourselves.

At this point, you may be shouting: "But I don't believe in God!" Good! Do you observe, though, that the cosmos exists? Does the universe exist? Does existence exist? Is there such a thing as Being? Are we able to know that existence exists? If any of these things can be said to exist, then what you are being asked to observe is your unity with cosmos, with universe, with Being. You are not, nor could you ever be, separate from these unthinkable and immeasurable mysteries. While you may appear to be a Scorpio, born in Philadelphia, and around 30 years old, in fact you are an observation of yourself as stardust. Learn to feel that. The more you feel that, the more you learn your true and actual observable nature, the less you will care about the difference between words like God, Universe, Cosmos, Being. Are there differences between these terms? Absolutely. Do they matter for us experientially, right now? Do we even know what we are saying when we say "God"?

But if evidence for what Huxley prefers to call the Divine Ground is within us, why is it that we do not find it? Why do we search for transcendence in shopping, snacking, drugs and alcohol, warfare, sports and high end cuisine? Another Nasruddin story suggests that it is simply because we are looking in the wrong places.

One night, Nasruddin was outside under a lamppost, looking carefully on the ground. He seemed to be looking for something. Periodically, he would cry out with delight, and then these cries were followed by sounds of disappointment. A villager asked Nasruddin what he was looking for.

Nasruddin: "I'm looking for the keys to my house."

Villager: "Where did you last see them?"

Nasruddin: "Over in the forest."

Villager: “Why, then, are you looking here?”
Nasruddin: “Oh, the light here is much better.”

The Keys to Nasruddin are Within You

The question to everyone’s answer is usually asked from within.
(The Steve Miller Band, “Jungle Love”)

If we laugh at Nasruddin, it is because something in us knows that we, too, are perhaps willing to look everywhere but where truth can be found. If this quest is about looking for the truth – is it true that only matter exists? Is it true that something transcendental to matter, this Divine Ground, exists? – then we might be able to feel that something is indeed pulling us to truth. We have an attraction as well as a revulsion for the truth. And so, like Nasruddin, we search for it, but at the same time we avoid the search for fear we may in fact find something. Who’s afraid of finding out the truth?

Huxley suggests that one way of modeling this two-fold dynamic – we search for happiness and truth, but we avoid looking anywhere but under the lamp post for it – is to experiment with the idea that we have at least two aspects of ourselves: a transient ego with no more reality than my mug, and an eternal self of which this ego is but a shadow. Huxley details the third aspect of his Perennial Philosophy when he notes that humans

...possess a double nature, a phenomenal ego and an eternal Self, which is the inner human, the spirit, the spark of divinity within the soul. It is possible for a human, if she so desires, to identify herself with the spirit and therefore with the Divine Ground, which is of the same or like nature with the spirit.

One way of thinking about this two-fold dynamic is to return, once again, to our mug. On the one hand, this actual mug, chipped and currently filled with a brown liquid, is transient. Subject to time and accident, it is always about to degrade and about to break. I may and do exercise my awareness and care with it, but still, it is no more immortal than my body. I may bike, swim, eat well, meditate, but this body will not live forever. Subject to the forces of entropy – the tendency of energy to disperse in the cosmos – the mug will slowly but surely also degrade, and it may even be defeated by gravity if it crashes upon my tile floor.

But what about the form of a mug itself? Does that disappear when it crashes to the tile? Obviously not. The idea of a mug – no doubt “invented” innumerable times in human history – allows us to make another, and another, and another. So despite the transience of this particular mug, mugs live on, no matter how clumsy the coffee drinker is.

So, too, is Richard Doyle fundamentally transient. Born, he will die. The very nature of embodiment is to experience time, and time, despite what the Rolling Stones may have said, is not on my side.

And the transience does not wait for death. Over the course of my life and apparent development, I have most definitely changed. I learned to walk, talk, argue, debate and engage in self-thwarting behavior. When I was ten, my most important identity was as “shortstop,” “student,” “brother” or “son.” Later it became “professor” or “father” or “husband.” But all of these transient aspects of myself are, as you can observe for yourself, merely ideas I have of myself, models of what I am. They are the feedback my body and mind give from the experience of time, with others. And they can contradict each other: Am I essentially a father? A professor? A husband? It is from these apparent conflicts that the dramas of life ensue.

Yet unlike the mug, which is the manifestation of a form that has ways of dealing with time – the idea of a mug, like rock and roll, may never die – it is precisely these ideas I have about myself that are transient. These are what Huxley refers to as the “phenomenal ego” – they are simply a way our self appears in material reality, space and time. None of them are, in fact, who we are. I am no more essentially an adult than I am essentially an infant. If we begin to learn to observe our thoughts, a technique that you will learn from, yes, practicing the word yoga of the Bible, then you will notice that there is no single “phenomenal ego” that you are. Look and see who “shows up” for each person and situation that arises during your day. At times I have been a soccer coach, a soccer dad, a doughnut maker, a fish canner, a teacher, a driver, a biker, a snorer, a swimmer, a drummer. These are all things I have done, and all ideas I have had of myself. But what am I essentially, such that I can be any of those things, and that I can imagine myself as essentially any of those things?

If I am not the ideas I have of myself, Huxley writes that the discovery of our true nature is our life quest, that which is pulling us to wonder, ponder and know. It is what pulls us to do anything at all, including reading this book, here and now. Human

...life on earth has only one end and purpose: to identify ourselves with our eternal Self and so to come to unitive knowledge of the Divine Ground.

This is the fourth aspect of the Perennial Philosophy: our quest for the Divine Ground. The 17th-century Dutch philosopher and lens grinder Benedict Spinoza described this as “human blessedness,” an effect of having an “adequate conception” of ourselves. In other words, when we begin to understand our true nature, as opposed to the fleeting episodes as doughnut maker, swimmer, etc., we experience a joy akin to awe, what Spinoza calls “the intellectual love of God.”

The more you read the Bible and allow its textual yoga to work on you, the more you may begin to wonder: Why don’t I know this already? Why isn’t this knowledge and this experience widespread?

While a previous section has demonstrated that perhaps the Bible has been anything but hidden, it is the case that as you focus on the passages in this book, you will understandably begin to wonder why it is that the Bible has been represented as something you should believe in, rather than something you should do. It just may be that a big part of our problem is that we have misunderstood not only what we are, but what words are.

In the Beginning Was Language

What are words for, when no one listens anymore? (Missing Persons, 1981)

And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. (Genesis 1:3)

To be blunt, the Bible, in all of its versions, is made of *words*. Practices based on the Bible, then, must take into account the very nature of words, as well as what any particular word or sequence of words means. This may seem like an odd thing to reflect on, because for most of us words are unremarkable aspects of our everyday life. Yet, in some very fundamental sense, words aren't "things" at all. They are the cognitive air we breathe – we live by words, and sometimes die by them. Words, woven together into sentences, paragraphs, exclamations and indications, form the fabric of our lives. Evolutionary psychologists such as Terrence Deacon and Merlin Donald continue a tradition reaching at least as far back as Aristotle – or words associated with the Greek philosopher's name – when they suggest that words are what make humans human. With words, we have seemingly conquered the Earth, and, well, named it "Earth." With words, we humans have covered the Earth, in part, with words: cell phones and slogans and bagged English muffins. Graffiti and phone books and tax code adoptions. Words compose the software of our mind, labeling all things banal to sublime.

Even "words" is a word. Our first Genesis passage for contemplation, Genesis 1:3, "And God said, let there be light", asks us to reflect on what words *are*. For this passage asks us not only to realize God as a creator, but to realize, in words, that the very method of creation was *in words*. For Genesis 1:3, God speaks, and light IS. What are words such that God creates with them? Are they to be taken literally? Is "literally" to be taken literally? To be sure, in this first book of the Bible, it is God doing the talking, and the talking is doing the creating, so, at first, we might really ask what God's words *are*?

God's words in Genesis are essentially (and not accidentally) creative. When God talks, things happen. That means that words are not just carriers of already existing meaning, or pointers to already existing things. Words, in the Bible, and from the start, create. This is the implicit, already assumed and not purloined understanding of the nature of words such that God can create with them. Crucially, there is no boundary between God's utterances and creation itself. *Elohim's words and creation are continuous*. What does this mean that the very first discussion of words in the Bible indicates that God's words create?

*Sticks and stones may break my bones
But words created the universe.*

It can be difficult to reflect on something as commonplace as a word. We might even become angry or frustrated with a friend or a teacher or an author who asks us to define "word," for if they don't know what words are, what are they doing writing with them? Great question!

This impasse – we do not seem to know what words are, and yet we use them, and they are the very substance of the Bible as well as, the Bible says, the Universe – may point to at least two different meanings of the word "know," distinguished in French and other languages but not English. "To be familiar with" points to one meaning of what we mean by "know," as in "I know Anderson Cooper. He's totally different from his onscreen persona." We "know" words by sight, without thinking or reflection, just as we recognize a friend's face in a sea of strangers. This form of knowledge relies on the association between ourselves and another. "To know" means "to be familiar with something distinct from us." We can, in this sense, "know" a place, a plant, a rock, a planet. Much of this knowledge is implicit, unstated. You know this form of knowledge when

you see it, even though it usually isn't visible. But whatever it is, this form of knowledge happens when two distinct things – say, “me” and “you” – become somehow connected. But the separation remains: No matter how well I “know” Anderson Cooper, I'll never – for good or ill – be him.

But another meaning of “know” indicates something more direct: We know a fact, as in “Pierre is the capital of South Dakota” or “Some say that domesticated turkeys sometimes drown when it rains because they stare up at the sky.” This form of knowledge still relies on the fact that we are separate from the thing we know: We know that the place labeled “Pierre, South Dakota” also has the label “state capital,” or that “domesticated turkeys” can be labeled, accurately or not, as “dumb.” In this form of knowledge, we, the labelers, are still implicitly separate from the things we label: towns, turkeys.

This is pretty dreary stuff – people and places we know but will never really connect with, things with labels that point at each other and ask us to memorize them – state capitals – or evaluate them – domesticated turkeys. These are the levels at which we are wont to say, “Sticks and stones can break my bones, but names can never hurt me.” Words are just so much fluff, secondary and superficial to the real matter of reality: Blood. Money. Food.

But wait, there is yet another, third form of knowledge, an *experience of knowing ourselves*. This “self-inquiry” is simple, but not necessarily easy. We can't know ourselves by reading a book, taking a class, or doing a web search. Nor can we, despite the powers and attractions of romantic love, discover the nature of ourselves through anybody else. Instead, we must devote ourselves to the study of our own nature. The good news is that if there is one thing in the world we can know, it is most certainly ourselves, for here there is no separating the knower and the known. Indeed, one of the hallmarks of this kind of knowledge is a feeling of unity: Unlike the set of all facts in the world, which I will never ever know, or all of the people and plants, with whom I can, at best, become familiar, become friendly, we can, and even must, come to know ourselves directly and without ambiguity. Who else would do it?

The existence of total self-knowledge – and I don't ask you to believe in it, only to experiment with it using the recipes in this book – hinges on our ability to join with that which we know rather than remain separate from it. Consider, for example, that simple but deadly word, “I”. “I” is right up there with “is” as the most obvious and yet puzzling word that each of us uses every day. Watch as I use both of them in the next sentence: Just what is this “I”?

Before you hazard an answer, don't take my word for it – experiment. Say the word “I” out loud, to yourself. Savor the sound as you would the first sip of coffee in the morning, an extravagant dessert or a crisp fall apple. Say it again. Feel the effect of the word on yourself. “I”. Yes, it can feel ridiculous to say “I” out loud, over and over, and yet if we move beyond that feeling of absurdity, “I” starts to become a strange unknown to us. Our first step to recognizing the nature of words in the Bible is to feel just how unknown and yet strangely familiar this simple word “I” is to us.

When we repeat “I”, slowly, we are chanting. We are focusing less on the content of the word than its effects. Yet no matter how we say it – with a question mark and a voice rising in pitch, “I?”, or as an exclamation, with the voice strong, clear and clipped, “I!” ...we can begin to observe its effect on us.

There is no doubt about it, “I” separates. It is like a linguistic slicer, cutting itself off from everything else. “I”.

It can take some time to feel this separation as an effect of the language, but if you practice chanting this simple word, to yourself, you will feel the cutting off of “I” from everything else. This slicing off from reality is absolutely essential to “I”. It is what “I” is. If we want to

begin to understand how words can be creative in this fundamental way in Genesis, then we can start to feel the way uttering “I” very much *creates* this sense of separation. To feel this creative aspect of language, get comfortable with this feeling of “I” as the world’s shortest computer program, a command that separates you from everything else. Feel it as you say it. “I”.

But, you may say, “I” is just a name for, well, “me.” It is the name I use for myself when, well, “I” am the subject of a sentence. “Please sir,” says Oliver Twist, “May *I* have some more?” True enough, but “I” is more than that as well. More than a label, it carves reality into distinct beings who experience themselves as separate, even though they all use the same name – “I”.

If you have trouble feeling the effect of this very short recipe for separation – “I” – or even if you don’t, it helps to compare it to a slightly different bit of mind hacking. Say “I” a few times out loud, as before, and feel the effect of it. If we imagine words to be recipes for creation, what is being created?

Now shift, slightly, to a longer chant: “I am.” Again, get still enough in your mind that you can observe the effects of the words. It’s easier to see the ripples from a skipped stone on a calm pond than on a rough sea. “I am.” If you savor the words slowly enough, you may be able to feel both the separation – “I” – and the reconnection – “am” – that occurs in the chanting of “I am.” Shifting back and forth between “I” and “I am,” you can perceive a subtle but distinct shift in the nature of your experience. With “I”, there is a sense of distance created by the utterance, as if space suddenly opens up between ourselves and the world. “I”. With “I am”, we can feel that space opening up, but as we do, we feel the actuality of what *is*: “I am.” While “is” is a word at least as taken for granted as the “I”, and invoked just as often, as in “I am puzzled by this continual instruction to say “I” and “I am,” existence is palpable and actual. Feel the solidity of “I am.” You may notice that the utterance of “I” alone is accompanied by an experience of *absence*.

For if we will feel our way through this sense of separation, apparently induced by “I,” we can observe that this feeling of separation is not a real phenomenon, a thing, or a process, but the absence of such a thing or process. “I”. What we take to be the feeling of separation is the opening of a gap. You might think this opening or gap is the distance between the “I” and the world, *but in fact this gap is the “I” itself*. The “I” is not a thing, process or person that is separate from the world she beholds, enjoys or suffers through, but is the experience of the absence of the very thing it would seem to describe. No wonder something always seems missing from life: “I” am never around for it!

Hacking I and I am

The effects of language here approach becoming biological – our relation to language is akin to the connection between a spider and her web. In these instances of what the mystical and philosophical tradition calls “gnosis,” language can no longer remain distinct from reality. God’s capacity to create through language – “God said, Let there be Light” – points to the continuity between the labeler and the labeled, and when we utter “I”, we can focus our attention enough to notice that we, too, *create*. In our creation, we create a perceived gap between ourselves and the world - “I” - yet if there were such a gap, how would language alter the world from which it is supposedly separate? No gap exists between the word and the one who utters it. Named, we form a bond between apparently distinct things. Named, these “things” become not things at all, but attributes of an undivided whole. “I”. “I am.” There is no boundary between what God says - “Let there be light” - and what IS. Notice, too, that God’s action, such as it is, is a “letting,” an

allowing, rather than a straight forward doing. We are accustomed to the idea that every doing requires a doer, but creation emerges here through a welcoming, an opening to, more than a making, and it is a welcoming that allows a continuity between language and what is. “Let there be light.”

This form of language without a separation between itself and reality is, of course, extraordinary. It is not our usual experience of language – otherwise we would never say to our spouse, our friends, ourselves, “What’s THAT supposed to mean?!” But nor is this experience impossible for us. For in this opening utterance that creates the beginning of a book describing the beginning of the world, there is no separation between God and creation. Does God, perhaps, with this example, teach us how to approach language in the Bible? Can we make each of our utterances a creation? To be creative, our use of language must itself induce a *metanoia* – a change in mind. This *metanoia* shifts our focus from the apparently real domain of material reality – our job, money, the sidewalk upon which we walk – to That which we are and take for granted: the internal and subjective world of our awareness. It can be challenging to shift our focus from the external world to our awareness of it, but the Bible is a treasure trove of recipes for experiencing this shift, a shift that we can begin to feel when we feel the difference between “I” and “I am.”

So, too, does the Bible demonstrate this creative power of language from the very first sentence: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” This sentence is in fact “in the beginning,” and so in this first instance of words in the Bible, they are self-actualizing – they do what they describe. Philosophers and linguists call these “performative utterances” – they achieve what they say in being said! The most common example of this sort of “self-actualizing” language is the “I do!” of a wedding ceremony. Here saying “I do” is in fact the doing: the act of being married. The opening sentence of Genesis taps into this capacity of language to do more than describe, but to create, and this *creative* beginning hints at the notion of what language is for the initial bards and scribes of the societies that produced the Bible. “In the beginning” creates the beginning.

Yet in the example of a wedding ceremony, this kind of creative language is dependent on a specific context. There are laws and ceremonies, licenses and offices, certified officials, judges and priests, who are accorded the authority for this special sort of speech. The creative power of “I do” does not come so much from the speaker as it does from the context to which the speaker, in speaking, submits. The doing is an undoing – a surrender to a higher authority – the divine, the state, the judge.

How can we surrender in this way when beginning the Bible? One thing is certain; we can’t do so quickly, in a rush, looking toward the next word or sentence. Instead we must let go of our own agenda and allow the words to capture the entirety of our attention. Can we disappear into the words? Can we “Let” the words create? This disappearance of the “I” into the words is the genesis of Now.

“In the beginning...” Here we are asked to imagine, as in the Buddhist tradition, the look on our face before we were born. We can breeze by this sentence if we like, as if we knew what a “beginning” was, and we know what it is like to be “in” one. Our ordinary sense of “In the beginning” would focus our attention on the past point in time, separate from the present. Yet this “beginning” is actually connected to us, not separable from us, precisely because “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” Here, then, focusing on this verse, we can begin to feel that a “beginning” is not the mundane point at which something commences, such as a footrace with a starter’s gun, but is instead That from which all of this emerges. Other

beginnings of the ordinary kind, of course, start and stop – the starter’s pistol does not ring out forever – but those beginnings are dependent upon The Beginning – that from which things would begin and end. The beginning is not only a past event, but a present one! Continuous with all that is, now, the beginning cannot be separated from us – Now.

The beginning is, then, Now. It is only our habit of projecting ordinary discrete events – the kind that start and stop – onto an event from which we cannot have any separation whatsoever. “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” means that the act of creation includes the creation of this moment right now, as well as the pondering of this passage. No belief that this passage is true, or that there was a creator named Elohim (the Hebrew word for the creative aspect of God in Genesis), is necessary to this interpretation. If there was a beginning, then it has not ended. If there was no beginning, then there is only continuity, an endless now without beginning or end. Either way: continuity. Oneness. Perhaps this is why most of us think about the past or worry about the future. When we experience now, we experience creation itself. And where is creation? Within you.

So there is no need to rush. Nor can we surrender to the Bible if we think we understand it. To surrender, we must slow down enough so that we don’t understand what the Bible says so much as we surrender entirely to it. The textual yoga of the Bible demands that we feel the power of words by giving up the idea that we wield them.

Narrative Mind and the Creative Logos

Religious knowledge cannot be imparted like other information, simply by scanning the sacred page. Documents became ‘scripture’ not, initially, because they were thought to be divinely inspired but because people started to treat them differently. (Karen Armstrong, The Bible: A Biography)

Again and again, the Bible returns to this creative aspect of language to give birth to our world. By wondering over this simple word “I”, we begin to get inklings of a strange and miraculous world just beyond our ordinary language, ready to be accessed, if only we will shift our script away from this focus on ourselves. If we begin to notice each time we utter “I” that we are referring to a character as fictional as Olaf the snowman, we start to experience What Is.

