

Questions Answered and Answers Questioned:

Conversations with a Spiritual Guide

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CONTENTS

1. Introduction: Who am I? Who is the Guide? What is this Book?

PART ONE: LIVING WELL

Creating Joy: Attention, Appreciation, Abundance

- 1. Attention: Investment Strategies for the Mind**
- 2. Thought: Metabolizing the Real**
- 3. Mind-Sailing**
- 4. Happiness: Retuning the Radio, Appreciating the Song**
- 5. The Ego is Immature, Irrational, but Overcomeable**
- 6. Good Dog, Bad Dog: Mastering the Mind**
- 7. The Mind is a Display Window that Attracts Customers**
- 8. Faith is Fulfilled: The Mother/Child Team**
- 9. Beyond Trust and Faith...Assurance**
- 10. Self-Love is the Window Through Which God's Love Shines**

Dealing with Difficult Emotions

- 11. Anxiety: Calming the Barking Dog**
- 12. Anxiety: Comforting the Child**
- 13. Anxiety: The Unheard Messenger**
- 14. Fear: To Whom Do You Grant Power?**
- 15. Anger and Anxiety: Accepting, Witnessing, Channeling, Enjoying**

- 16. Frustration: What to (Un)do About It?**
- 17. Anger: Choosing to Make Yourself Soft**
- 18. Weathering Your Emotional Weather**
- 19. The Meat and the Stewpot (Emotional Versus Spiritual Growth)**
- 20. Dream Problems Only Dissolve When You Wake Up**

Living With Others in a Challenging World

- 21. Disappointments and God-Appointments**
- 22. Are Children a Burden or Blessing?**
- 23. Don't Try Harder, Try Easier**
- 24. Self-Esteem: Avoiding Others' Projections**
- 25. Listening Beyond Positions and Op-positions**
- 26. The World is a Dark Stage**
- 27. The Troubles of the World: How Not to be Overcome**
- 28. War: The Horror of the Unreal**

Pain, Illness, Aging: The Body and Beyond

- 29. Pain Doesn't Have to be that Painful**
- 30. Medications: Sin or Self-care?**
- 31. Physical Pain and the Intact Covenant**
- 32. Physical Healing: Our Stories and Dialogues**
- 33. The Aging Body and the Timeless Self**
- 34. Seeing Through Illusions**
- 35. Who Am I? The Self Beyond All Mirrors**

Living From the Heart

36. Head and Heart: A Landlubber and a Ship's Captain

37. A Net Catches Fish, Not the Ocean

38. Designing a Proper Universe

39. The Heart is a Flip Phone

40. Death and the Timeless

41. Heartbreak and Beyond

PART TWO: REALMS OF REALITY

Other Dimensions: Death and the “Subtle Plane”

42. Death (and Enlightenment): Getting Off the Hook

43. Others Died? Other-Sided

44. Our Living Conversation with the Dead

45. Reincarnation IS

46. Astral World: What You Want is What You Get

47. Realms of Reality: Amusement Parks and Planetariums

48. ESP: To Intuit by Getting Into-It

49. Out-of-Body (and In-the-Body) Experiences

50. Eighty-Eight Keys and the Music of Karma

The Way the World Works: Twelve Lessons

51. Lesson #1: The Room in Which All is Related

52. Lessons #2-3: Bursting the Bubble-World

53. Lessons #4-6: The Game Unfolds

54. Lessons #7-8: Remembering What You Already Know

55. Lessons #9-10: The Benevolent Universe

56. Lessons #11-12: You Cannot Be Alone

We Are Part of the Mind of God

57. The Creation Beyond Destruction

58. The Mother Ship and its Probes (God and Us)

59. God Doesn't Care (The Impartial Referee)

60. The Bottomless Mind of God

61. Avatar World: Befriending and Expressing the Divine

62. Physics and the Garden of Eden

63. Matter and Spirit: Pushing Off and Penetrating

Time and Eternity: The Evolving Universe

64. The Big Birth

65. Ocean Waves: Time and Eternity

66. Perceiving Perfection: The Is-ness Behind the Business

67. Buddhas and Bicycles: The Universe Awakens

68. Evolution: The Scientific "How" and the Religious "Why"

Coda: How Do I Know this Spiritual Stuff is Real?