Yet we might wonder why and how this capacity for language to actually create our world is frequently forgotten by us. If the Bible reminds us again and again of the strange power of words, it may be that this is precisely because we keep forgetting it. And while most of us have a positive association with the word “creative,” this “creativity” can be creative of the very chains that would sometimes seem to enslave us. If we use language in a way to describe a world that is separate from us, then we can begin to forget that language has any other function.

It may help to know that it is probably not the “I” that decides what to say. When it comes to the inner world of subjective experience, this creative power of language can convince us that in fact this strange word “I” is an accurate label for who and what we are. Recent research, though, strongly suggests that we don’t think up what we say. Instead, we rely on what we hear to make sense of what we have just said.⁵ In other words, each of our utterances would appear to emerge out of the void and to *create the impression retroactively* that we “*thought up*” our words

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See “Speaker's Acceptance of Real-Time Speech Exchange Indicates that We Use Auditory Feedback to Specify The Meaning of What We Say”, <http://pss.sagepub.com/content/25/6/1198> and Gary Weber's

before saying them. This research, though it was clever, confirms what your own observation can find: Try observing your speech, carefully. Focus your attention on the source of the words that you say. Do you know what you are going to say beforehand, or are you “surprised” and know only after the fact? The world continues to be created out of the void, now, but our sense of separation and authorship tell a different story – the story not of Reality, but of the “I”, this strangely separate being who somehow creates what they are going to say in a process separate from ongoing creation itself.

Intriguingly, the first time the word “I” appears in the King James Bible, it is a marker of this sense of separation. It is to remedy the possibility of Adam being “alone.” Recall that besides creating the world out of words, God has given Adam the task of naming all of the beasts of the field:

And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him.

And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof.

And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for Adam there was not found an help meet for him. (Genesis 2:18-2:20)

Now recall that Elohim has *already created Everything*. Elohim had already “created great whales, and every living creature that moveth...and every winged fowl...” (Genesis 1:21). Elohim had even, it would seem, created the very primordial loneliness afflicting Adam. What to make of this repetitious making? As we work together slowly, look for signs of the ongoing and continuous process of Creation discussed above, “the act of creation includes the creation of this moment right now.” Learning to feel this ongoing nature of creation is key to putting ourselves in a state of mind to experience this spiritual evolution always already offered by the Bible.

Notice the relative creative freedom here enjoyed and suffered by Adam. God observes to “see what he would call them.” The creative power of language occurs in humans precisely to the extent that we open ourselves to the flow of words that we do not control or own. We appear to be “alone,” but we swarm with life and creativity. If we think Creation is finished, static, then we look for words that already exist to describe and point to what already exists. If we can feel the ongoing process of creation, then we begin to feel ourselves part of that process of creation, just as Adam was. Poetry emerged out of Adam's mouth, and it would seem that God watched this ongoing aspect of creation with interest, perhaps even amazement: “Really? That's a *duck*? Well I'll be...Being itself.” Reality, All That Is, includes loneliness as well as surprise: As the creative power of Everything Whatsoever, the appearance of apparently separate things would appear odd, worth pondering. Part of what was created in the beginning was indeed creativity itself.

But, by all reports, none of these animals were a proper companion to Adam. Now in Hebrew, the word translated as “Adam” is “*ha'adam*” – it simply means “human being.” It is not specifically a male human being. The Hebrew word for woman is *ishah*, as “taken out of” of

“you don't consciously think up what you say...new research”

<http://happinessbeyondthought.blogspot.com/2014/05/you-dont-consciously-think-up-what-you.html>

man, *ish*. Both *ishah* and *ish*, as beings rather than words, then, emerge from *ha'adam*, which itself emerges from *ha'adamah*, earth. Note the continuity in sound between *ha'adam* and *ha'adamah*, akin to the assonance between *ish* and *ishah*. Say them aloud:

ha'adamah
ha'adam

ishah
ish

ha'adamah
ha'adam

ishah
ish

ha'adamah
ha'adam

ishah
ish

Can we feel the sonic continuity here? A paradox occurs when we wonder, rightly, how *ishah* could be taken out of *ish* when *ish* did not yet exist? This paradox disappears when we recall that woman emerges from that which *becomes* man in this development. Man only becomes man through the emergence of woman, and woman only becomes woman in the arrival of man. In what way can these be understood as opposites?

Rather than opposed, man and woman are both invaginated in *ha'adam*, itself invaginated in *ha'adamah*. And sequentially, Adam names woman before he names man, as the word *isha* actually precedes *ish*, both named by *ha'adam*. Both man and woman are enfolded by a larger scale: humanity, itself assonant with earth, *ha'adam* nested within *ha'adamah*. Given the vitality of language as a force of creation, then, the very sonic (if not etymological) continuity of *ish* and *ishah* as sounds suggest that for Genesis, assonance and not opposition is a fundamental characteristic of difference, with humans enjoying assonance with the earth.⁶ Sexual difference as such does not yet exist – creation is ongoing... For this God created not one new creature, but two – one male, one female – from Adam's very flesh:

*And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof;
And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man (ha'adam), made he a woman, (isha) and brought her unto the man. And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man (ish).
(Genesis 2:21-23, Hebrew added for emphasis)*

Note the emphasis here on the continuity between Adam and Eve. While the creations of the “beasts of the field” were recognized as distinct from Adam – he was no longer alone – none were a proper “help meet” or companion. Companionship requires this continuity as well as apparent distinction. The King James Bible uses an intriguing word here to signify this relation that is at once a separation and a connection: “Cleave.” Our next verse dramatizes the separation as well as unity of human beings by noting that our departure from our parents serves a more fundamental unity:

Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh. (Genesis 2:24)

Now “cleave” means *both* to divide and to connect, making it a remarkably apt word for indicating a separation that is in fact an interconnection. What from one point of view is a severing of ties – that between parent and child – is an essential part of a larger-scale connection. In other words, and at the risk of yet another pun – puns are harbingers of Oneness – the separation is only apparent and not actual.

By asking us to imagine a separation that is in fact a (love) connection, Genesis is asking us to step outside our commonsense geometry that tells us two things or beings are either separated or that they are not. Nothing would seem to be simpler than the question of whether two entities are distinct, and yet again and again we will learn that what is separate on one level is continuous on another level. The separation between Adam and Eve, as male and female, is only *apparent* – they form “one flesh” from which they both originally are created.

Division itself is portrayed here as provisional: Adam's rib, separated from Adam, becomes Eve, of “one flesh.” Leaving home, too, is only an apparent separation, as, “cleaving” unto his wife, man and woman become parents themselves. The drama of separation and unity is just that – a play of division and reconnection where any separation is transient, and in a sense, unreal. This helps make sense of Adam and Eve's lack of shame at their nakedness:

And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed. (Genesis 2:25)

It is illuminating to experiment with this sense of shame. Though we are all, says Genesis, “created in the image of God,” many of us do not glory in the appearance of our own naked body. Looking in the mirror, we may feel dissatisfaction for this sag, or that blemish... some perceived lack. But if we look to this shame, if we feel it, we will feel that this is only the shame one feels in the presence of another. It is our sense of separation from each other that kindles both desire and shame.

And certainly though it would indeed be a shame to feel such shame, it is not the same as the sense of nakedness we feel towards another human. This sense of nakedness and exposure, which comes even before shame, is entirely predicated on the sense of separation – we are being looked upon by another person.

But Adam and Eve, as it were, feel no shame. If this is so, it is because no separation is perceived between them. They are indeed one flesh. To be sure, Adam was no longer lonely precisely because another had appeared during his sleep, and his activity of naming her “woman” indicates that there was indeed someone new under the sun to be named. But any separation here – indicated by the “wo” of woman – is entirely and fundamentally only apparent. Separation is

no more actual here than my shadow on a summer's day. The senses – Adam is over here, Eve there – report one thing, but the truth is another. Appearance is not reality.⁷

Now much has been made of the role of the serpent in the next turn of our tale, yet it is not the snake who persuades Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, but her senses and her reason. True, there had been a prohibition by “The Lord God”:

*And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat:
But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die. (Genesis 2:16-17)*

In other words, it would appear that “The Lord God” had separated off this tree, made it distinct. It was not like the other trees, offering as it did the knowledge of good and evil. Yet on another level, this tree, too, emerges “In the beginning.” When Genesis tells us that “In the Beginning, God Created the heavens and the earth,” this *includes* aspects of the world that seem to be otherwise separated from each other. Again, when Elohim creates the heavens and the earth “In the beginning,” it is not just the beginning of this or that, but the beginning of anything whatsoever. This sort of beginning is of a fundamentally different *kind* than the beginning of a meal, a story or a footrace. It is the condition for the emergence of absolute Everything.

And this Everything includes, as perhaps it must, apparent separation. Would the world be without loneliness? Would creation be complete without the appearance of such separation, itself begetting loneliness, itself begetting...Eve. “...and God divided the light from the darkness” (Genesis 1:4). So while on one level – the level of our ordinary, transient and unreal perception – separation exists, on another level such separation disappears: Everything emerges from the existence of existence itself, what Exodus will simply name as “I am that I am” or even “Being.” Already, Genesis uses a different word in Hebrew: Yahweh. This is a different aspect of God from the creator, Elohim. While Elohim creates, Yahweh Just Is. The tree of separation Just Is. Here we can see that this separation is similar to the distinction between Adam and Eve as man and woman and yet one flesh: apparent but not actual. Even “the beginning” as an imagined separation from Now is not actual. We are being asked to inquire into the source of everything, and if we look, do we find a beginning or an end?

Yet there must be *something* that is distinct about this troublesome tree. Why is this tree singled out, divided from the other trees? Perhaps it is because this tree is the tree of division itself. For what does the “knowledge of good and evil” consist of? This knowledge is a *separating* knowledge, a knowledge that distinguishes rather than connects. It offers the perception of division – the division of Good and Evil.

Now this may seem to be, well, a good rather than an evil thing, to have access to such knowledge. It seems crucial to be able to divide the good from the evil, and act accordingly. But recall that humans “in the image of God created he him.” It is rather crucial for us to go slowly

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Even the word “cleave” itself tells this tale of apparent separation and unity. Etymologists tell us that this one word, with two precisely contrary meanings, has evolved from two distinct words from Old English, *clíofan* and *clífan*.

and wonder: What is the nature of that image? At least one crucial feature of that image is its Oneness. For how could Elohim create out of words if there were a distinction between the divine and words? Creation is perhaps more properly understood as the exploration of the divine by itself, for nothing that exists could possibly be separate from God. God is identified with existence itself. You may wonder whether God exists. But do you wonder whether existence itself exists? If so, who wonders?

So the troublesome tree offers the appearance of knowledge – the knowledge of how to distinguish – but it does so on the condition of generating a separation that is only apparent and not actual. Unlike the performative utterance which was creative – *Let there be light* – God’s command here is descriptive rather than performative. It describes a situation repeated here by Eve:

And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die. (Genesis 3:2-3)

Already, words are adrift. While the creative and performative utterances of Elohim bring Everything – including this prohibition – into Being, the prohibition on eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil has already shifted its meaning ever so slightly. In short, this command is a different kind of utterance from God than the utterance that brought Everything into being. Creation is ongoing... How can we tell?

You may have noticed that Eve repeats the prohibition with a difference. “...neither shall ye touch it.” While there was no difference whatsoever between the utterance – “Let there be light” – and its effects – “God saw that it was good” – here language takes on slightly new meanings with each repetition.

Now this may seem to be an error on Eve’s part, but recall that there were no special conditions associated with God’s speech such that light emerged. Recall, too, that Elohim has already “outsourced” the task of naming the beasts of the field. Elohim brings them into being, and only *then* are they named. Only then are their names created. Creation is ongoing... Might part of our task be learning to notice?

Again, we might be tempted to see this drift to “neither shall ye touch it” as a misunderstanding or distortion of the original prohibition, but why not experiment with the possibility that the capacity of language to take on new meanings in different contexts is in fact not a *failure* of language but one of its *features*? Recall the strange case of “cleave.” Picture Elohim looking to see what crazy sounds Adam is going to make when he presents him with a duck. Try repeating the following aloud to yourself:

*One of the strengths of language is that it can be repeated across different contexts.
One of the weaknesses of language is that it can be repeated across different contexts.*

The serpent takes advantage of this strength and weakness of language – it can be repeated across different contexts. “Strength” and “weakness” are labels for this capacity of language to shift meanings in context. Sometimes – as with this apparent distortion – it appears as a weakness – and sometimes – *as with the capacity of this command to be repeated at all* – it is a strength. The very creativity of language emerges from its ability to change contexts and be changed by them. Rather than inert carriers of a pre-existent meaning, language is an active vehicle of ongoing

creation. “Weaknesses” and “strengths” are attempts to divide this capacity of language to drift – into categories such as good and evil.

*And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die:
For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil. (Genesis 3:4-5)*

Our ordinary reading of “then your eyes shall be opened” is that we would see the truth, but this is in fact the contrary of the case. It is precisely because Eve’s senses – any senses at all – cannot be trusted to report reality that she eats the fruit.

And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat. (Genesis 3:6)

It was in fact the *seeing* of the fruit, that it was “pleasant to the eyes,” that persuades Eve to eat it. Convinced not so much by the serpent as by the senses, a story emerges for Eve: This fruit could “make one wise.” This is crucial: The senses are taken to refer to reality, and thoughts are spurred towards a wise – and separated – self.

When we read that Eve saw that “the tree was good for food”, we should pause, and we probably don’t. *Can* we in fact see what is good for food? While food can certainly look delicious, it is our sensation of taste that informs us whether or not a given fruit is indeed good eating. Consider the beautiful dragon fruit – it looks delicious and tastes, all too often, no better than soap. Was this synesthesia – the mixing of our senses, as when we declare a cheese “sharp” – testimony to the cleavage of all of the senses unto each other, a primordial Oneness without distinction? Or was it simply an error, a mix up that confuses vision with taste in a creative twist of language?

Yet if the fruit “was good for food,” we can see with Eve that perhaps it was ripe. Here we are dealing not with a communication from the serpent, but from the tree itself: many ripening fruits release gas, causing other, neighboring fruits to ripen. The scent, appearance and taste of many fruits are tuned toward the preferences of other organisms – focusing their attention. If Eve is communicating with the serpent, so too is she in communicative contact with the tree. The tree, the serpent and Yahweh all compete for her attention. Recall that while Eve has direct rapport with the serpent and – we suppose – the ripened fruit, she is only in indirect contact with Yahweh. Her knowledge of God’s command is only hearsay. Perhaps, even, it was Adam who added the “neither shall ye touch it” – he has previously proved capable of linguistic creativity.

When we work with biblical passages in this way, we have to try them out on ourselves. We have to contemplate them. As Eve contemplates the fruit, do you feel a pang of desire? If we feel that desire, that wanting, we can feel that it depends fundamentally on an apparent separation that must be remedied – the gap between fruit and tongue must disappear. The synesthesia, even as it indicates a oneness of the senses, only exacerbates this wanting. The sense of separation – the impossible impression of the eyes that this fruit tastes good – must be confirmed by the tongue. And not only the tongue must know this flavor: a self that would know the satisfaction of this need to know is brought into being. Creation is ongoing... Rather than increasing Eve’s knowledge about the fruit, her senses open up a new yawning and yearning need to know. A scarcity, in a utopia of surplus, is born. *The “I” is this experienced absence.* The confusion of

taste and vision speaks to a sensory oneness that seeks to comprehend the nature of a now palpable separation from the fruit. Why is the fruit separated from Eve?!

Of course, strictly and simply speaking, there is no separation of Eve from the fruit. Her vision of it speaks to its proximity. Yahweh has not separated her from the fruit at all – only prohibited the eating of it. And where can this prohibition be found? Really search for it: Where is the prohibition?

If you search, you will see that the prohibition is not an object of sense perception – it cannot be smelled, tasted, seen, heard, felt – but is instead an idea comprehensible only *within* you. True, Yahweh seems to have used words when he, as he will say later, “commanded” (Genesis 3:17) Adam, but these were merely the vehicle of the prohibition, and not the prohibition itself. The prohibition points to its author and not its words. It has reality as an idea – we can imagine a scenario in which we cleave to it – but not as a transient material phenomenon. Crucially, as an idea, it cannot be found in the external world – it can’t be found anywhere at all with our senses. No scientific instrument could find this prohibition; prohibition has been *sensed* as a separation by Eve and Adam: a constraint on action is experienced as a separation in space. Experienced as a lack, something that is missing, the prohibition is perceived rather than understood. Intellectually, as an idea, we can see that a prohibition is not something that is missing – it is an idea about how to regulate conduct. Only when interpreted in terms of the senses – my tasting is being blocked – does the injunction against eating the fruit appear negative. As an instruction from God, it could instead be understood as an attribute of the garden, which seems to have everything in it – even a prohibition, found only and entirely within Eve and Adam. Without a prohibition, something would indeed be lacking: Yahweh’s guidance. Imagine being left in a forest with no guidance about pitfalls and highlights! Look around...we are an audience who can be moved by a careful reading of Genesis precisely because this is our perceived situation.

The serpent anticipates that where there is wanting, so too is there a desire to *know*. The prohibition introduces the perception of a lack. The fruit *looks* good. Is it? The serpent tells Eve, truthfully, that the fruit will leave her “knowing good and evil.” But what does it mean to “know good and evil” in the context of the garden? This feeling that knowledge will fill a lack for Eve in fact introduces that very lack. Suddenly, nothing is more important than knowing good and evil.

Now the Hebrew phrase is *tov V’ra*, roughly translated as “good-and-evil.” The hyphenated form used here in English highlights the fact that these qualities, good and evil, cannot be actually separated, but are intrinsically and essentially connected to each other. Each is “known” not directly, but in reference to the other. In fact what is suggested here through Genesis 3’s Hebrew use of a “merism” – a way of describing a whole through contrasting parts, as in “the long and the short of it” – is that when eaten, the fruit somehow *induces a perception of the world as the play of opposites*. The whole kit and caboodle, everything, seems like it is understood through this partial map. There it is, in black and white.

But remember that here in the garden there are no opposites that are separable from each other – only apparently contradictory aspects of Everything. Elohim and Yahweh are different aspects of One God. Adam and Eve, man and woman, both emerge from *ha-adam* (“human”). The “knowledge of good and evil” is thus also only apparent knowledge – a newly created image of reality created by a way of speaking about and perceiving the world, for richer or for poorer. Once they’d eaten the fruit, it seemed to Adam and Eve that they were opposites:

And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons. (Genesis 3:7)

All at once, Adam and Eve perceive their apparent duality, and they act accordingly. “Open eyes” appear as the opposite of “shut.” But is this so? If there is an error here, it is the error of believing in the senses. Eve *believed* that the fruit would make her wise, and she believed – despite tasting, like the rest of us, with her tongue – that she could *see* that the fruit was good to eat. Yahweh’s prohibition asked the two to move *beyond belief* in their senses and to remain undivided.

If the two suddenly “knew that they were naked,” what did Eve and Adam now “know”? They are paradoxically united in this sudden knowledge: one flesh, one shame. It may be instructive to note that the Hebrew word used here, “yada,” has come to mean “blather,” as in “yada, yada, yada.” “Yada” indicates, in short, when we think we are saying or knowing something, and we do not.

But do Adam and Eve truly know, or do they *believe*? Just as Eve believes the evidence of her senses that “it is a fruit to make one wise”, so too do the two believe in the sudden appearance of duality, even they are united in their shame. Eve and Adam, having eaten the fruit, continue to believe their senses rather than that which is beyond the senses: God, and their own nature as “in the image of God (Elohim) created he him.”

Our usual reading of “And the eyes of them both were opened” suggests that the two could now truly see, for who could see with their eyes wide shut? Yet once again it is the drift of language itself that is implicated in a now illusory perspective. Adam and Eve’s eyes were opened, but they did not see: a shorthand way of speaking, *tov V’ra*, is taken to be reality rather than an imperfect model of reality. If “the eyes of them both were opened,” they were opened into a dream where language, a model for reality, is taken to be reality itself, and the vision of the world through the senses was taken to be actual. *tov V’ra* is transformed from a way of representing the world of “this-and-that” to an understanding of the very nature of the world itself. If the world appears to be dual – male and female, good and evil, Elohim and Yahweh – it is in fact One creation of Elohim, a creation that now includes sudden shame.

And, so, creation continues. The world is modeled as a play of opposites, and lo, it is so. What becomes possible now, after the eating of the fruit, is to know, experientially, that the senses do not, cannot, reveal truth. The fruit was not good to eat, even if it looked it. This sense of division is so drastic that it extends to Adam’s perception of a separation even from God, in whose image he is. He utters the deadly word “I” as his name, rather than God’s:

And he said, I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself. (Genesis 3:10)

Hacking the Brain with Elohim

*“...riverrun, past Eve and Adam’s, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodious vicus of recirculation...” (James Joyce, *Finnegan’s Wake*)*

We can feel just how alone Adam is here. I, I, I. Suddenly, Adam feels himself separate from That which breathed him into being. Can we begin to feel that perceived separation ourselves?

This sense of separation may feel so normal and ordinary that we do not even notice it. Language divides the world into “good” and “evil”, “here” and “there”, “me” and “you”, and so of course we feel cleft from each other and other things. Yet biologically and physically speaking, there is no such separation.

Consider the rain on a hot summer afternoon. Clouds pile into cells, forming thunderheads. The wind blows as cool air meets warmer air. The wind emerges not through the opposition “hot/cold,” but through their *difference*. This difference is what meteorologists call a “temperature gradient” – a difference in temperature over a given distance. It is the differential between “hot” and “cold” that makes the weather system a system. In other words, from the systems level point of view – from the point of view of trying to comprehend what is making that storm approach – “hot” and “cold” are not dualities that oppose each other – good versus evil – but are twin aspects of one system – differentials of hot and cold.

But when Adam feels himself capable of being hidden from God, when he feels his nakedness as his separation from Eve and vice versa, he mistakes a gradient for a duality. There is no “Adam” without God – how could he separate himself, hide himself? There is no Adam without Eve. With Eve, he is of one flesh – how could he be naked before her? As with Eve's impression that she could perceive the taste of a fruit with her eyes, this is more an error than a moral failing. Adam takes his difference from Yahweh – one gives instruction, the other receives it – to be a separation. Just as Eve perceived the prohibition – an idea – as an actual separation, so too does Adam perceive his *difference* as an opposition. The “Fall,” such as it was, was to fall into oppositional thinking when in fact the world is a gradient of differences. Adam, as Elohim's creation, is Elohim's way of being Adam. He is not separated from God any more than hot and cold are ever anything but a gradient differential of each other.

Why, then, does Yahweh/Elohim seem to punish Adam and Eve if this is simply an error rather than a moral failing? Notice that it is the creative aspect of God named here and not simply What Is. If we insist on seeing what follows as a punishment, we again repeat Eve's error in perceiving guidance as a separation or a punishment. Here Elohim introduces pain into the human equation:

Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee. (Genesis 3:16)

If we believe our first sense of this passage, it is easy enough to perceive this declaration as a punishment: Once Yahweh/Elohim determines that Eve has violated the prohibition, “sorrow” is meted out and Eve is doomed to a life of “desire.” Such an analysis is tempting. But as with the fruit itself, appearances here can be deceiving. If we wish to avoid sowing further sorrow, perhaps we should observe what the text has to teach us, rather than what we believe it to say at first blush. It may help to look at Yahweh/Elohim's treatment of Adam:

And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life;

*Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field;
In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return. (Genesis 3:17-19)*

Moving slowly, and not judging merely by appearances, we might see that this is not really a punishment but a continuation of the guidance offered by Yahweh. “Yahweh” simply means “I am” or “Being” in Hebrew, so Elohim/Yahweh is simply informing Adam and Eve of How It Is. The perception of division within Oneness creates sorrow – that is just how it is. Here, just as Eve had to deal with multiple, contradictory voices, Adam “hearkens unto” the voice of duality. Elohim/Yahweh seeks to tune Adam’s ear away from the material world of sensation and back toward his own awareness within – that domain where the creative fount of names emerged and there is a continuity between himself and...himself. Adam’s misdeed has been that he “hearkened unto the voice” of another, rather than his own. Just as Eve was persuaded more by her senses than her inner self, Adam cleaved unto an external voice rather than his interior image of God, that dynamically unfolding imprint of God that he is.

Notice that God does not say “you disobeyed me.” Adam, in a world of multiple linguistic signals, listened to one that was inaccurate. The fruit only appears to make one wise. If this perception is believed, it causes suffering. That’s just How It Is!

Then why the sorrow? If we can slow our reading down and see what the text says rather than what we assume it says, we can see that the idea of God punishing Adam, Eve and the serpent is just an assumption on our part. Sorrow emerges *because*, and only because, each believed their senses rather than the direct communication from Yahweh available *within them*. Sorrow was not now given by Being, but caused by the very false perception of the transient and discrete material world as the domain of reality. This is an aspect of our existence: If we perceive separation, then sorrow *is*. As soon as the three identified not with their interior sense of continuity with all things but with the evidence of matter as separable and discrete, sorrow begins, as sorrow *is* this sense of separation from each other and from Being.

Given what we now know about our biological nature, it becomes completely implausible for us to contemplate ourselves as beings separable from our environment or each other. Each of us, modeled as a separate being, hosts ten times as many bacteria as human cells. Each of us, breathing in, breathes in the oxygen of three hundred to five hundred plants – our green respiratory system distributed over the earth. Our sense that we are separate from each other or the Other is just that – a sense. And we have made the great mistake of believing it. Every time we believe the evidence of our senses over our insight, we repeat the error of Adam and Eve. And even when we read Genesis, we repeat this error, believing that the sorrow is punishment meted out by a God external to us rather than the result of a misunderstanding, an incorrect view of reality. The fruit is no more real than the mug is.

Adam Gets His Tasking Network On

Why, if this sorrow is caused not by Yahweh/Elohim but by the incorrect perception of separability, does God appear to “curse” Adam? Note that “cursed is the ground for thy sake.” In

what way, given the sorrow of separability, might Adam's need to sweat for his food be plausibly construed as for his own "sake"?

Since 2001, contemporary neuroscience has modeled the activities that would be putatively taking place while Eve and Adam pondered the possibilities of the fruit. Three networks operate in the human brain in order to carry out behavior such as the picking and eating of the fruit: the Default Mode Network (DMN), the Dorsal Attention Network (DAN), and the Control Network. The last network in this neuroscientific trinity is responsible for switching back between the first two, with the first responsible for self-referential thought – such as "I want to eat that fruit" – and the second responsible for problem solving – "sew together fig leaves now." Intriguingly, the first two seem to compete with each other, with the thoughts of the "self" crowding out our capacity to solve problems, and with problem solving and focused attention leaving no "room" for the "I." Could this be Elohim's prescription for Adam and Eve's fall into the sorrow of the "I"? Was Elohim, rather than punishing Adam and Eve, helping them to hack their own brain networks through the intensive focus on the everyday tasks of human life – providing food, having a family?

We can test this idea ourselves with rigorous physical exercise or immersive work. Recall Psalms 46:10: "Be still and know that I am God." If we can get still enough and observe our own thoughts, we turn the brain toward itself in an act of self-observation. When we do so, what do we see?

A useful exercise is to sit still, either on the floor with your knees flat and your buttocks on a pillow, or on a chair with a straight back. Simply sitting cross legged on a pillow or on the floor is not a good strategy, as it will lead to numbness and pain in short order. Somehow make those knees flat, or take to chair, or walk deliberately and slowly in circles. Close your eyes and count your breaths on the inhale or the exhale, backwards from ten. If any thought besides the counting of the breath intervenes, return to ten and start again. What occurs?

Many people I have worked with in meditation report that they rarely get beyond seven before a sentence such as "Why did Swami Blahblahananda ignore me at the meeting?" or "I wish I had a pretzel!" or "I'd be happy if I had a swimming pool" or "I lost that red balloon" intervenes. Your own unique thoughts will vary, but most of us, most of the time, are thinking entirely of the past or the future, and we are thinking of ourselves. But if you are pedaling up a steep hill on a bicycle, you will find that there is no room for such thoughts. By the sweat of your brow you will make it up the hill. Or not. The "I", the Default Mode Network, has no say in the matter. It literally does not pedal. The DMN only thinks about pedaling and takes credit or blames itself for it later.

So, too, can we immerse ourselves in the slow and intensive reading of the Bible. By focusing on what the words say to us, and what they don't, the genesis of the within emerges. By pointing Adam's attention not toward his sense of self – the Default Mode Network – but toward his focus on a task – activating the DAN network – Yahweh/Elohim taught methods of loosening what Aldous Huxley would later call the "throttling embrace of the self." And "for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" simply declares Adam's Oneness with all things, rather than his newly perceived separation. If the "I," as the false perception of separation, does not exist, who, exactly, would die?

But what of Eve? How does the pain of childbirth and the desire for her husband function as an instruction rather than a punishment?

in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee. (Genesis 3:16)

Again, it may seem that God is here *inflicting* sorrow on Eve and dooming her to a life of subservience. Yet we have learned nothing if we again are seduced by the fruit of appearance and, like Eve, mistake appearance for reality. If this is not punishment, then how does it function to reorient Eve's awareness away from the “I” and towards Oneness? How can this apparent punishment function as a recipe for *metanoia*?

The Gita in Genesis

Another major text of the Perennial Philosophy, the *Bhagavad Gita*, can help illuminate how this shift in focus is a pathway to what is often called spiritual realization. The *Gita* describes different routes to what Huxley pinpoints as the very purpose of human life – the discovery of our unity with the Divine Ground. Each path is a “*yoga*” – the Sanskrit word for “unity” – and each yoga is a technique for experiencing union with the divine: Oneness. In practice, each path connects to the other, but while we are on any one of them, they can feel distinct.

All of the paths focus on withering the experience of self. *Jnana* yoga is a journey of wisdom and knowledge: It involves learning what we really are through reason and empirical investigation. If we investigate what we are with our consciousness, we will find out what we really are through gnosis. This path of self-knowledge is one of the main techniques offered in this book. By encountering Genesis passages as techniques for self-reflection, you will, by fits and starts, come to know what you are.

But we are all gloriously different, and the “same” person can find themselves on different paths as they develop. Just as “Yahweh” and “Elohim” are different names for the same God, distinct yogas transform us in the same ways but through different means. In the past, when I would find myself suffering, *karma* yoga was very useful indeed, and it remains so. *Karma* yoga is even, believe it or not, one of the reasons this book is getting written at all. *Karma* yoga is the engagement of selfless service without any thought of the outcome. By immersing ourselves in service for others – Paul’s practice of *agape* – we dwindle the Default Mode Network that transmits separation and sorrow. In many Buddhist traditions, all work, including meditation, is done for the sake of others, for the benefit of all sentient beings with whom we are involved in what monk Thich Nhat Hanh calls “interbeing.” Sorrow is the experience of separation for creatures of interbeing such as ourselves. While the pain of childbirth – unknowable by me from within – is actual but transient, sorrow is the interpretation of the pain by the Default Mode Network. The “I” takes pain and transforms it into sorrow. This is why we never feel more alone, more separate, than when we feel pain and ask, “Why me?”

But if we look around and see the situation of the “others” who appear to be separate from us, we can see that we have precisely this sorrow in common with them. If we feel ourselves to be separate, alone, and in despair, we can see this condition all around us. There is no shortage of work for the *karma* yogi. By giving of ourselves in selfless service, there is no room for that Default Mode Network to transform the pain of our embodied existence into sorrow. The pain of

childbirth is perhaps the most obvious physical sacrifice a human being can make for another. Just ask your mother.

So if Yahweh reports to Eve that she will be in sorrow in childbirth, this is just a description of How It Is. Pain is one inescapable fact of an embodied existence. But belief in the separation of ourselves from each other – the “knowledge of good and evil” – greatly multiplies the effects of that pain and transforms it into suffering and sorrow. But what of “and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee”? Is this not the famously patriarchal framework of the Bible?

The third yoga, *bhakti*, discussed by Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita* brings this guidance of Yahweh’s into relief as a teaching rather than a punishment. Krishna – an incarnated form of the Godhead – teaches all of the yogas to Arjuna, an archer on the battlefield, but *bhakti*, or devotion, is perhaps the most popular to emerge from the *Gita*. *Bhakti* yoga has yielded some of the most beautiful poems ever composed, as poets sought words with which to practice and describe their devotion. Devotion here means simply to love with all of our heart. If, in our quest for divine union, we do not or cannot achieve either the intellectual understanding of our true nature (*jnana* yoga) or the dissolution of ourselves into service for others without thought of outcome (*karma* yoga), then we must simply love God with all of our heart. Because it is often difficult for us as human beings to love a transcendental principle of all creation, we can personalize this God. They become a character with whom we can interact. By loving this form of God, in whatever form that makes our love flow, we ourselves dwindle the Default Mode Network. We gradually lose the sense of being a separate “I.” By loving God with all of our hearts, we unite with God as this ever intensifying love eventually and unmistakably erases the very distinction between ourselves and God. That is what it means to love God with all of our hearts.

Now, of course, Adam is not Yahweh or Elohim. In a profound and yet simple way, God is not Yahweh or Elohim either, but that for which Yahweh and Elohim serve as labels, an ineffable transcendent Fact. But like Eve herself, Adam is an aspect of God’s creation which, if we will devote ourselves to it, harbors a way to divine union. Through the devotion of Eve to Adam, she learns devotion. By practicing devotion, Eve is again on the pathway to withering the Default Mode Network and becoming what the *Gita* calls being “established in Oneness.” For once the apparent but not actual separation between ourselves, each other, and God begins to dissolve, What Is begins to manifest for us: Yahweh.

Recall that “Yahweh” can be more or less translated as “Being,” or even “Reality.” The science fiction writer and visionary Philip K. Dick even sought to define reality as “that which doesn’t go away even if we stop believing in it.” Even when Eve and Adam believe their senses, their reality as images of God doesn’t go away. It persistently guides them back to their path. Perhaps this is why, as already suggested, the famously burning bush of Exodus attracted Moses’s attention not so much because it was ablaze, but because it did not burn:

And Moses said, I will now turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt.
(Exodus 3:3)

But even if we accept that Eve’s “desire” is not punishment so much as an instruction from God to Eve in devotion, why would Elohim/Yahweh describe Adam as “ruling” over Eve? To be effective *bhakti* yoga, it is not enough, for most of us, to be devoted to corn bugles, or mini-vans, or shag carpet. It is not enough, even, for us to be devoted in “friendship” with each other. For the devotion proper to *bhakti* must dissolve our feeling of separation, and for this, total

surrender is called for. The “I” transmitted by the Default Mode Network must no longer be in competition with the DAN network of tasking. I must surrender entirely to it. Only then will the mirage of the “I” disappear, and we will come to know our true selves, a domain much larger than any little old “I”.

Now, just as Elohim and Yahweh are different names for the same God, and the Default Mode Network is a different name for the “I”, might “Adam” and “Eve” be different names for the *Gita*’s paths to union with God? Is Eve’s subjection to Adam’s “rule” itself an allegory about the ascent of the tasking network through *bhakti* and the demise of the selfing, Default Mode Network? Only by experimenting with it might you find out.

And as different labels for the one flesh of male and female, each of us can, at different points on our unique path, find ourselves being all about Eve, or acting as Adam. We may immerse ourselves in selfless service, practice devotion, or turn our gaze inward. Part of your adventure is to look and see what Reality has in store for you, right here and now. James Joyce’s novel to end all novels, *Finnegan’s Wake*, is awash in meanings, but one of them, at least, is ours: Until we begin to discern appearance from reality, we are, all of us, male and female, yes and no, Eve and Adam, circling around the truth, from swerve of “sure” to bend of “yea”, nay, a “commodious vicus of recirculation.”

“riverrun, past Eve and Adam’s, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodious vicus of recirculation...”

Discerning the Gradient of Language and Reality Through Surrender

Perhaps we have never left Eden. Reflecting together on Genesis 1-3, we can see that our temptation is identical to Adam and Eve’s: We are tempted to believe in the appearance of the text, rather than work out its actual effect on us as we read it carefully. It is tempting to say we are already lost, that somebody else’s error in the deep past is to blame for our apparent situation. But if we actively forget what it is we are “supposed” to find in this text and instead test it for its actual effects on us, together, then we can see that the story is not so simple. Such slow and reflective work even with these three chapters in the Bible can tune us into the tasking network, and begin to deactivate that part of our brain that thinks it knows what the Bible says, and thinks that it is separate from God. When we truly reflect on these passages, we have to compare what it says superficially about reality – that we are exiled from paradise – with our inner experience. You must find the Genesis within you.

Because unlike the discrete, material, transient appearance of things external to us, our inner self is unchanging. Each morning, when you awaken – groggy or refreshed, eager or full of dread – there you are again. For while the slightly different selves that you are – with your family, at work, while driving – are all distinct and even, at times, in conflict, you can begin to feel that underneath all of this transience, Something persists. That Something is What Is. That Something is Truth. Coming to realize the unchanging essence of what you are can only occur when you will turn your attention towards it rather than the various and continually changing aspects of material reality, which very much does change even if we keep believing in it. Yahweh, Reality, Being, What Is: All of these are distinct names for What Actually Is, and when we act counter to what is,

we suffer. Rather than make the same mistake over and over, it is time for us to evolve. Part of the nature of “What Is” is that it has many names by which it can be disclosed to us, even as it remains the same. Every time we take appearance – or one of these labels - for reality, it is as if we are burning our hand on the stove, over and over again.

And Reality gives us the instructions to avoid this fate, if only we will listen rather than interpret it to our own ends. You may, for example, have a hard time accepting that Elohim/Yahweh is not punishing Adam and Eve for their error. We want someone to be at fault, just as we may blame a rock when we stub our toe on it. But while in our collective imagination we see Adam and Eve wearing the fig leaves they have sewn together, aghast at their nakedness, notice that Yahweh continues to guide and even gift them:

Unto Adam also and to his wife did the Lord God make coats of skins, and clothed them.
(Genesis 3:21)

Creation is ongoing. While Yahweh is often portrayed as a wrathful God, a punishing father, here he is nurturing and creating. Precisely because we could not separate ourselves from What Is if we tried, Reality provides every aspect of our lives for us even as we fail to notice it. But what of the exile out of the Garden?

And the Lord God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever: Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life. (Genesis 3:22-24)

By now, you are likely wary of appearances. It *looks* like Yahweh/Elohim is almost jealous of Adam and Eve here. It can seem, even, that Elohim/Yahweh is worried about his monopoly on the Godhead – “the man has become one of us.” It seems, even, that humans are on the brink of achieving divinity themselves: “and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever.” But is “eat, and live forever” the same as becoming divine? Or does it just *look like* divinity?

Recall the contrast between the transience and separation of material reality and the inner realm of continuity that you have always experienced. Your experience is so continuous that you take it for granted, noticing only the interruptions of your continuity from without – the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune that make up life (Hamlet, Act III, Scene 1). To be divine is not to “live for ever.” In fact, it is not to live at all. Life is the very essence of change. Divinity, Yahweh, is What Is – the unchanging. Our adventure is to experience both.

And so, Yahweh/Elohim spares Eve and Adam something like eternal suffering: To live forever would be unceasing misery, separate, naked and afraid.