69. The Quarrel Between the Mind and the Soul

Appendix One: Hari's Worldview

Appendix Two: Who Are You? — The Guide Responds

Appendix Three: A Philosophical Postscript — The Universe Re-Members

Appendix Four: A Note on the Preparation of this Book

Bibliography

Introduction: Who am I? Who is the Guide? What is this Book?

A funny thing happened a few years ago. I started communicating with an inner spiritual voice, or as some would call it, a spirit-guide. Not that funny you might say — there are many authors, teachers, and just plain ordinary people who claim to have experienced that kind of communication. But it was funny to me: funny-peculiar, not funny-ha-ha, as I used to explain the difference to my children.

Here I was, scientifically trained with an M.D. from Yale University School of Medicine with a Ph.D. in Philosophy, a professor for twenty-two years at Loyola University Maryland. Not the kind of person who is supposed to be talking with a spirit-guide, a seemingly disincarnate being from another realm. My mind is trained, and is now used to train others, in careful thought and logical analysis. I am a big believer in the power of the scientific world-view. Yet I also couldn't deny my experiences.

Experiences of a spiritual sort had been happening to me for over twenty years. They particularly began back when I joined a Twelve Step program (the program used in Alcoholics Anonymous, and other such fellowships) for multiple compulsive problems. When I was age eighteen to twenty my mother died of breast cancer, and my brother and my father both committed suicide. Such harrowing events, as well as preceding traumas and, perhaps, constitutional predispositions, left me something of a nervous wreck. While successful on the outside I was disturbed within by intense anxiety, guilt, low self-esteem, and a tendency to bleak, depressive moods where I dwelled as much in the land of death as with the living.

The Twelve Steps, along with therapy, and other forms of inner work and spiritual practice, helped me to overcome, or at least better cope with such problems. The Steps also

triggered a series of sometimes quiet, sometimes dramatic, spiritual experiences which led me to belief in a Higher Power. (Some of this is recounted in other books I've authored.) In accord with mystics of religions the world over, I have come to view this Power as inside myself, as well as saturating the outer world. I look within for Higher Consciousness but have also prayed to and talked with God as if he/she were another. I'm happy to mine the riches of many spiritual traditions and methods without worrying too much about defining my religious "brand." (For the record, I'm currently a Jewish Quaker who teaches Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism at a Catholic college.)

Still this spirit-guide thing was a new and deeply weird development. It started when I first contacted a "medium." Again, not a typical thing for me to do, skeptic that I am. Perhaps because of the premature deaths of my closest family members I have long had a passion to know more of what death is, and whether one survives, individually, or as part of an eternal Mind. Can one know what life is, and whether it has any meaning, without also exploring death? I was intrigued to discover that a Psychology professor who I had known when at Yale University as an undergraduate, had become intensely interested in such matters and attempted a rigorous scientific study of the claims of certain mediums to contact the dead.¹ Gary Schwartz, Ph.D. from Harvard, professor at Harvard and Yale (now at University of Arizona), with many prestigious appointments, positions, and grants, and he's taking this stuff seriously? I was intrigued.

I contacted one of the mediums, untrained, unprofessional, but who performed quite impressively in Gary's book. On a phone appointment she told me at length, while I transcribed her words, about different family members from whom she received images and

¹ *The Afterlife Experiments: Breakthrough Evidence of Life After Death*, by Gary Schwartz with William L. Simon. Note: Full citations to all books mentioned by myself and the guide are provided in a bibliography at the end.

communications. At her suggestion I kept almost entirely silent during the call so as not to cue her responses. Though there were occasional mysteries, or perhaps mistakes, I was rather “blown away” by the power, specificity and accuracy of what she shared — how could she know all that?