From Instruction to Sacrifice: Cain and Abel

As soon as we are willing to experiment with the notion that God is simply and unavoidably teaching Eve and Adam about the nature of creation, we begin to see that even the

demand for sacrifice is not so much for Yahweh as it is for humans. Fortifying the argument that Eve's experience of childbirth is a potent training in selflessness, Eve notes that it is not she who bore her son Cain, but Yahweh:

And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain, and said, I have gotten a man from the Lord. And she again bare his brother Abel. And Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground. (Genesis 4:1-2)

"I have gotten a man from the Lord" indicates both Eve's selflessness as well as her sense of separation. If Eve were to identify purely with the appearances of material reality, she would of course and understandably say instead, "I bore a son", or even "Adam and I had a son." And if she were to experience herself as separate from Yahweh, she most certainly would not experience the birth of her first son as "from the Lord." By pointing away from either herself or Adam, she points to a creative and generative reality beyond appearances, and to the continued proximity of Yahweh: That Which Is. The bond of a parent with a child is tremendously powerful, and by pointing to Yahweh's gift, Eve dwindles the sense of control and attachment usually associated with the adventure of being a parent. It also anticipates Abraham's test of selflessness by Yahweh, a test we will focus in on later as perhaps the ultimate practice of *agape* as Abraham cleaves not unto his son but unto Yahweh.

Eve, though, still receives Yahweh's gift through the lens of her separation. Yahweh gives, Eve receives. Through her continued interconnection with "the Lord," the most primal and literally interior phenomenon that can be imagined, the birth of a child, comes from elsewhere. But this adventure in *karma* yoga, though it shows progress away from the sense of intensive separation that gives rise to the pangs of wanting, does not seem to be heritable. Her first born son Cain famously and once again takes appearance for reality.

And she again bare his brother Abel. And Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground. And in process of time it came to pass, that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the Lord. And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof. And the Lord had respect unto Abel and to his offering: But unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect. And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell. And the Lord said unto Cain, Why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen? (Genesis 4: 2-6)

Why, indeed, is Cain "wroth"? We don't know how many kilos or pounds or baskets of produce – "the fruit of the ground" – was offered by Cain, nor how many animals were tendered by Abel. Nor do we know, with any precision, why Yahweh "had not respect" for Cain's offering, or how that disappointment was communicated. We know only that Cain's "countenance" had fallen, and that this communicated to Yahweh the sense that he was "wroth." Everything else at this point is projection on our part.

Pause for a moment and consider the absurdity of imagining Cain's offering as a simple gift that somehow disappoints Yahweh. What do you get for the deity who quite literally has/is Everything?! We can imagine the torturous deliberations as Cain and Abel respectively wonder over the best present. Part of the absurdity resides in the fact that a "gift" presupposes some want in the recipient, some lack that is being remedied. "I have always wanted a silk tie festooned with high resolution images of corn bugles!" declares Swami Blahblahananda. Nasruddin wants a

compass that will tell him where he is: the pointer points not North, South, East or West, but to the I.

Thus far we have presumed that the offering is for Yahweh. Given our own context, this makes sense – gift giving in an economic society presupposes the distinction between the giver of a gift and the one receiving it. One other word for the activity engaged in by Cain and Abel is “sacrifice.” As both a noun – referring to the offering itself – or a verb – the act of offering – “sacrifice” has often come to indicate an offering for someone or something else. It is a negation of the self for a larger cause. In baseball, a “sacrifice bunt” means that a player, such as Nasruddin’s descendent Yogi Berra, would willingly give up the opportunity to hit the ball soundly in order to advance another runner. In military contexts, soldiers are often described as making the “ultimate sacrifice” – they willingly give up their lives for the greater good, it is to be hoped, of the nation.

But as a way of thinking about Cain and Abel’s offering, this meaning can be seen to be a remarkable distortion, even a reversal, of the actual function of any such sacrifice. When we sacrifice it is not so much for the sake of another as it is for the sake of becoming selfless altogether. It is not so much an act by the self *for* another as it is an act *on* the self. For once we plunge ourselves into the task network (DAN), we might very well become attached to the fruits of that work. While our sense of “I” and “mine” would dwindle during the actual immersion in everyday work, the Default Mode Network can easily become enamored of what “it” has done. Even though it is only an obstacle to actual problem solving and the completion of tasks, this part of our brain enjoys taking credit for the results. Perhaps you have had this experience with a boss, a friend or a lover who is fond of saying, “I’m glad I had that idea.” In order to become free of this “I”, the *Bhagavad Gita* counsels giving up this false sense of “I” and “mine”:

nir mamaH nir ahankaraH saH shaantim adhi gacchati

“...without the sense of “I” and “mine” attains peace and the end of suffering.”

(Gary Weber, *Dancing Beyond Thought*)

The offerings in this context are not for Yahweh, but for Cain and Abel. If the twin goals of *agape* and *metanoia* are to be achieved, then selfless service must be truly that: devoid of self-interest. Self-interest is not in our self-interest! If Yahweh is the recipient or destination of any offering from Cain and Abel, it nonetheless is not *for* Yahweh, who already enjoys the fruits of creation, of which one is Cain and another is Abel, sacrificing. How might these offerings further the apparent goal of Yahweh – to teach human beings how to experience what they are, beings created in the image of god?

The more successful offering of Abel, for which Yahweh had “respect,” might hold a clue for us here. Think of sheep. Sheep are veritable software for focusing the human mind seeking sleep. Sheep are attention attractors. The eyes of a panda become the focus of wilderness preservation efforts not because they are more important to the interdependent ecology of earth than a lowly fish, such as the snail darter, but because they serve to focus our attention. Sheep are warm and fuzzy – they make us feel secure and without threat. Cuteness may seem trivial and unimportant to a discussion of scripture, but the textual yoga offered here is all about the focus of our attention. If we begin to feel why and how we feel about sheep and pandas, as opposed to, say, lentils, figs, olives and dates, we can begin to understand this scene with Cain and Abel.

Imagine, now, sacrificing a sheep. Do you feel anguish? Grief? In short, *we identify with sheep*. We can even keep them as pets. Ritualistically speaking, making an offering of a sheep is

akin to giving of ourselves. Philip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* features a character in a post-apocalyptic world who tends an electric sheep in order to represent that he experiences empathy. Even an electric sheep in a science fiction book can, it would seem, elicit empathy in us.

Can we feel the same for wheat? Rutabagas? For most of us, no. Though ecologically speaking, plants are fundamental and essential to the emergence of human beings as our life support system with which we literally breathe in and out, in the realm of appearance they appear other to us, even inert. Because plant movement takes place on a different scale of speed than ours, we treat them as if they were lifeless – part of the background of sticks and stones against which our drama takes place. Our narrative mind, the story making facility of the Default Mode Network, rarely knows how to treat a plant as a character, a participant in the drama, and so, to all appearances of the “I” or *ahankara*, they don't even exist.

And so in the world of appearance, the “fruit of the ground” does not seem a worthy offering – to whom? The offering does not need to be convincing to Yahweh – recall that Yahweh does not want for either sheep or lentils – but is instead designed as a technique for Cain and Abel to keep their sense of “me” and “mine” at bay. Yahweh does not have respect *for the effect of this offering upon Cain*.

To perceive this more clearly, consider how, precisely, Yahweh knows that Cain is “wroth.” The follow up question gives us a clue: “*why is thy countenance fallen?*” (Genesis 4:2-6). Now “countenance” of course describes the face, that remarkable organ of expression and nuance. Yahweh communicates directly with Cain's face, and sees that it has fallen. When does a face fall?

In some obvious sense, Yahweh is simply asking Cain why he is unhappy. Our face falls in chagrin, in sadness. But another sense of the face falling is that it was once raised in expectation. In short, Cain had thoughts about the value, either positive or negative, of his offering. Cain was expecting one outcome, and found another: Surprise! Chagrin! Falling face!

We've all been there. Sweeping my kitchen floor is one way I practice *karma* yoga. I received instruction in this ancient yogic practice through the experience of having a family. Airplaning a spoon brimming with mashed collard greens towards my son's periodically opened maw, some of the green goodness would find itself in an emergency crash landing on the tile floor. Follow up with some dripping apple sauce, add in radiant heat from the floor, and you acquire a goo with the consistency of some dried top secret glue incubated by Swami Blahblahanda's crack team of scientists. Add some stray cereal from breakfast, and you begin to get the idea of my kitchen floor. Having a child is unfathomably wonderful and overwhelming, and at times, when my son was napping in one of those vibrating chairs, it was all I could do to clean and sweep. And so I would scrape up the goo, sweep, looking over at my son, working the dustpan and brush against the tide of food entropy.

Sweeping can be very meditative. The Zen tradition even describes the breath as the “broom” that sweeps the mind clear of thoughts. So intuitively, I seemed to have discovered the benefits of plunging myself into sweeping. I would even chant along while sweeping, and after a while, incredibly, the floor would be spic and span. *Sweep with me: Om gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha....Om gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha...*

And then I would wait for my wife to notice, even as it was my DAN network working away, sweeping, bending, buffing, wiping, my Default Mode Network would come in at the end and seek credit. That's what it does.

And so I would buff and polish and sweep and mop and clean until everything gleamed. And my wife would come home from teaching, and my face would be raised in expectation, my eyebrows at the ready for the recognition of my masterful work. But of course, she too was overwhelmed by the tasks of working and raising the family, and, most of the time, she didn't notice my exquisite sweeping.

Why was I wroth? Why had my countenance fallen? I was not truly engaged in *karma* yoga. I was in it for the outcome. Though it seemed I was sweeping, immersed in the now, part of me was anticipating some vague reward I would get for my actions. I was sweeping for approval, received none, and I was wroth.

Self-interest is not in our self-interest! Most of the time, now, I sweep for the sweeping. No future result is sought. If we live not in reality, the Now, we live in a fantasy about the future or the past that never was and never will be. Yogi Berra: "The future's not what it used to be." Without seeking a reward in some never to be encountered future, the sweeping, being buoyed up by the tasking network of my brain, is quite literally its own reward as it shuts down the incessant internal thoughts we might call Toxic Thought Syndrome. Swept clean!

Cain's Toxic Thought Syndrome

And so Cain, wroth, is no less separate than Adam from What Is, Yahweh. Adam, thrust suddenly into apparent separation, feels the isolation of the "I". Imagine this isolation: Adam, formed out of the breath of creation, continuous with the very exhalation of Elohim, who "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life", imagines that he can hide from Yahweh – What Is. Take a moment and pause on the idea of hiding from Reality. Where would you go? Any aspect of the self that thinks it can hide from Reality *must* be deluded. Cain, anticipating approval in return for his sacrifice, however extraordinary, was not sacrificing at all. If the offerings from Cain and Abel were techniques for experiencing selflessness, rather than elaborate schemes for Yahweh to receive gifts that he, in fact, IS, then the attempt of what Paul will later term *agape* has not worked for Cain's spiritual practice.

Unless we pause and consider that, as with Yahweh's "punishment" of Eve and Adam, Cain is being taught by the very Reality that has brought him into being, we risk repeating the mistake of all the humans in Genesis thus far. Yahweh is not really asking Cain why he is upset. He is asking Cain to wonder why he is upset.

And the Lord said unto Cain, Why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen? If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him. (Genesis 4:6-4:7)

By doing "well," Yahweh is not referring to the success of Cain's crop, or even the extent of his offering. Yahweh is suggesting, more or less, that "if you do your best, what is there to worry about?" The Hebrew word here translated as "accepted" (*seeth*), could perhaps be more successfully rendered as "exalted," "raised up," or even "enlightened." For if we treat these offerings as practices intended as training in selflessness, then we can see that Cain's wrath emerges precisely because rather than doing his very best in focused immersion in the task and releasing all thought of some separate reward in the non-existent future, melting into the task – a doing without a doer – he is looking for a benefit from his offering. Rather than treating the

sacrifice as a withering of self that enables him to feel and experience and *be* his connection with Reality, Cain feels chagrin as he does not get the approval from Yahweh that he “deserved.” Rather than dialing down Cain’s Default Mode Network, what the Sanskrit tradition might parse as his *ahankara*, the offerings have inflated it with expectation, and his face falls when those expectations are not met.

Yahweh’s question is thus a rhetorical one. Reality has a message for Cain: If you let go of your own self-interest by giving away, with no attachment, what you appear to have “earned,” you will be exalted. You will not be exalted because you are good, or moral, or because it is the right thing to do. Exaltation occurs because the cause of our suffering, the separate sense of self, dwindles towards zero when we do our very best, losing ourselves in a task, experiencing separate selfhood itself as a transient fiction that comes and goes. For it is not Cain’s Default Mode Network, his “I”, that has tended the crops, pulled the weeds, kept birds, insects and rodents at bay, and harvested the fruits. The “I” does not sweep, but instead anticipates the approval that is to come. That is what the “I” IS.

You probably already know what is coming next. But as with Genesis 22, when we explore the drama of Abraham and Isaac as an instruction in *agape*, what is left out is as crucial to notice as what is included.

And Cain talked with Abel his brother: and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him. (Genesis 4-8)

Yahweh’s question should be ringing in Cain’s ears, and ours. *Why* is he wroth? Cain gives no response. To answer this question, he could give his immediate response: “Because you, Yahweh, did not appreciate my offering of olives, lentils, figs and dates. Nothing I do is good enough! You love Abel more than you love me!” But would this really answer the question? Why does Cain look to Yahweh for approval in the first place?

This may seem a preposterous question. Yahweh is Being Itself Aware of Itself. *Of course* Cain would want his approval. But recall that since the eating of the fruit, it is the perceived sense of separation from Yahweh that is the problem for humans. Treating Yahweh as exterior to himself, distant, a source of approval or disapproval, only highlights this sense of separation. Only by giving totally of what appears to be himself can Cain overcome this sense of separation. In this context, Cain and Abel offer the fruits of their labor as a way of reminding themselves: “Everything I ‘have’ comes from Creation. Here’s the result of your creation creating through me! I have gotten a sheep from the Lord. I have gotten some figs and olives and lentils from the Lord!”

But Cain felt that he had played a starring role in the creation of the lentils, olives and figs, and was disappointed when Yahweh did not seem to recognize “his” good work. Still, Cain could have taken Yahweh’s question as an occasion for what the nondual tradition calls “self-inquiry.” Self-inquiry is precisely what it sounds like: One investigates the source of the self. “Why art thou wroth?” might make Cain look to himself to see what it is about him that is making him upset. In self-inquiry, Cain would look not to the outside world for the source of his distress, and would instead practice contemplation and introspection, searching for the source of his unhappiness. Why am I wroth? To do this, Cain must first accept his own possible role in the creation of that distress. To truly search, we must not prejudge the matter. While it may seem that what follows – murder – establishes Cain’s power in the world – his own sense of “agency” – Yahweh suggests through his questioning that any such agency resides *within* him rather than

without in the domain of action. Yogi Berra: “You can observe a lot by just watching.” By taking our awareness and looking to see what it is that this “I” is doing, we would notice an endless stream of thoughts. Noticing these thoughts, we might realize that it is these thoughts that are causing us distress. Has anything changed in Cain's situation to cause him an actual problem, or is his problem, such as it is, entirely composed of thoughts in his own mind?

Like most of us, most of the time, Cain did not really hear Yahweh's question or his explanation of it. Cain does not look within and ask: What is it about this “I” that makes me upset? I was fine when I was working the fields, themselves created by Yahweh. Like us, Cain avoids the contemplation of the within, and looks around in the world for the source of his unhappiness. Cain: “That's it! It was the gradient difference between Cain's offering and Abel's offering that was the source of the trouble! Get rid of Abel, get rid of unhappiness!”

And Cain talked with Abel his brother: and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him. (Genesis 4-8)

Taking appearance for reality, Cain slays Abel. We can see his mistake: As long as we believe that we are “wroth” because of some external material condition, we will seek to manipulate that external material condition until we find happiness. We will kill our brother, raise armies, build factories to fulfill imagined wants, move those factories overseas for more profit, and so on. But Yahweh's simple question asks us, after a while, to wonder if these endless searches for a material solution to our distress are viable. As Yogi Berra apparently never said, you just can't get there from here.

And the Lord said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother? And he said, I know not: Am I my brother's keeper? And he said, What hast thou done? the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground. And now art thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand. (Genesis 4:9-4:11)

Do we really believe here that Yahweh, the Lord God who will be identified in Exodus as Being Itself, is asking Cain for information about his brother Abel? Or is Yahweh literally asking Cain to find where his brother is? For his brother has not gone anywhere: “thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground.” While Cain falsely believes the world of appearance, and thinks that he can separate himself from his brother, he quite simply cannot. But the self-inquiry that Yahweh is asking Cain to practice would simply ask: Where is *Cain*? Where is *Abel*? When everything is one undivided being unfolding in continuous creation, where would Abel begin and Cain end? Without a separation between himself and Yahweh, who you will recall *exalted* Abel and thus experienced him as continuous with and not distinct from Being, where does Abel begin and Yahweh end? There is simply no elsewhere – All That Is, Is. Only the illusory perspective of a separate self believes that murder can separate brothers, any of us at all, from What Is.

And now art thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand. (Genesis 4:11)

Why is Cain now cursed? It may appear, again, that this curse is Cain's punishment from Yahweh, to whom he looks for approval or disapproval. But what follows, in the light of our earlier discussion of Cain's oscillation between his sense of self interest and his immersion in his work, is simply a description of How It Will Now Be:

When thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength; a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth. (Genesis 4:12)

Cain has now not removed the source of his distress, but instead made it ubiquitous: “Where is Abel thy brother?” While previously, Cain could attempt to localize his distress on his sibling and blame him for his dashed expectations, his fallen face, he now faces his brother in all directions: “Where is Abel thy brother?” The earth itself becomes a transmitter of Abel’s memory, making the Oneness of Cain and his brother all too evident: “a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth.” No matter where Cain goes, there Abel is. Indeed, Yahweh’s question very well could be rephrased as: “Where *isn’t* Abel thy brother?”

And while previously, as for Eve, *karma* yoga provided a respite for Cain from the incessant demands of the internal voice – “That Abel thinks he is so fancy with his sheep!” – the earth itself now serves as an echo chamber of his own internal voice: “Where is Abel thy brother?” Loss of self into the pure immersion of the task network becomes yet more difficult when the task itself is the interaction with the most virulent form of the separated self – murder. Each tilling of the ground is an encounter with the absent presence of Abel.

We can sympathize with Cain’s promised restlessness. We cannot escape our own thoughts. Wherever Cain goes, there he is. To the extent that we feel held hostage to our own incessant internal self-referential narrative, we feel the constant need to flee, and yet no flight is successful: the problem resides within us. We try intoxicants, sex, shopping, travel, crime – and there we are. As *Halloween*, the 1978 horror film advertised it, “*The call is coming from inside the house.*”

Cain’s inability to look for the source of his distress – “Why art thou wroth?” – leads him to once again experience the source of his distress – his own internal voice. He protests against his supposed punishment, intriguingly noting that the “I” can’t take it:

And Cain said unto the Lord, My punishment is greater than I can bear. (Genesis 4:13)

Note here that Yahweh never describes Cain’s vagabondage or lack of fecundity as a punishment – this is Cain’s *interpretation* of Yahweh’s description of what is to come. Punishment, of course, presupposes and reinforces the separation of the punisher and the punished. Again, Cain seems to blame Yahweh just as he blamed Abel for his plight, which is internal: it was the murder of Abel that will hound Cain’s attention and divert him from selflessness, creating the craving for succor in a restless search for vagabond relief.

Behold, thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the earth; and from thy face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth; and it shall come to pass, that every one that findeth me shall slay me. (Genesis 4:14)

It is worth pausing here to again note the divergence of Cain’s analysis of the situation from Yahweh’s. Cain claims that it is Yahweh who has “driven me out this day from the face of the earth,” though of course this is at best an exaggeration even of Cain’s plight: he shall be a “fugitive and a vagabond.” His restlessness is his exile. Rather than having been “driven” out, he will not be able to escape the earth, from which his murdered brother’s voice cries.

The next phrase is even stranger, and helps us take the measure of Cain’s delusion: “...*and from thy face shall I be hid.*” As with Adam’s pretense to hide from Yahweh, the thought of division from an all-encompassing continuous creative unity is itself the mistake. Cain, full of

thought of Yahweh's approval, perceives himself as separate from and in competition with Abel. This separation is the ultimate cause of his murder of Abel, as it is an attempt to accomplish what is perceived as only a partial separation: there must be a connection between two beings if they are to compete. But with Abel's voice crying out from the Earth, Cain experiences the fact that this separation is only apparent and not actual. Even as Cain perceives his imminent death – "and it shall come to pass, that every one that findeth me shall slay me" – he perceives not another but himself: Others become but mirrors for his own murderous nature. If he is hidden from the face of Yahweh, it is only because everywhere he sees his own fallen face. Even in his experience of separation there is, in fact, unity.

Yet Cain gets his wish for some apparent separation. Homeless, restless, vagabond, a fugitive in fact from himself – he is haunted by his own vision of murder, mirrored through an imagined other who would slay him – Yahweh again manifests compassion for those who do not realize themselves to be an aspect of Being Itself. Being Itself includes, along with murder, compassion:

And the Lord said unto him, Therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the Lord set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him. (Genesis 4:15)

Remarkably, then, Yahweh's actions towards Cain are anything but vengeful or punishing. Just as Yahweh offered the deluded couple of Adam and Eve coats of skins, Yahweh clothes Cain with a mark, a protective sign to separate him from the rest, if only apparently. Just as existence itself is an unfathomable gift to all of us, a gift that of course at times can feel like an absurd burden, Yahweh signs Cain with an incalculable grace.

Our idea that Yahweh punishes Cain is in fact Cain's notion: If we take it on as the truth of this Biblical narrative, then we repeat Cain's mistake. And when we do so, we repeat the misunderstanding of the cause of his, our, unhappiness. If we take "Why art thou wroth?" to be an instruction in self-inquiry, we are practically forced to encounter the fact that it is our stream of internal thoughts – thoughts of hope or fear about the future, remorse, nostalgia and resentment about the past – that keeps us out of the gift of the present, the genesis of Now. Why, indeed, are we wroth? With our mind focused on the nonexistent past and never existing future – it is always, you can observe, Now – we crowd our lives with thoughts whose effect is to isolate us, suffering, restless, vagabonds upon the earth.

Making a Name: Communication Breakdown and Babel

And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech. (Genesis 11:1)

...and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. (Genesis 11:6)

We have so many readers and experts working with this colossally powerful text that we become convinced that we know what the Bible has to say, and we avoid the sometimes difficult task of investigating the matter ourselves. (Richard Doyle, *The Genesis of Now*)

We may be tempted, at this point, to accuse Yahweh of being a poor spiritual teacher. Thus far the teaching has consisted of an instruction that was ignored, an exile into *karma* yoga complete with goat skins, and a misunderstood sacrifice that led to a fratricide. If Yahweh, at this point, were your life coach, you might start interviewing to fill the position.

But what if rather than being a deficit in Yahweh's teaching, these trials and tribulations indicate something about our nature as beings in relationship with Being? What if this trial and error were part of the process by which human beings, on an adventure of separation, East of Eden, discover their true nature? What if spiritual evolution, like its biological counterpart, works through failing on the road to fitness?

Recall that when Adam was given the gift of naming the animals, Yahweh appears to witness creation rather than direct it:

And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof. (Genesis 2:19)

This is the very first action that we get to see a human being perform in Genesis, and Yahweh acts here as a spectator, a bystander: "...in the image of God created he him."

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. (Genesis 1:27)

Insofar as Adam and all human beings are "in the image of God," then, they would appear to be fundamentally and not accidentally *creative*. Yahweh looks on here as an artist, one step removed: what will creation create?

This essential creativity is often mistaken for a sense of free will, as if Adam were here absolutely unfettered in his capacity to name the aardvark or the koala, assuming his franchise for naming extended to Australia. But a closer analysis suggests not that Adam was absolutely free in his choice of name, only that Yahweh was not certain of what it would be. In other words, Yahweh was in a situation of "not-knowing." Having created a creative being, Yahweh/Elohim could only watch as the names emerged from Adam's mouth. Creation is ongoing!

This ongoing aspect of creation, a dynamic deeply resisted by an ego that perceives itself to be separate, unchanging and untouchable even while nothing ever quite works the way it hopes, provides us with a clue to the source of that human faculty that is as much feared as it is worshipped: the imagination.

It should intrigue us that our name for our creative faculty should have its verbal roots in the "image." An image is, of course, a visual. We imagine creativity as that aspect of ourselves that can envision something new, novel, beautiful and clever, and distinct from who we already are. Ideas present themselves to us, and only then do we report, "I have an idea." In the movement from the arrival of the vision to the experience of "having" an idea, we shift from a posture that welcomes this unexpected guest – an innovative technique, a song, a fragment of poetry – to one that takes ownership of it.

Aha! If you reflect on your own experience of having an idea, a remarkable fact emerges: it is only retroactively that we seem to have "had" an idea. Insights arrive within a stream of thoughts and images. They are not subject to our will – we host ideas more than we really "have" them. Ralph Waldo Emerson pondered his own thoughts and noted that:

The mind is one, and the best minds, who love truth for its own sake, think much less of property in truth. They accept it thankfully everywhere, and do not label or stamp it with any man's name, for it is theirs long beforehand, and from eternity. The learned and the studious of thought have no monopoly of wisdom. (Emerson, "The Over-soul")

We are the occasion for imagination to come into being, and then, we begin to live in the world we have imagined. As Eve might have put it: "I have gotten an idea from the Lord."

Perhaps this is what the 18th-century poet William Blake meant when he wrote that "The imagination is not a State: it is The Human Existence itself." Not a static thing – a State – imagination is instead a flow, an unfolding. "...in the image of God created he him" suggests that if we take the model of humans as being in the "image of God" seriously, then we must realize that what appears to be human creation is in fact a continued creation of God, cosmos, itself. Rather than separate from the cosmic evolutionary creative process that brought Eve, Adam, Abel and Cain into being, humans are a continuation and local instance of that ongoing evolution. The manifestation of ideas is no less a cosmic event than a solar flare or a meteor, and sometimes this kinship can even be felt. Aha!

Now, of course, evolution works in part through trial and error. Evolution is an experiment with Reality by Reality on Reality. "Let there be light!" is continuous with "Let there be bacteria," as well as "let there be bacteria that glow!" As participants and not merely bystanders to this ongoing experiment– think of Elohim watching, perhaps with joy, as Adam names the beasts of the field – we contribute to this process precisely to the extent that we manifest ourselves as being "in the image of God."

What does it mean to be "in the image of God"? We might be tempted to think this indicates that Elohim – in whose image humans are described here – is therefore a two-armed, two-legged creature like most Earthlings. But Elohim's words, and the breath that carries them, are the very saying that brings creation into being. Contemplating Genesis here means contemplating that in Genesis, humans are created as beings of continual creation. Insofar as "in the image of God created he him," when it comes to creating, the distance between "he" and "him" is as nothing at all.

And recall that it is from this nothing, this void, that All of It emerges. From nothing It all comes, and so if we are to be creative, and to be in the image of Elohim, we must create with nothing at all in mind. We must become empty, a blank space, for creation to emerge. In the blank space between "He" and "him" we are connected to, and not separate from, Elohim. In the space between even these words, creation itself unfolds, right now.

This emptiness comes when we do not know what we are doing. When we come to Genesis 11, we think we know what the Babel story is about. But with this perspective we are anything but empty or creative. It may seem that the Babel story is about the dangers of creativity:

Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth. (Genesis 11:5)

The humans featured here are manifesting their nature as creators. They are "going to," working together, in one speech, one language, forming a community of labor. They build a city, with a tower, one that bridges earth and sky, unto heaven. Connecting earth and sky, they "make us a name." With language, in one language, they hope to avoid the forces of chaos, the effervescent

impermanence of human life. They will not be “scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” They will be *Babel*.

Is not this “of one language, and of one speech”, the Oneness of which we have been questing? It may seem so. But what divides Babel even as it links earth and sky? “They will not be scattered abroad.” The humans of one speech, one language, are united in their refusal to accept a fundamental aspect of material existence: it comes and goes. They want to arrest time and space, and “make a name for themselves.”

Making a name for themselves, they invest in a material form that they hope will overcome not only space, but time:

And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar. (Genesis 11:3)

Even if my mug seems fragile and transient once I begin to really look at it, bricks are the very epitome of solidity, and it would seem, reality. Bricks assert a reality – they are impervious to our will and outlast our brief dance between dust and dust. But the mistake of the denizens of Babel, it would seem, would be to confuse the relative persistence of bricks, and the city and tower that they compose, with the unchanging aspect internal to all of us and which cannot be captured by language: Can we really be captured by a name?

And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. (Genesis 11:6)

Imagining that they can overcome the scattering of time and distance, the Babylonians build a city and a tower. But the Oneness through which this tower emerges is a Oneness that secures itself from scattering. Refusing the scatter, it puts its faith in matter. The apparent reality of bricks is a potent optical illusion, as bricks, too, come from dust and return to it. Taking refuge, even in a brick, creates only the appearance of persistence. When we look to transient, material things for persistence, we are not accidentally but essentially disappointed. Our face will fall.

Even in one speech and language, full of ambitions, open to excellence, going to, the people of Babel are missing something vital: acceptance. Reality includes dissolution and “scattering” as much as it includes “mortar and slime.” By refusing the scatter of time and space, Babel builds itself upon a false view of reality. It is as if one had built a city out of ice on an active volcano. It can’t work.

Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. (Genesis 11:7)

Intriguingly, Yahweh, Reality, intervenes in this fiasco – the search for timelessness in a fundamentally impermanent form, the fabrication of Oneness through exclusion – not by destroying the city, as will occur in Sodom and Gomorrah, or by simply flooding the city and tower, as in the treatment of Noah and his ark. Instead, it is to the capacity to “understand one another’s speech” that Yahweh directs attention. On the one hand, this serves an obvious end: it explains the apparent mystery of diverse languages among humans. Genesis, as a cosmological text – a text that would take on the task of explaining to humans where they come from and why they have the characteristics that they do – teaches, through this allegory, the origin of linguistic diversity.

On the other hand, we might wisely pause if we think we are “understanding one another's speech” here. For the error of Babel was precisely the error of false understanding: able to manipulate earth itself into a structure that would bridge earth and sky, they have nonetheless forgotten, or never learned, who and what they are: aspects of an eternal process of creation that could never be scattered abroad in any true sense. If we move too quickly, we will repeat their mistake:

Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city. (Genesis 11:7-8)

The very thing that the people of Babel wished to avoid has occurred: a scattering abroad. If we go too quickly, we won't notice that the mechanism of this scattering is as uncertain as the drift of language itself: no longer able to understand each other, they are dispersed. Yet does Yahweh “scatter them abroad” physically, leading to the confounding of language, or does the confounded language cause the scattering?

We simply do not know. Our vehicle for this narrative – language – is simply not up to the task of transmitting an answer to this question. Even now, we can feel this limit of “making a name.”

If language cannot be the venue by which we can know what has been taught here in the Bible in Babel, perhaps the imagination is: “...and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do” points to the imagination as a site where Yahweh, What Is, locates the need for instruction.

It is precisely because of the imagination's relationship to reality that it must, perhaps, be disciplined or “restrained.” While we habitually think of, even imagine, the imagination as unfettered, free, devoid of boundaries, if we reflect again together on the period just before we experience “I have an idea,” we can see that the flow of ideas and the transformation of them into “ours” requires no less transformation than it does to make mud and slime into bricks and mortar, and bricks and mortar into a city and a tower. Is it not the transformation of the imagination into a “doing” that is rejected here by Yahweh?

A Guided Meditation on the Source of Ideas and Dessert Toppings

If we are not to repeat this mistake of Babel, and believe that language is capable of transmitting these teachings of Babel, we must experience this transformation of the imagination into something that is “ours.” Begin by practicing Psalm 46:10. Be still. Turn off your phone, drink a glass of water or tea, get comfortable in a chair or with your knees flat upon the ground. Be still.

Don't try to understand anything, even why you are being still. Just be still.

In the stillness, observe the stillness. Watch as ideas come to visit. There is no problem with these ideas. No matter what their content is, no matter what they apparently concern, they are just that: ideas. Welcome them but do not focus on them. Let them, like the rest of life, come and go. There is no need to “go to”; simply be with the ideas as they come and go, observing them like a bird that flits from branch to branch before flying away – scattering. Many people are passionate birders, going to great lengths to observe a diversity of birds in their life list. Can you

bring the same passion and focus to the task of observing your thoughts? No binoculars are needed!

Observe the ideas arriving. Where do they come from? Ignore what they are about, though they are probably about the past or the future. Let them come into your awareness, and look carefully for their source. Surely they must come from somewhere!

Looking beyond the ideas – whether they are thoughts, feelings, images or a combination of all of these – you will begin to be able to feel where they come from. It is like tasting a flavor that it is only hinted at in your food or drink. Let go of everything else and let your focus be on where this idea or that idea comes from. If you lose track, let go of the attempt, and be still.

Now notice that nothing you say or write can capture this feeling of an idea coming into your awareness. This feeling is not the idea. The coming into being of the idea into your awareness is not simply the awareness of a content. It is a feeling of awareness itself, with content layered on top like a dessert topping of a delicious consistency and flavor. Underneath, there are many layers. Feel the space from which ideas emerge before becoming identifiable, before they become “yours.”

Allow the ideas to continue their visits. You may notice that the more you simply observe them, the less these ideas appear to be about “you” and are instead, simply ideas. Can you focus your attention on them and watch where they come from and where they go?

Nothing Succeeds Like Failure: Babel’s (Evolutionary) Triumph

Babel is, like much of Genesis, about the strengths and limitations of language. Recall that for the bards who would have repeated the narratives and cosmologies of Genesis that were eventually (at least 2500 years ago) put into the strange new information technology, writing words themselves would be technologies of extraordinary mystery and power. Most written traditions have precursors as well as contemporaries that are oral, as until very recently literacy was not widespread.

It may seem strange to describe language as a “technology,” but it is just that – a technique for focusing, attracting and distracting attention. Scholars estimate that humans have been using language for between 70,000 and 100,000 years, but writing is a much more recent invention. Neolithic humans used symbols that were likely in use over a period of twenty thousand years, but so called “true writing” – repeatable marks that compose a graphic code that allow humans to reconstruct information plausibly recorded therein – probably dates to about six thousand years ago. Literature – the use of writing to record information that is not simply composed of facts such as transactions – is even younger, dating from perhaps 3200 BCE. All of these scholarly estimates are just that – estimates based on limited but not nonexistent evidence – and are best treated as a context for thinking about the history of writing and language within which Genesis was composed. For our purposes, it does not matter who composed Genesis – whether it was, as some traditions assert, the work of Moses, who does not appear until Exodus, or whether it was first transmitted orally and then written later. Whenever and however it was written, Genesis was written in language and often discusses language in a way that suggests we should pay close

attention. And if we pay close attention, we realize that language is itself a main character of Genesis: the effects and capacities of language are at the center of many of the main actions.

Within this context, then, to “make a name for themselves” literally means to be inscribed into language. What if Babel were able to indeed make a name for themselves? What would that mean to contemporaries, and by extension, to us?

Reflect for a moment on the immediate differences between oral speech – I just shouted to Swami Blahblahananda to *please* cease and desist from eating all of the corn bugles – and written discourse – “Swami B, kindly leave a few snacks for the rest of us stuck here between earth and sky!” One is transient, ephemeral – it comes and goes. Poe’s purloined letter discussed earlier in the book presented a problem to investigators precisely because it did not simply vanish after being written. Hanging around, getting into the wrong hands, this written text was dangerous because it was robust. Apps such as Snapchat, which make photos or texts disappear after a given time period, provide a measure of our desire to have the benefits of writing – communication at a distance – without the side effect of persisting over time and possibly leaking to the wrong or unintended audience. For language, writing approaches a kind of immortality – it seems to stand outside time in a way that my good-natured shout to Swami Blahblahananda does not. Hence for Babel, making a “name” for themselves really approached immortality – it was an attempt to transcend time.

Yet this immortality is only apparent and not actual. The Bible itself offers us powerful testimony that a piece of writing is no less fragile than my now much discussed mug. True, a manuscript does not shatter if I elbow it off my breakfast table and onto a tiled floor, but time itself takes its toll on the matter of a manuscript. No physical copy of the so called “Q” gospel, for example, has ever even been found, and so for scholars it remains a hypothetical source for the common material of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Indeed, none of the original documents of the New Testament exist, and the documents that we do have access to differ. In short, we have no definitive original copy of any of the documents of the New Testament, so it is only through textual criticism – more an art than a science – that we can reconstruct what appear to be definitive texts.

The situation with Genesis is no different. The oldest Hebrew texts of Genesis were found with the Dead Sea Scrolls, and they are very incomplete. Some of the scrolls have not even been identified, as time has taken its toll on them if not their message. And so in a very literal sense, written language is just as impermanent and ephemeral from the perspective of eternity – the time scale of immortality – as oral discourse, which clearly, like my salty snack, comes and goes.

And when we focus on the meaning of Genesis, it becomes even trickier. The sheer number of interpretations human beings have made of Genesis alone is testimony to the capacity of a written text to take on a plurality of meanings. The meaning of a written text may be even more subject to decay than its physical form, precisely because it *looks* like it is the same for centuries. When we think we definitively understand an ancient text, we probably don’t.

The situation may seem dire. But recall that the problem of Babel is not a problem posed by bricks, or mortar, or slime, or even language. The problem resides in not realizing the limitations of these finite tools in our quest for happiness. The highest tower, the sturdiest brick, cannot defeat time, and if we forget this, our faces will fall. Even the 16th-century Dutch artist Breugel’s treatment of Babel, a carving in ivory, has disappeared.

But the good news is that this very message about the limitations of language appears to be a very plausible interpretation of Babel itself. Babylonians failed to make a name for themselves except insofar as they are remembered as putting too much faith in their ability to

defeat time. In seeking to avoid the scattering effects of time, they exemplified the human situation of living in time. Accept the scattering; embrace the dance from dust to dust.

Such acceptance may sound weak, an ignoble surrender that takes place when our courage fails us. Do we not deeply respect audacious ambition? Should not each of us shoot for the moon, dare to be great?

While Genesis 11 can appear to present a case of humans daring to become too much like God, it is in fact a case of insufficient, rather than excessive, ambition. Faced with an ever transforming, dynamically evolving Reality, Yahweh, whose scale transcends time and space and is confined only by the characteristic that S/He Is, the Babylonians seek to heap up a large pile of organized dirt. When we really begin to grapple with the sheer scale of the difference between Being itself and being a particular being, earthly ambitions – fame, money, tall buildings, works of art about ambition – cease to be significant. The Tower of Babel is no more, and perhaps less, significant than the mound of a termite. When we zoom out and look at the big picture – even the tiny snapshot of evolutionary time between ourselves and Babel – any particular event dwindles and can be seen to be what it is – a part and not the whole of a glorious cosmic unfolding.

But how can we “go to” and do our part for this glorious whole? Is our task to simply sit idly by while the cosmos does its thing? Or are we part of this cosmic drama of spiritual evolution, or apart from it?

Again, our language, if we do not contemplate its role in our perspective, is sometimes an obstacle to understanding our situation. If we invest too much in our apparent efforts, we, like Cain, cultivate a sense of “I” and “mine.” This only deepens the divide between ourselves and Reality. We will come to believe that the fruits of our labor and imagination are “ours”, that “we” have somehow transcended time. We will imagine that we have a legacy, that we have left something behind for future generations, and that we will not be forgotten. We will not “be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.”

But everything from the Tower of Babel to the body of David Bowie is subject to the thermodynamic dance of dust to dust. While the Laws of Thermodynamics teach us that matter can neither be created nor destroyed, it is also the case that nothing material persists. What we perceive as time is the ongoing transformation of apparently persistent material reality. When we hear the word “matter,” we should hear “an optical illusion that appears to persist but comes and goes.”

When you contemplate this fact of our existence, you may feel despair. Can you carefully, deliberately and calmly look for the source of that despair? You may think that the source of this despair are the Laws of Thermodynamics. But is that what you feel when you are feeling this despair, fear or anguish? Where, precisely, do you feel the distress? When, exactly, are you feeling it?

You may find that when you truly and persistently look for the time and place where you are having this distress, it retreats and even disappears. This is because when you encounter a future moment when you or a loved one will no longer live, or when you worry about the bag of salty snacks being empty, or a mug shattering on the floor, or an ivory miniature masterpiece disappearing, you are abstracting from Reality. You are divided from the present moment. *Being divided from the Now feels terrible because you are divided from Reality.*

It may seem that the solution, then, is not to think of the future, and this is a good start. But it is not so simple, and our infrastructure of everyday life entails planning that involves abstraction from the present. It may even be that humans have successfully transformed this planet precisely because we are capable of this sort of strange abstraction. How, for example,

would the Babylonians “go to” and work together to build a tower if they did not have a division of labor? A crowd would form around the mortar, or the slime, or the baking of the bricks – chaos would ensue. “I” serves as a label to differentiate tasks, as in “I will cultivate the figs while you, Abel, tend the sheep.” And so on. The problem, then, is not so much the abstraction – a capacity of our imagination to perceive unlimited virtual rather than actual situations – but our credulity before this abstract illusion. The “I” is a way of talking that appears to be real but is not. The abstraction of the “I” allows us to divide up labor, and divide up time – past, present, future. If we look empirically for either the past or the future, though, we can never find it: only the Now exists. If we look for the division between ourselves and another, or ourselves and the cosmos, we can’t find it. These divided imaginary entities are sometimes useful fictions. What Huxley called the “phenomenal ego” is a strategy humans have adopted to navigate our ecosystems, a strategy that has become counter-productive. It is not who we really are. It is not in touch with Reality. It is an impossible object. The tower of the ego must and will fall.

And so if we attempt to give up all ambition, if we despair before doing anything at all, this too is a false abstraction, for it was never “us” who were “going to” in the first place. Who would give up ambition? If we appear to take on different roles based on our separation from each other – particularly evident in a world where so few own so much – this is only an appearance and not reality. Contemplating Babel means contemplating the way in which neither the labor of Cain nor of (B)abel is our own, but is instead only the result of our continuity with and not separation from Reality.

But when we perceive the communal work involved in the division of labor – you carry bricks, I will bring the mortar – to be evidence of actual separation rather than communion, then of course our language is confounded. We come to believe that this strange and potent word “I” refers to something persistent rather than transient. This “I” will make a name for itself. How can all of us, with our unique and ever-changing experiences of this cosmos, be labeled with the same tag – “I” – without confusing every one of us? Like Cain, we are scattered abroad, vagabonds upon the earth.

Ironically, though, Babel did indeed “make us a name.” “Babel” both indicates the ancient civilization of Babylon and puns on the Hebrew word *balal*, which means “jumble.” Making a name through recourse to the separation, compression, and burning of earth into bricks, what had been one speech becomes jumbled through the division of labor enabled by the “I”. Nothing succeeds in evolutionary terms like failure – the cosmos learns what *not* to do. Are we listening?

Consider the other good news of Babel for a technological society such as our own: No matter what sorts of projects we become enthralled by, no matter how much we forget in our focus on achieving the impossible – making material reality persist even as its nature is to come and go – Reality never goes away. Unchangeable, persistent, beyond time and space, it eventually forces us to shift our focus away from the transience of apparent reality and back to what is actual. Is the tower real? Not really. Is the “I” that would “go to” real? Only contemplation, a going to that involves us looking within rather than without, can answer these questions, and each of us must look and inquire for ourselves. Contemplating Babel means learning from the mistakes of Babel, transcending our petty ambitions for fame, money, a pile of bricks, and really, and truly, getting ambitious. That’s the Genesis of Now.

The Audacity of Spiritual Evolution

Now when we imagine a future without ourselves, we abstract. This abstraction pulls us out of our actual life, here and now, and we focus our attention on an imagined future. This focus away from the fecundity and abundance of the Now induces a feeling of lack in us – we feel separated from Reality, and at some level, we are. From Babel, we might learn that when we “go to” and seek to create something material in the world that will fill this lack induced by abstraction and imagine a future without ourselves, it is doomed to failure. No amount of manipulation of the material world, no amount of wealth, fame, pleasure or success, will transform the basic rules of the game: material reality comes and goes. When we avoid this coming and going by holding on to the “I” or any of its apparent creations, we suffer, and we inflict that suffering on each other and the planet as we seek to “double down” and find some material solution to our impasse. What then are we to do? Should we simply binge watch TV, post to Facebook, eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we may die?

It may be that each of us needs to see for ourselves that this is not really a solution, or even possible. When our “I” starts to see the situation it faces – transient material reality featuring a very brief dance between dust and dust with no certainty in sight – it can indeed seek oblivion in drugs, food, sex, money, entertainment. But the irony of this response is that not even this search for oblivion is subject to the individual control of our conscious awareness – the “I”. Sometimes, as with drug addiction, this lack of control can be fatal. But all of us, when we believe the false and very bad news of our separation from the cosmos as an “I,” face the same dynamic: a non-existent self holds on for dear life and seeks to hide from the despair caused by the feeling of transience and separation we have been contemplating.

Fortunately, the diverse spiritual traditions that Huxley distills into the Perennial Philosophy agree that our apparent situation is not the actual one. We live only in a linguistic dream of separation, as our evolutionary ally, language, fools us into thinking we actually *are* the way we talk about and imagine ourselves. The false terror of a life and death of separation is compared to a loop of rope on a dark night that takes on the appearance of a snake. When we see that our terror was caused not by a viper but by a length of line, we can only laugh, and at the very least, feel relief. How can we shine a light on this false view we have of ourselves and feel this relief?

We must be audacious, courageous, and persistent. If we think we see a snake, we must face it to see what it is, and what it is not. Precisely because we are continuous and not separate from the evolution of human culture and the infrastructure of language and time it has created and been created by, it can appear ridiculous to question something that we all take to be so obvious: our separation from each other and the cosmos. Nothing could be more taken for granted than this idea that each of us is born alone, lives alone and dies alone. At best, we can come to believe that “it takes a village” and that we are beholden to the community and the social order for our well-being. But the idea that we are not actually separate beings in the first place, that we are aspects of a massively interconnected cosmos that has been unfolding for 13.7 billion years, and learning, along the way, to know itself – this seems the epitome of audacity.

And so, don’t believe it. But you may find yourself, as you read this book, experimenting with this idea. And as you experiment, look for the source of your incredulity or your belief. Who balks at the idea of being a way for the cosmos to know itself? When does it balk? Those sites where our resistance to our increasingly obvious non-separation from All That Is are pregnant with possibility. It is there that we have the most to learn.

Recall that Huxley’s four-fold path of the Perennial Philosophy included the following characteristics:

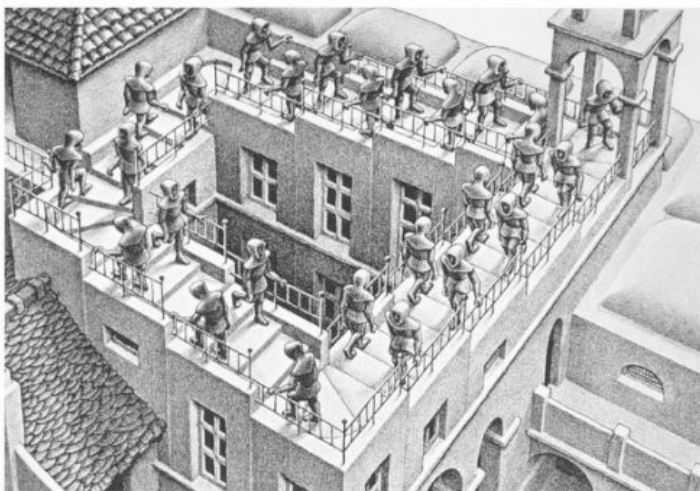
- *Appearance is not Reality*
- *Humans can know with certainty that appearance is not Reality through Self Inspection*
- *Each of us have a material and a transcendental aspect*
- *The purpose of human life is to discover Reality*

By seeking to materialize the sacred desire to “reach heaven,” Babel fails, but it fails in a way that is itself a teaching. We might even say that the tower and the city are the ego’s idea of transcendence. It is as if Swami Blahblahananda identified the kingdom of heaven with an unlimited bag of corn bugles: We can understand it, as it seems to smack of the infinite – there are always more salty snacks to be had – but the problem of material transience in every other domain remains. We have only solved the problem of never running out of salty snacks, and then we run out of time to eat them. Worse, it is not only things but feelings that come and go, and once we have access to the plenitude of bugles, we find that we no longer desire them, and so we get to work conjuring an endless bag of chips.

The whole reason we can mistake the material for the transcendent is that the two were never divided in the first place. The urge to be outside of time, to “make a name,” bubbles forth from this urge to transcend appearance and know reality. Something in us *knows* that there is more to us than appearance. But Babel’s response to this quest for the eternal is premature, and it is looking in the wrong place: We cannot find Reality in the world of Appearance unless we look for the source of both, and that can only be found by looking within: Who wants to reach heaven? Who wants to know? *This desire for transcendence in us, this desire to “go to”, this is, strangely enough, the very heaven that we seek.* As we turn to the audacious examples of Abraham and Noah, we will see just how much Reality we can find within us.

Noah’s Ark of Unknowing

All of humanity’s problems stem from man’s inability to sit quietly in a room alone.
(Blaise Pascal)



Now it may seem that it was the audacity of Babel that led to its downfall, but in fact there was a yawning lack of ambition there. While the impulse to transcendence that led to the desire to rise higher and higher has its origin in our desire to know the truth of Reality, this impulse cannot succeed because it mistakes transcendence for a physical form. To “transcend” comes from the Latin for “to climb over,” and it is natural, if we take the material

world to be the world of Reality, that we interpret the realm of the Eternal in terms that map onto the perceived physical world. But transcendence of the sort described by the Perennial Philosophy means overcoming not merely physical obstacles to our line of sight; it means overcoming and integrating the limitations of physical reality altogether. Only if we can overcome this coming and going do we truly transcend and experience Reality – the unchanging.

Artist M.C. Escher illustrated this phenomenon with the impossible staircase embedded in his *Ascending and Descending*, printed above. If you look carefully you can see that no matter how long the steps are climbed, one does not ascend. Similarly, transcendence on the physical plane is not and cannot be transcendental in the sense that we wish. We wish to overcome time and space, we feel the impulse to do so, but when we interpret these impulses and “go to” physical tasks, our ambition is found wanting, and we will not transcend.

And as long as we perceive the world of objects and things as the only true reality, we will look there for transcendence. But if we ponder the *viewer* or the *creator* of Escher’s staircase, we will see that she, unlike the erstwhile climbers, can transcend material reality. If we try to figure out Escher’s staircase, we will ascend and descend over and over again. But once we realize it is an illusion, we can transcend it. We enjoy and appreciate Escher’s print not simply because it is an optical illusion, but because it is a false image that somehow illuminates a truth. We perceive here that despite appearances, Escher has not represented physical reality. And when we perceive this mismatch between appearance and reality, we can experience, just for a moment, Reality. *One of the hallmarks of Reality is that it does not map onto our model of it.* Escher is able to represent the ways in which All is not as it appears, and if we live our lives as if appearance were reality, we will feel very much like the climbers of Escher’s stairs. We cannot solve the problem of the staircase on the level of appearance itself – we must wonder over the distinction between appearance and reality.

The “impossible staircase” at the heart of Escher’s print was itself inspired by the work of Lionel and Roger Penrose, who created the illusion in a paper published in 1958. Many others have gone on to create other impossible objects – objects that appear to be, but aren’t. Is the separated self an impossible object in a world of continuity?

This is the audacious truth suggested by Genesis: Though we appear material and transient, you are born of transcendence. Your imagination is one sign of that transcendence – it has no limits. By learning to focus our minds on the unchangeable Reality within us, we can begin to identify with That which never changes rather than with the to-and-fro of apparent reality, where everything appears to change even as the staircase never ascends. Though we are beings who appear to live in the scattering forces of time, we can experience *metanoia* by shifting our identification away from our transient, illusory self and towards unchanging truth of the ever present Now, where it is never past or future, but only Now. Is this the true meaning of the much discussed End Times – the moment for each of us when we identify not with the to-and-fro of material reality, but with the unchanging and eternal aspect of ourselves – the alpha and omega of each of us, Now?

Hence the scattering of Babel was no more a punishment than the extinction of the dinosaurs. Reality, in both cases, had its ultimate say. Decreasing resources, a comet on the Yucatan Peninsula – not even dinosaurs could reign forever. No quantity of time can reach eternity. For Babel, the challenge also presents a problem of scale: No matter how high the tower, could it transcend space and time itself? The tower of Babel was an impossible object – it can never ascend to the heights to which it aspired.

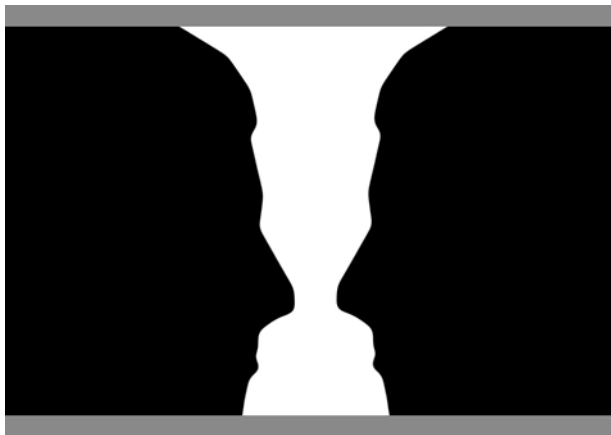
So why, then, do we think of Babel as punishment rather than the inevitable outcome with Reality?

Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. (Genesis 11:7)

Note that in no way is God separate here from the inhabitants of Babel, and nor is the tower somehow encroaching on God's realm. Instead, Reality suffuses Babel. Reality is the very impetus for this impossible stairway to heaven. Yahweh is in constant contact with the goings on "below." "High" and "Low" are perspectives of a self that feels itself separated and located in space and time. Only such a being can be scattered. Being itself, Yahweh, everywhere and always, only goes up or down from the perspective of a separated ego. Babel's encounter with a Reality which is always already everywhere feels like punishment only to a separated ego. To a being that has understood that it is a veritable hologram of Being, then there is nowhere to be scattered to or from.

Why do I use this language of a hologram? While the translation of humans as being formed in the "image" of God is illuminating for us and helps us ponder the continuity between humans and Reality, for most us an image suggests a sense of separation: any picture of my mug remains separate from the mug itself. An image of a mug is not a mug. Yet one of the fascinating things about a hologram – a three-dimensional image – is that any part of the hologram contains the whole hologram. If you slice off a piece of a hologram of my mug, you still have a hologram of my mug. So perhaps we should experiment with "in the hologram of God invented he him" if we are to begin getting a sense of the way in which a part – each of us – partakes of the whole: the Godhead, Reality, Yahweh. Only by learning to doubt the apparent world of separation can this holographic aspect of ourselves be cultivated.

Perhaps now – when else? – we can understand Quaker William Penn's instructions to "look within" – he was teaching us a way out of the optical illusion of apparent reality. While we spend our lives from infancy to death focused on the external world with its dangers and allures, this is just one aspect of our perception. We spend our lives not in that external world, but in the subjective realm. Both are aspects of Reality, just as we can see, by turns, either a vase or two faces in the image below.



Psychologists call the shift in perspective that takes place between the appearance of the faces and the appearance of the vase a "gestalt shift." How can we experience the *metanoia*, the change in mind, necessary for a gestalt shift on our perception of Reality, and understand the world from the inside out rather than the outside in? How can we come to experience ourselves as a holographic aspect of Reality? By dwindling the self that appears to be in the foreground, the apparent background of the transcendent comes into view.

The self can dwindle in a moment of extraordinary surrender. Such surrender is an act not of passivity but of audacious courage. Abraham's audacity does not suddenly appear in Genesis 22, where his son is taken to a – his – sacrifice. "Sodom and Gomorrah" no doubt brings to mind images of destruction and righteous wrath – the outcome of sin and a wrathful God.

Then the LORD rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the LORD out of heaven; And he overthrew those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew upon the ground. (Genesis 19: 24-25)

Now *this* is the Yahweh we can recognize. This is the cinematic Yahweh lurking behind every disaster, the punishing God to whom televangelists point when a hurricane kills. But before the brimstone and the fire, Abraham had the chutzpah to negotiate, well, with God:

And Abraham drew near, and said, Wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked? Peradventure there be fifty righteous within the city: wilt thou also destroy and not spare the place for the fifty righteous that are therein? That be far from thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked: and that the righteous should be as the wicked, that be far from thee: Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right? (Genesis 18:25)

Now Abraham's sense of reciprocity with Yahweh here is remarkable. If Yahweh were totally distinct and other from Abraham, there would be no occasion for a dialogue of this sort. And Abraham's bargaining, here, finds its leverage in the essential Oneness of the "righteous with the wicked." Just as Shakespeare's character Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* cannot take merely a "pound of flesh" from Antonio without killing him and thus doing an injustice, Abraham knows that if the wicked are punished, so too will the righteous. The Oneness of human beings means that not only do the righteous live in proximity with the wicked, but that any given human being can be by turns righteous and wicked. If there is no essential self, how can one be essentially righteous or wicked?

The very basis of Abraham's capacity to bargain with Yahweh is thus first the unity with and not the separation of himself from Yahweh, and the empirical unity of the righteous and the wicked. "Doing right" requires a recognition of the deep proximity of good and evil – justice presupposes Oneness. Justice, "doing right," is somehow owed to humans by Yahweh. Why? Why, after all, would Yahweh be obliged to be "just" to humans if they were not holograms of God? Yahweh and Abraham are in accord:

And the LORD said, If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare all the place for their sakes. (Genesis 18:23-26)

Abraham's premise of Oneness continues as he bargains with Yahweh. What is it that moves him to speak? Is it not that he sees himself, who is "but dust and ashes," in the doomed inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah?

And Abraham answered and said, Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the LORD, which am but dust and ashes:

Peradventure there shall lack five of the fifty righteous: wilt thou destroy all the city for lack of five? And he said, If I find there forty and five, I will not destroy it. And he spake unto him yet again, and said, Peradventure there shall be forty found there. And he said, I will not do it for forty's sake. (Genesis 18:27)

Note the generosity of Yahweh here: Each time Abraham asks for grace in the event that righteous citizens are located, Yahweh agrees in what becomes a predictable rhythm, setting up a stepwise auction to thirty, twenty, and finally ten. Abraham's appeal to Yahweh is based on his difference from Yahweh, as he is but "dust and ashes," but so too does this difference seem to be the very basis of the generosity shown here. The difference – but not separation – between Yahweh and Abraham is that Yahweh can spare the righteous, and that his sparing is beyond any calculation or measure. There is no pause before any number of the righteous. Yahweh's justice here is beyond calculation – if there are any righteous mixed in with the wicked, then Yahweh's destruction would be essentially unjust, no matter the number. Yahweh literally does not seem to give it a thought. Perhaps this is why Abraham continues with his bargaining.

And he said unto him, Oh let not the LORD be angry, and I will speak: Peradventure there shall thirty be found there. And he said, I will not do it, if I find thirty there. And he said, Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the LORD: Peradventure there shall be twenty found there. And he said, I will not destroy it for twenty's sake. And he said, Oh let not the LORD be angry, and I will speak yet but this once: Peradventure ten shall be found there. And he said, I will not destroy it for ten's sake. (Genesis 18:30)

Ten or fifty, it matters not: if the righteous are destroyed with the wicked, Yahweh's destruction would be unjust. Perhaps it is clear to all, including the reader: even a single righteous being, if destroyed along with the unjust, renders the judgment of Yahweh uncertain at best.

If Yahweh's difference from Abraham consists in this capacity to spare the righteous from destruction without any calculation, of what does Abraham's difference from Yahweh consist? Is it simply the lack of this capacity to spare the righteous, or is there something else specific to Abraham?

Abraham would seem to know both his proximity to the Divine Ground – he is, after all, in negotiation with Being – and his distance: he is but "dust and ashes," wary of the anger of Yahweh. But what peculiar dust and ashes these are that find themselves advocating for the righteous before Yahweh. Do "dust and ashes" have the capacity to imagine themselves in the place of the punished? Do "dust and ashes" surge with the courage to negotiate with What Is – the eternal, unchanging aspect of Cosmos? Do "dust and ashes" have an idea of justice such that the destruction of the righteous would be deemed a wrong? Abraham has the strange capacity to contemplate, even judge, the very nature of Yahweh: "*Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?*"

It may seem obvious that "doing right" means sparing the righteous. But this question of unjust punishment of good people – the major chord of The Book of Job – asks us to ponder why good people suffer. If Yahweh is the "Judge of all the earth," it would appear that the law and jurisprudence of this lawgiver would – emphatically – be oriented toward doing right. In short, Abraham has an idea of God, and it is this idea that both enables his negotiation and gives him

vision of his audience. Abraham, like a good negotiator, appeals to the very nature of his partner in negotiation.

Yet Abraham's idea of Reality is just that – *an idea*. No idea we can have about Reality can be Reality itself. Alfred Korzybski, a 20th-century linguist, noted that “Whatever you say it is, it isn't.” Indeed, from the perspective of One Creation Unfolding and Becoming Aware of Itself Through Us, any idea we have of Reality is an attribute of Reality and not apart from it. It is *a* view and not *the* view – the view Reality has of Itself. And so, just as it appeared plausible that the required number of righteous would reach one or even zero, Abraham's idea bears its awful fruit:

*And he said, Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak yet but this once:
Peradventure ten shall be found there. And he said, I will not destroy it for ten's sake.*
(Genesis 18:32)

How has Abraham's *idea* of Reality framed his dialogue? Is there a purloined premise here, hidden in plain sight? More than once, Abraham has anticipated Yahweh becoming angry. Why? Let's contemplate some of the context for Abraham's dialogue with Yahweh that we have not yet reviewed. Does Abraham have occasion to anticipate that Yahweh will be wroth? Or is this an assumption that has no more grounding than the idea that a thief will always hide his booty?

Recall that Cain, having killed his brother Abel, was in fact preserved from destruction. And in finding that the earth had become “corrupt,” Yahweh did not become angry so much as “it grieved him at his heart” (Genesis 6:6). Yahweh, in response to the corruption, destroys the earth in a flood, yet “Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord.” (Genesis 6:8). Now the word translated as “grace” or, in other translations, “favor”, is חֵן, (transliterated as “*hên*”) speaks to Yahweh's capacity to be affected by humans. Yahweh encounters the human realm, hears the “cry” of Gomorrah, and is affected. Augustine, in a famous reflection on Genesis, wonders if the voice of God that creates is a *material* voice. Here we can wonder where God's hearing can be separated from the cry of humanity. Wonder is the beginning of contemplation. Wonder takes place in the Genesis of Now. Can you feel the *agape* of wonder?

Corruption grieves Yahweh in a way that seems to anticipate the errors of Babel: “And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” (Genesis 6:5). Again it is the use of this infinite capacity of the human mind to *imagine* that enables this fantasy of any separation from God. Babel imagines that time and space can be defeated, that transcendence can occur on the physical plane, that they literally, physically, might construct a stairway to heaven separated from the effects of time and space. Human thoughts here in Genesis 6:5 were likewise infinite in nature but separated, partial, incomplete: “only evil.”

Yet Yahweh consistently encounters individuals who seem to deflect any plan for complete destruction. Neither in the case of the flood or Sodom and Gomorrah is the destruction total. Both the destruction and the grace speak not to a separation of Yahweh from humans, but of their utter and total interconnection. *There is no devastation without grace*. Devastation-and-Grace, like Good-and-Evil emerges in patterns within the Bible as a merism – there is no One-Without-The Other.

And nor has there been anger. Recall that it is Cain who was wroth, not Yahweh. Might Abraham's fears of Yahweh's anger be based not on any behavior of Yahweh's, but of the human, all too human, behavior in Genesis thus far?

Dancing between dust and dust, “of dust and ashes”, Abraham may have a wrong view, but he has courage, and not without reason. Only one chapter before Abraham’s bargaining, Yahweh has taken Abraham for a walk:

And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect. And I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly. And Abram fell on his face: and God talked with him, saying, As for me, behold, my covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations. Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee. (Genesis 17:1-5)⁸

And so Abraham had good reason for this feeling of reciprocity with which he approaches Yahweh in negotiation for Sodom and Gomorrah. Yahweh has made the being formerly known as Abram a promise – a “covenant” – and a marker of this covenant is the change in Abram’s own name to “Abraham.” Note the context. Abram falls on his face, and a covenant emerges. Victory-Through-Surrender.

Once again, a divine word is uttered, and it is so. Yahweh has here become an author *within* creation as well as *of* creation. Adam named the beasts of the field, but Yahweh names Abraham. Abram, rather than making a name for himself, has his name remade – or what we might today call “remixed” – by Yahweh through the practice of surrender. Creation is ongoing! In this sense the promise that Yahweh has made to Abram has been written into Abram’s name – he who is now Abraham. “Abram” means “Exalted father”, “Abraham”, “father of many.”

And while there is indeed an asymmetry here between Yahweh and Abraham – one names, the other is named – there is nonetheless an extraordinary continuity between Yahweh and Abram-Becoming-Abraham. They walk as one, in perfection. Perhaps it is worth pausing, then, on the idea that Yahweh will “multiply” Abram into Abraham. What kind of divine math operates here?

This is not the first promise that Yahweh has made to Abram:

And I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth: so that if a man can number the dust of the earth, then shall thy seed also be numbered. (Genesis 13:16)

Yahweh’s gift here is beyond reckoning. It is unfathomable, not calculable. No human can number the dust of the earth, let alone the ballots of a presidential election in Florida. Dust clumps, rendering it as difficult to differentiate one particle from another as it is to separate the righteous from the wicked. Why does Yahweh use this figure of speech to communicate with Abram about his gift?

Yahweh communicates here through *negation* – he describes what he has given by indicating what is not. No matter how hard he might try, Abraham cannot calculate what he has been given. The concept of numerical infinity – as old as the ancient Greeks – includes within it the set of uncountable numbers, but Yahweh is communicating not through positive but easily

⁸ A fascinating parallel to this passage can be found in Ramana Maharshi’s *Forty Verses on Reality*: “If one enquires ‘Who am I?’ within the mind, the individual ‘I’ falls down abashed as soon as one reaches the Heart and immediately Reality manifests itself spontaneously as ‘I-I’. Although it reveals itself as ‘I’, it is not the ego but the Perfect Being, the Absolute Self.”

misunderstood means – “Your kin will be infinite!” – but through negative and yet absolute terms: my gift to you is not comprehensible. It is beyond thought. “Infinite” puts a label on a quantity or an aspect of reality that is beyond measure, but we can easily fall into the trap of thinking that we know what we are saying when we say a word like “infinite” or “God.” So rather than make the error of Babel – whose stairway would necessarily be impossibly infinite – Yahweh points to his gift as beyond thought. Without calculation, there is no anticipation, and, it is to be hoped, Abram's face will not fall.

True, he can measure part of his gift in one sense: he can walk the land he has been gifted, as instructed by Yahweh, and see its extent and nature. But this walking is a dwelling in the land, a feeling out – it is not measured by anything but Abram's gait. But the gift promised here by Yahweh – and that promise happens Now – simply cannot be abstracted from the act of experiencing it. To think here would be to make a mistake. To think that he could fathom the promise of Yahweh is to make an error. Physicist Richard Feynman is quoted as saying: “If you think you understand quantum theory ... you don't understand quantum theory” (Dawkins, *The God Delusion*). If we, or Abraham, think we understand the gift of existing at all, then we don't understand existence. Reality's gift simply cannot be comprehended or measured, and it is this gift beyond thought that is Now being communicated here – through negation. Just as no stairway can lead to transcendence, no thought can fathom being. You can't get there from here!

This strategy of negation is appropriately absolute: it says precisely what it is *not*. Only Abram, in this scenario, can discover what is – through the legwork of exploration. He cannot model it with thought. Yahweh's comparison of dust and Abram's seed looks like an act of positive communication, but upon inspection, when we contemplate it, it falls to pieces like the Tower of Babel. By making a self-undermining mark between what is and what is not, Yahweh opens the space for Abram's communication with Reality. By confounding language, Yahweh communicates.

Reality is trying to get through to humans, through the distinction of what should and should not be eaten, through the acts of sacrifice the self that thinks it is doing, through the direction into self-inquiry: “Why art thou wroth?” *Genesis* can be usefully read as the continual search by Yahweh for recipes for communicating with those who, in the hologram of God created he him. It can be difficult to get and keep the attention of those with the boundless capacity to imagine. The gift of the imagination – the out-of-nowhere creativity that Adam displays when he names the beasts of the field – calls forth Yahweh's techniques for focusing our attention, capable as it is of endless dispersal.

We may notice that everywhere we look, humans are focused on screens and not on each other, but the attempts at awakening in *Genesis* suggest that our attention has been wandering for some time. Perhaps now the wandering of our attention has been made more visible through the gift of the screen. Capable of absolutely anything, our imagination becomes enthralled with a material, and necessarily incomplete, version of transcendence. Is spiritual evolution the process of experiencing and comprehending the transcendent through our unique material and finite situation?

Yahweh walks with Abram precisely to commune with him. Communication names a coming together, a being in common in which our significant differences do not disappear. All communication is based on an equal parts connection – through presence or at a distance – and difference, the difference between one sound and another, one mark and another. The separation of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil was the drawing of a distinction, a difference. In attempting to communicate this difference – a difference that is distinct from and not identical to

prohibition – the signal did not get through. The nature of the sign was not perceived. Eve simply had too much imagination – she imagined that the fruit looked good to eat. In discussion with Cain, Yahweh is bewildered by a being who would be wroth while forgetting the immense, incalculable gift of existence itself. Cain proudly displays his fruits of the field, even as he is himself a fruit of existence.

Thus the pattern we have begun to notice before: What appears to be a punishment is, in fact, a repeated and shifting attempt at communication. Different rhetorical tactics – sacrifice, gifts, negotiation, covenants – are attempted in this encounter between the limited and the transcendent. But what of those apparently obvious instances of punishment – the flood and Sodom and Gomorrah? Surely these are straightforward instances of punishment? If anything is straightforward here in the encounter between Being and a being, it is the persistence of grace with its apparent opposite – destruction. With Noah, Yahweh attempts to draw a difference that is not an opposition like good and evil – the difference between grace and destruction. And within his ark of grace, Noah, with the help of a dove, looks for a sign that the waters had abated:

And the dove came in to him in the evening; and, lo, in her mouth was an olive leaf plucked off: so Noah knew that the waters were abated from off the earth. (Genesis 7:11)

Note here the nature of the sign for Noah: The olive leaf is out of context. The apparent antithesis between water and earth is overcome. The ability of the dove to pluck the leaf from one place to another enables the communication that the waters had (somewhat) abated. But the very nature of this dispersal of leaf and bird means that it, too, is transient and uncertain at best, a mixed message:

And he stayed yet other seven days; and sent forth the dove; which returned not again unto him any more. (Genesis 7:12)

Noah's knowledge is partial, incomplete – an interpretation of a scrap of leaf snatched from a bit of dry land. Noah has an inkling, but he does not know. And so he waits. Noah dwells not only in the ark, but in the Now.

If we contemplate the ark, crammed with living things of all kinds, Noah somehow presiding, our imagination misses out on the essential attribute of the ark: it is a site of waiting. It is a site of not knowing. Noah waits for seven days for the rains to begin, waits through the forty days and forty nights of rain, waits through the 150 days that the waters “prevail upon the earth.” Noah waits through the “seventh month” to the “tenth month”, then another forty days, and he sends out the raven and the dove as scouts. Noah waits for the dove, and the raven, who does not seem to return but instead goes “to and fro.” Noah waits in vain for the dove to return from its second sojourn. The waiting continues until, out of the immense silence, Yahweh speaks: “Go forth of the ark, thou, and thy wife, and thy sons, and thy sons' wives with thee” (Genesis 7:16).

We may wish to credit the ark, or Yahweh's grace, with Noah's survival, and of course both are deeply connected to his passage through the flood and beyond. But in our emphasis on the objects – the ark of gopher wood, the plucked leaf – and the characters – the dove, the raven, Noah himself – we may fail to notice that it is this capacity to wait, alone, without knowledge, that is vital.

Perhaps Yahweh contemplated Noah's immense and continual surrender to the Now. Is it this waiting without thoughts of the past or anticipation of the future that Yahweh is teaching to Noah? Can we, now, appreciate the strategies necessary to the unbounded, incalculable waiting of Noah? Is the ark a chamber for not only preserving life, but for inducing the cloud of unknowing? Is it not through this exemplary unknowing that life was preserved in this account? Mystics through the ages have sought refuge and solitude in caves, monasteries and forests. Contemporary mystics since scientist John Lilly have sought out flotation tanks for the removal of all external distractions, enabling a focus on the within, a domain beyond thought. *Was the ark Noah's flotation tank?*

The flotation tank is, of course, a technology invented in the 20th century. And Noah did have a window: "*A window shalt thou make to the ark, and in a cubit shalt thou finish it above*" (Genesis 6:16). But I have found that the Bible becomes useful the minute we attempt to practice it, and it becomes dogma the second we seek to believe or disbelieve it. So to determine if this claim for the ark as a chamber for inducing the cloud of unknowing has any validity, no amount of archaeology or speculation on the nature of ancient technology is necessary. All that we need to do is contemplate and reenact Noah's state of mind during his time in the ark.

Reenacting Noah at Gate 14, Boarding Now

The plane arrives at the gate. Smiling travelers arriving from some pleasant, perhaps even tropical locale, file off. Smiling middle aged men who ordinarily and indifferently wear poorly fitting, non-descript suits find themselves wearing woven hats and shorts. The sense of imminent joy is almost unbearable. In three hours you will be transported out of a frigid, windblown icy city into the wafting balmy breeze, a sandy crescent lined with waving palms. You can practically feel the cold beer in your hand. Mexican beer commercials dance in your head.

A distorted voice scratches through the microphone, but you can't quite make it out. "Captain...delay."

A shockwave of dread creeps up your spine. Thoughts swarm, mutate, take tangents from each other. The cold beer has vanished, replaced by a terror at uncertainty. The abyss of the unknown swallows all hope.

Minutes crawl by... Airline authorities, it now seems extremely likely, are waiting on some bureaucrat. They have received an anonymous tip. Either the plane needs a part that is impossible to locate, the pilot is drunk, or there is a terror threat. It must be one of the three. What else could possibly explain it?

Suddenly, everyone rises in response to a cryptic message over the sound system. "Boarding... now." Now?

Gifted with neuronal connections beyond number, the space of all possible thought generates a seemingly endless and speculative internal narrative from our Default Mode Network. Endlessly, we try to figure out our lives. Then we try to figure out the lives we think we have lived while figuring it out, and haven't. Most of us, faced with the task of simply being alone in a room, become desperate enough to shock ourselves rather than experience nothing at all. Rather than simply getting still and experiencing selflessness (Psalms 46:10), we generate distracting stories with which we avoid what is right in front of us, Now.

Abraham's Journey Beyond Thought

And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of. (Genesis 22:2)

Now if our own capacity to simply wait is thwarted by our endless internal narrative and a desire to fill the apparent lack opened up by its sense of separation from cold Mexican beer, we can admire Noah's unstated but heroic capacity for letting go of any expectation whatsoever. An adept in the realm of not-knowing, Noah teaches us that, even an apocalypse can be survived if we surrender our need to know what happens next by contemplating the genesis of Now.

And as much as we might rightly admire Noah's zen-like capacity to not-know and simply unfold with the Now without wondering about what will happen next, even his downright Olympian achievements in the cloud of unknowing pale in comparison to Abraham's in his famous journey to "offer" Isaac. For this otherwise inexplicable command by Yahweh to take Isaac and "offer him there for a burnt offering" – in short, to murder his son in an act of sacrifice – becomes understandable if not repeatable as an instance of Yahweh's ongoing teaching for us to surrender, and to surrender Now.

The King James Bible translates the first active verb of Genesis 22 as "tempt":

And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am. (Genesis 22:1)

This translation, while dated, is not entirely without merit. "Tempt" comes from the Latin for "testing" or "trying." The modern sense of tempt as "entice" or "provoke to desire" is entirely distinct. We may be tempted to suggest that Abraham somehow is provoked into desiring a disobedience to Yahweh's simple command to "*Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.*" But among the most spellbinding aspects of Genesis 22 is the fact that we have absolutely no textual evidence that Abraham harbored even a thought of departing from this command. Rather than think, Abraham was nothing but *response*. In this sense, what was tested for, searched for here was a separation from Yahweh. In Abraham there was neither disobedience nor obedience – only a unity with Yahweh that can be perceived in his activities as pure response to Yahweh's word. Abraham was empty of anything other than Yahweh – his apparent doings were the being of Yahweh. When we cook, we test for doneness – Abraham's was a test of Oneness.

This ability to respond to Yahweh – What Is, Reality – is not a new attribute for Abraham. Recall our discussion of his capacity to bargain with Yahweh just before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah:

And the men turned their faces from thence, and went toward Sodom: but Abraham stood yet before the LORD. (Genesis 18:22)

Abraham literally stands with Yahweh here – he is not separated from What Is. It is this very proximity and even identity with Yahweh that enables him to appear to bargain for the sparing of

the just, a bargaining that reveals the continual Oneness of grace with destruction. The men leave – Abraham remains. This continual connection with Yahweh, Reality, means that when Yahweh shows up unannounced at his tent, Abraham instantly responds with hospitality:

*And he lift up his eyes and looked, and, lo, three men stood by him: and when he saw them, he ran to meet them from the tent door, and bowed himself toward the ground, And said, My LORD, if now I have found favour in thy sight, pass not away, I pray thee, from thy servant:
Let a little water, I pray you, be fetched, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree:
And I will fetch a morsel of bread, and comfort ye your hearts; after that ye shall pass on: for therefore are ye come to your servant. And they said, So do, as thou hast said.
(Genesis 18:2-5)*

This instantaneous and active welcoming of Yahweh and his entourage may appear to be nothing but formal politeness – what you do when God comes to visit. But in fact it is this welcoming, this opening of a space for interaction, that speaks to both Yahweh’s identity with Abraham, his deep interconnection, as well as his distance and difference – he is a “servant.” Consider the actions that ensue – one can practically visualize an invisible thread connecting Yahweh and Abraham here, as Abraham welcomes Yahweh with *agape*. Abraham cleaves unto Yahweh:

And Abraham hastened into the tent unto Sarah, and said, Make ready quickly three measures of fine meal, knead it, and make cakes upon the hearth. And Abraham ran unto the herd, and fetcht a calf tender and good, and gave it unto a young man; and he hasted to dress it. And he took butter, and milk, and the calf which he had dressed, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree, and they did eat. (Genesis 18:6-8)

Abraham hastens, he runs, he speaks. Sarah makes ready and kneads. Abraham fetches, gives, and sets butter, milk and a dressed calf there in the shade, and together they eat. In short, Yahweh is *welcomed*. Yahweh is *served*. Is welcoming an action that is like all of these other actions? Is it the sum of all of these actions? Is service an action?

We cannot determine the answer to these queries by looking up “welcome” in the dictionary, although I welcome you to do so. (The etymology is particularly instructive.) We must instead contemplate, for ourselves, the feeling and nature of a welcome. Welcome welcoming by practicing it, now. Welcome the only experience of time we can ever have: the Now. Eyes closed, looking up towards the middle of your eyebrows, breathe in and out into a calm space. Begin chanting:

*Welcome now.
Now welcome.
Welcome now.
Welcome now.
Now welcome.
Welcome now.*

What does it take to welcome? Who does it? When do they do it? You might notice that it is not an action of the usual sort – running, or fetching, or kneading. Welcoming is not so much a doing as an undoing: a space is made in the self – you can practically feel yourself being hollowed out, making way for the Now. In welcoming, we get out of our own way. If the “I” feels closed, separate, apart, “welcome” requires an opening which undoes the separation.

*Welcome now.
Now welcome.
Welcome now.
Welcome now.
Now welcome.
Welcome now.*

If you can welcome Now, now, you might see that in welcoming Now, all sense of the separation necessary to the idea of past/present/future cannot be sustained. The Now, in its Now-ness, is not the past become present. It is not the present about to become future. The Now is nothing but itself, and it is always Now. Welcome it – it’s all there ever is. Everything else is an idea of what is, but enough about that, for now.

And so in welcoming Yahweh in this way, Abraham and Sarah open themselves to Yahweh. To serve Being, they cleave unto Yahweh – they empty their agenda and open it to Yahweh. Twentieth-century saint Mother Theresa puts it this way:

It is only when we realize our nothingness, our emptiness, that God can fill us with Himself. When we become full of God then we can give God to others, for from the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks. (Come Be My Light)

Perhaps this explains the improbable birth of Abraham’s son, his only son whom he loveth, Isaac. For it was only by opening themselves to Yahweh that Isaac was born in the first place. Under the shade of the tree, in the midst of the feast, Yahweh makes a promise:

*And he said, I will certainly return unto thee according to the time of life; and, lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son. And Sarah heard it in the tent door, which was behind him.
(Genesis 18:10)*

The welcome makes possible a promise. By cleaving unto Yahweh, forming a continuity with What Is, the barrier between now and the future dissolves. A promise, it would seem here, thrives in the domain of welcoming. This welcoming both marks Yahweh as a guest, a stranger, and yet in deep connection, even communion, with Abraham and Sarah. In this hastening and running and kneading and making ready, in this welcoming, Abraham and Sarah become aspects of Yahweh and are not distinct from the divine. They form a commons with their food.

Recall from our earlier discussion that the *Bhagavad Gita* points to *karma* yoga as an excellent method for experiencing unity with the divine. By performing actions for the sake not of the self but of an other, the usual sense of “I, me, mine” withers – unless, of course, one becomes proud of one’s charity.

Note that this may appear to be a strange sort of welcome, but is appearance reality? Sarah is not, it would seem, beneath the tree, but in the door of the tent. Does Sarah welcome by making space? What is she making space for? The future:

Now Abraham and Sarah were old and well stricken in age; and it ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women...Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also? (Genesis 18:11-12)

On the divine scale, there is no barrier between word and action. Words are the genesis of Now. “In the beginning” names and enacts the eternal Now, the creative unfolding continuity that is the only experience we ever have. We do not experience the past, but only imagine it, and we imagine it in the Now. The future is an object of speculation, and both past and future are only encountered, even as ideas and projections – you guessed it – Now. Dominated by thoughts of the past – Sarah and Abraham are “old and well stricken in age” – both have ideas of a (barren) future. Hence Sarah’s laughter – the sheer absurdity of sudden fertility at the age of ninety – is, like Cain’s countenance, full of expectation. Laughter, according to contemporary neuroscience, depends upon this sort of thwarted expectation:

Humans experience the humor of a joke in three phases. First, the listener encounters some type of incongruity: a punch line that seems out of place compared with the joke’s set-up. Then, following a cognitive construct called surprise and coherence, the listener tries to resolve this incongruity. Finally, the listener’s brain determines the joke’s sense – or lack thereof – and decides whether or not the joke is funny. (Harvard Mahoney Neuroscience Institute Letter)

Just as Cain’s face falls precisely because he had expectations, so too does Sarah’s cackling signify her certainty about a domain that never exists: the future. The sheer incongruity of a 90-year-old pregnancy disrupts Sarah’s sense of who she is, and all she can do is laugh.

Can you observe laughter? Cackle lightly to yourself, re-enacting Sarah. Do it again. Let it roll out of you. Who laughs?

Sometimes Yahweh is the ultimate straight man. Always in the Now, Yahweh does not seem to get the joke:

And the LORD said unto Abraham, Wherefore did Sarah laugh, saying, Shall I of a surety bear a child, which am old? Is any thing too hard for the LORD? At the time appointed I will return unto thee, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son. (Genesis 18:11-14)

If laughter emerges in part from incongruity, it may well be that Yahweh, What Is, *does not yet know incongruity*. In this scenario are we watching Yahweh, Being, learn about what Being is becoming? “Amazing! Incongruity! Being One, and nothing but, incongruity is, ahem, something new indeed.” In this sense, these experiments in spiritual evolution would apply not only to the development of human beings through the trials of selection awakening to their Oneness with their ecosystems and All That Is, but to Being Itself as it explores all possible states – even incongruity.

If All That Is explores its own nature and possibility, this resonates with the genesis story of the *Taittiriyaopaniṣad*. Being One, it desires to explore the nature of being multiple: *tad aikshata bahu*, or “may I become many.” Hence the apparent multiplicity of the world is just that – apparent. When we perceive the incongruity of apparent multiplicity with the obvious and yet obscure fact of Oneness, it can feel like a cosmic joke.

The joke, of course, is on Sarah, for she does indeed bear a child, Isaac, Abraham’s son, his only son, whom he loveth. Yahweh speaks, a certain oath is made, and Isaac is born. Word made flesh?

How can we begin to comprehend this process by which language is the genesis of Now? What happens and does not happen next can only be understood if we experiment with oaths. If an oath is to be, in fact, an oath, there can be no self present in it. We must become, with Mother Theresa, empty, “forgetful of self.” We talk, incorrectly, of “giving our word” as a promise. But if our word is given, nobody gives it. For an oath is precisely the identity of a word with its action, and a self only gets in the way.

The Zen tradition treats this over a cup of tea. A university professor visits a Zen Master:

The scholar had an extensive background in Buddhist Studies and was an expert on the Nirvana Sutra. He came to study with the master and after making the customary bows, asked her to teach him Zen. Then, he began to talk about his extensive doctrinal background and rambled on and on about the many sutras he had studied.

The master listened patiently and then began to make tea. When it was ready, she poured the tea into the scholar’s cup until it began to overflow and run all over the floor. The scholar saw what was happening and shouted, “Stop, stop! The cup is full; you can’t get anymore in.”

The master stopped pouring and said: “You are like this cup; you are full of ideas about Buddha’s Way. You come and ask for teaching, but your cup is full; I can’t put anything in. Before I can teach you, you’ll have to empty your cup.”

Only if we welcome What Is can we empty ourselves of who we think we are. In emptying ourselves of who we think we are, our actual nature, including our continuity with the divine, comes into view. Hilarious!

Is it this emptiness of intent that makes an oath possible? We ordinarily think of a promise as something “we” need to keep, but in this instance it would appear that the condition of promising is to harbor no distinction between oneself and the promise – one IS the promise. Already in a covenant or promise with Yahweh, deeply interconnected with the divine, Abraham gets a message:

...Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of. (Genesis 22:2)

Now at this point we have every right to expect that Abraham will bargain with Yahweh. “Take me instead!” or even “Make up your mind! First you give us a child late in life, and now you wish

to take it?!” Astonishment, grief, anger, desperate pleading – all of these would be expected in the context of this directive from Yahweh. But here, what is *not* in the text becomes at least as important as what is in it. And Abraham no more hesitates to respond to Yahweh here than he did in the shade of the tree. In short, he responds precisely as Yahweh instructs him to – Now.

And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and clave the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him. (Genesis 22:3)

It is the absence here of any other response besides these actions – rising, saddling his ass – that ought to give us pause and make us wonder. We may be tempted to label this actualization of Yahweh’s directions to be “obedience” on the part of Abraham, but “obedience” presupposes some other impulse besides the one followed. A dog often obeys its master when told to sit, even as its tail wags and its nose is sniffing in another direction. The sheer absence of any other response from Abraham is the most vital scripture we have on our effort to comprehend what Yahweh is testing and teaching here.

Then on the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off. (Genesis 22:4)

It can be difficult, when we contemplate this passage, to truly experience what is left out. Already we are three days into Abraham’s journey to sacrifice his son! For now, we can ignore the fact that this is the only son he loves, birthed as he was by Sarah and not Hagar, Sarah’s maid. And when we ignore it, we are implicitly remembering that Abraham is *human*. It is human to love one son more than another, and it is this human that Yahweh is addressing, not some ideal perfect being devoid of flaw, who is being tested here by Yahweh. Would a perfect being even require testing?

It is this humanity of Abraham that should give us pause, and which gives this teaching its sublime power. If Abraham were some sort of spiritual super hero, who loved all beings equally and achieved equanimity in all situations, we wouldn’t really feel we had much to learn from him. “I’m not like that!” we might rightly say, and we might rightly doubt that any human being could or would achieve this sort of Oneness with the divine. But we have seen Abraham stand face to face with Yahweh, arguing for the rights of humans to justice. We have seen him, with a between-the-lines anxiety, offering a meal to Yahweh under the shade of a tree. And we have heard Sarah laugh at the preposterous idea that she could become pregnant at the age of 90. We have watched as she did, indeed, bear a child. And we have watched as, absurdly, Yahweh commands Abraham to kill the very child that has been given to him.

Abraham gets a message from Yahweh, and the message becomes pure action. And then: Three days pass! Three days of wondering. Three days of terror. Three days of ideas for somehow escaping the inescapable. But absolutely none of this is represented in Genesis 22. Why?

Perhaps none of these thoughts are reported precisely because it is crucial to this teaching that Abraham does not have them: Cleaving unto Yahweh, Abraham is represented as taking a journey beyond thought. Perhaps musician Miles Davis never said “it’s not the notes you play, it’s the notes you don’t play,” but especially if he didn’t, it captures this chasm of silence that erupts right before our eyes, right Now, in Genesis 22:4. Three days of silence, three days beyond thought *is the achievement here*, and it is an achievement that is only possible to reenact if we

experience the genesis of Now. Now there are No Thoughts of past or future: “How will I possibly deal with the death of my son, whom I lovest? Should I obey God or my instincts and sense of right and wrong?” Now is the domain of No Thoughts concerning the unthinkable: “Why would Yahweh have me kill that which I have been gifted with?”

And Abraham said unto his young men, Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you. (Genesis 22:5)

One might expect a certain nervous reticence from Abraham here, a lie or a distraction to shield the horrible truth of this journey. But instead we get a straightforward report and, again, silence:

And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife; and they went both of them together. (Genesis 22:6)

Isaac, carrying wood for his own sacrifice...Has Abraham no shame? In fact, he does not. Like Adam and Eve before the eating of the fruit, he has no shame. No resistance. No self. One could even say: no conscience. Shame would require an interruption in the pure capacity to respond, the response-ability, of Abraham. Shame, deception, special pleading – these would point to Abraham’s own “self,” even what we might want to call a “conscience.” There is no sense of shame, no sense of right and wrong here, because there is nobody there to have it. “*So empty of self had Mother Theresa become that she spontaneously kept shifting the focus of her letters from herself to Jesus*” (Come Be My Light).

And, to be clear, Genesis abounds in alternative strategies which Abraham could have pursued. A favorite strategy is substitution, as when Laban, after promising his daughter Rachel to Jacob, substitutes his first born, Leah:

And it came to pass, that in the morning, behold, it was Leah: and he said to Laban, What is this thou hast done unto me? did not I serve with thee for Rachel? wherefore then hast thou beguiled me? (Genesis 29:25)

And Abraham himself has already operated through the deception of names, labeling Sarah his “sister” while he travelled, to avoid conflict. But here, there is no substitution of Ishmael for Isaac. There is no substitution of himself for Isaac. Any parent can recognize the strategy – their first, spontaneous thought would be “Take me instead!”

But despite the appearance of altruism, such a strategy would be an evolutionarily rational choice made by a calculating self: Isaac is Abraham’s future, the “seed of many nations.” Much more than Abraham’s life is being asked for here: If Abraham ever believed he had a future, it is about to be offered up to Yahweh:

And Isaac spake unto Abraham his father, and said, My father: and he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering? (Genesis 22:7)

Where indeed? Has Abraham forgotten the main ingredient for a successful sacrifice? It would be easy to see the joke here: Isaac, wondering about the whereabouts of the lamb, is, of course, the

lamb, provided by Yahweh. “*I have gotten a man from the Lord.*” (Genesis 4:1). Or is it that always and everywhere, each and every time, the sacrifice is of the self?

And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together. (Genesis 22:8)

In giving over even the action of the sacrifice itself to Yahweh – “God will provide himself a lamb” – demonstrates precisely that it is not Abraham, but Yahweh, who is the causal agent for all of these actions. Abraham is not even the sacrifice here – his self has already been dissolved into Yahweh’s. Abraham is nothing but a manifestation of Yahweh. No “I, me, mine.” No “past, present, future.” Abraham lives only in the Now, cleaving unto the recipe he has received from Yahweh:

And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood. And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. (Genesis 22:9-10)

By now, you have probably started to notice what is left out of this tale of an offering. You may even hear an involuntary soundtrack of the violin screech from *Psycho*, the classic film by Alfred Hitchcock.⁹ But if you can get still with this horrific passage, you can perhaps feel that this text moves us beyond horror to the unthinkable.

This reflection on genre – is it horror? Is it slapstick? Is it scripture? – may seem irrelevant or even blasphemous, but it enables us to focus on what this passage is not. Devoid of sentiment, we are confronted instead with actions: arriving, building, laying wood, binding. There are no pithy quotes, no last words, no protestations or lamentations. The passage is unthinkable precisely because it contains no thoughts, only actions. Carried along by the prose, the simple manifestation of Yahweh’s word, we might experience Abraham’s state of mind as he simply and absolutely *makes it so*. With action crowding out thoughts, the sequence is chilling and inexorable. Without reflection, Abraham acts.

And the angel of the LORD called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I. (Genesis 22:11)

We might reasonably wonder: How is it possible for Abraham to hear this message from God? Empty, in the silence beyond thought, he can hardly avoid it. Here is what he heard next:

And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me. (Genesis 22:11-12)

What does it mean here to “fear” God? The Hebrew, *yā·rê*, points beyond our ordinary conception of fear, as in “I ain’t afraid of no ghosts” or “I have a fear of flying” or “I’m afraid that bag of salty snacks is now empty.” This fear here is kin to terror, which comes from the word for “shaking” or trembling. This is not an emotion so much as a bodily response: One is “scared out

of their wits.” Sarah laughs, Abraham trembles, though perhaps his knife hand was steady. Does total terror, the awe before Being itself felt by a being, Abraham, empty Abraham of thoughts?

All we can deduce from the text is that Yahweh’s directive had Abraham’s total unwavering attention. Where is yours?

(Epi)Genesis and Spiritual Evolution

*Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved. (Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*)*

*What if spiritual evolution, like its biological counterpart, works through failing on the road to fitness? (Richard Doyle, *The Genesis of Now*)*

Simply contemplating the shift in feeling and tone that takes place when we think of Abraham being “tested” rather than “tempted” can bring the nature of his ordeal into relief. With his attention focused completely and totally on the task at hand – the offering of his son, his only son whom he loveth – there is no room for any attention on himself. Nor is there any room for any wandering of the mind that would place this incongruous directive from Yahweh into a story that would somehow make sense of it. Instead, the absurd command remains beyond explanation, beyond sense, beyond thought. Neither comprehensible nor incomprehensible, the command from Yahweh, Being, Reality, simply *is*. Is this not our state as well? Is life comprehensible? It is scarcely livable!

It may seem strange that a human being would require such terror and trials in order to glimpse the most natural of all experiences – Reality, Being Itself. But as evolutionary beings gifted with both senses and imagination, we are usually, like Eve, lost in the labyrinthine identification with what looks good to eat, what seems right to do, and what appears to give us pleasure. Our sense of linear time – learned habits of worrying over the past and anticipating the future – lead us to take appearance for reality, missing the invisible emergence of the Now as we chase the phantom of the past and the specter of a future. Our attention is bent not towards Being, the basis of all things, but towards things and the spectacular dramas that feature them. We become fascinated by the sense that we cause our own existence, and we seldom get a glimpse of where our attention comes from, entranced as we are with the objects and narratives of our attention. Hence we are tested by our environment and our lives: Can we experience Reality? Can we, through practice and experiment, evolve into beings who comprehend Being and understand our true nature?

It does help that these events and objects, while seeming to persist, come and go. Sometimes this can happen suddenly, like the “famine and death” of the “war of nature” described by Darwin above: A brother overdoses at 27; a mother dies in the night, her heart breaking. As painful as they are, these sudden episodes of loss can be seen as gifts, glimpses into the actual

nature of reality. Nothing material persists. Period. Abraham's son, his only son whom he loveth, can be lost. Being, Reality, just might take him. Eventually, it most definitely will. The Buddhist tradition calls the impossible demand that material reality conform to our models of reality "attachments," and it is for attachments that Reality was querying Abraham. Could Abraham, would Abraham, empty himself even of his attachment to Isaac? Isn't it precisely when we lose our sense of control, the experience of this ongoing "war of nature," that we experience ourselves at our most exalted?

Was Reality's test of Abraham any different from the "laws acting all around us" that so inspired Darwin? While Darwin writes in the epigraph above as if the most "exalted object which we are capable of conceiving" were the evolution of animal life, here we can see that this emptiness, this selflessness, this *agape* is yet more exalted, and that the narrative of Abraham and Isaac is precisely a way of rendering it. And perhaps Darwin is right – the nature of the offering of Isaac is precisely that we cannot conceive it, we cannot fathom it, and so our only choice in contemplating it is to lose the self that attempts to comprehend it. We understand Abraham when we do not understand him. If we succeed, we fail. Failing, we succeed. Out of the war of nature, *agape*.

When we fail to conceptualize Abraham's test, we reenact his journey beyond thought. Dwelling in the unthinkable, we develop beyond the need to conceptualize and label. In this development, the "I", and its desire to "make sense" of the dynamically unfolding events that are much larger than us and not subject to our control, can fall away.

It is perhaps in this sense that Abraham's test is ours. Can we let go of our attachments and empty ourselves of what we think we know, so that we can get a glimpse of Reality and Evolve Now?

Biologists, beginning with the work of C.H. Waddington in the 1930s, have dubbed epigenetic phenomena "processes that affect gene expression in a heritable manner without altering DNA sequence." While until recently most geneticists thought that our inheritance resulted entirely from our genetic endowment, it has become clear that environmental factors, including diet, exercise and stress levels, could and probably have altered the traits inherited by generations in our species. Chants – such as "Welcome Now, Now Welcome, Welcome Now" – have been found both anecdotally and in research to lower stress levels. Given the operation of the Default Mode Network we have discussed, this makes sense: Chanting "crowds" out our internal self-referential narrative and releases us, if only for a time, from the feeling of "I, me, mine." Chanting enables a feeling of selflessness. Shut up and chant!

And what if one's life itself were to become something like a chant, a selfless practice? Abraham's covenant with Yahweh requires him to become totally devoid of self-interest, and it is precisely this experience of *agape* that the offering of Isaac elaborates and tests. And Isaac, of course, is the promised "seed" of many nations. Recall that Yahweh makes his covenant not only with Abram (Abraham), but with his "seed":

And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.
(Genesis 17:7)

This promise of Yahweh's is not with a person, but with a person and their "seed." What kind of extraordinary promise is a promise that is "everlasting?" What sort of time is implicated in this

oath? Yahweh here treats time as One eternal moment. When is that eternal moment? Can we find it? Is this a covenant with us, Now?

After Abraham's test, oaths are mentioned twelve more times in Genesis. Do we get the point? If Eve's *karma* yoga was not inherited by Cain, was Reality attempting to find a way to make *agape* heritable across generations? Were the oaths and covenants that abound in Genesis precisely attempts to select, out of the war of nature, in the midst of famine and war, for a selflessness that would manifest for many generations, always available in the Now?

If so, there hasn't been much success. *Agape* – selfless love – though not extinct, remains a rare attribute. But perhaps in our experiments in contemplating who we are and where we come from, we are being pushed and prodded by the forces acting all around us to let go of our attachments and experience Reality, Now.