At the end of the two-hour conversation she said, “By the way, you don’t really need me. You can do this on your own.” (For me that added to her credibility because she was not trying to hook a future customer — quite the opposite.) She recommended a book about contacting one’s own spirit-guide.² Rather half-heartedly I bought it and tried out its method. The short form: *it worked*. Though I had only a vague visual impression of someone wearing a white robe, I started distinctly hearing a voice within my mind identifying itself as “Harry.”

“Harry?” I thought. What kind of a name is that for a spirit-guide? *Hari* was the slightly corrected version I heard.³ I quickly found that I could ask Hari whatever I wished, and I would immediately hear forming in my mind an answer, one which utilized precise language, metaphors, parables, clarifications, and explanations concerning issues I had been struggling with for years. Hari provided wise counsel on matters both personal and metaphysical.

For the most part I talked with him in front of the computer so I could take down immediately and preserve his answers. My fingers raced to keep up. As a writer, it made sense that for me such spiritual communion might best flow forth in written form. (For many that

² *Opening to Channel: How to Connect with Your Guide*, by Sanaya Roman and Duane Packer.

³ Though I didn’t think about it until much later, in the Hindu tradition — which I am conversant with and teach — Hari is one of the many names used for Vishnu, and his *avatar*, or divine incarnation, Krishna. Vishnu is God in the role of one who preserves and renews the world at times of decline through repeated manifestation on earth. My “Hari” has served that kind of purpose for me — one of assistance and renewal.

“Hari” is pronounced as if it would rhyme with “sorry.” I found myself in time also addressing him as Hare (pronounced like Har-ay), which I much later discovered is the Sanskrit “vocative” form of Hari — what you would call such a being if speaking to him personally. However, I have chosen to stick with “Hari” throughout the book for consistency, and as a little easier to pronounce in English.

might be quite the wrong medium.) A few times I would simply have conversations in my head — or heart — while walking, sometimes writing them down afterwards.

What gives, I wondered? The simplest answer, the one that presents the least conflict with a standard scientific world-view, is that I was communicating with my own subconscious. Perhaps the technique of “automatic writing” and my imagination of a guide, unlocked access to another part of my mind allowing helpful messages to come through.

As a scientist I cannot disconfirm that hypothesis. I could even point to some supporting evidence. In some areas the manner of speech and the kinds of points made by “Hari” strike me as similar to things I myself believe, spoken in ways I might. For example, later in this book there is a long treatise on the spiritual meaning of evolution, but I had just been thinking, reading, and teaching in similar ways on the topic myself.

At other times more personal messages that the guide transmitted were similar to messages I had received earlier in life through prayer. They confirmed, reminded me, or elaborated on, what “I already knew.”

Of course, all this does not prove “Hari” is just a creation of my own mind. It makes sense that spiritual inspiration — if you believe in such a thing — would flow into me, or any of us, through many conduits, restating essential truths in a variety of ways. It may be evidence that a guiding Consciousness is at play, teaching the recalcitrant pupil over and again through different vehicles.

Even when Hari refers to authors and ideas I have studied over the years I do not think that proves it is just my own mind at work. As Hari has told me, a teacher must speak to a student using a language the latter can understand. In that sense, my training as a man of science and professional philosopher, may be an asset. The material I’ve studied over the years, the terms

I've mastered, even the sort of questions I've learned to ask, all become material that Hari can use in speaking to and through me.

But why do I keep thinking of him as another, as *Hari*? Frankly, because I believe there is evidence that more than “just me” is at play; that this is a genuine dialogue and not simply monologue in disguise.

Why? Most intriguing to me are frequent experiences of being startled by one of Hari's points or examples. Trying to clarify a concept he might say “Imagine you are a child eating ice cream,” or “Say you're lost in the desert with a semi bearing down.” On several occasions, as a kind of scientific experiment, I have paused in the middle of such a parable, searched quickly within myself, and realized that I — at least as conscious being — had no idea whatsoever where this could go.

I have then said to myself something like, “If this really turns out to be meaningful I'll know it wasn't *my mind* that produced the meaning.” I'll mentally predict that the parable will **collapse into nonsense “that through internal incoherence this whole Aconversation” will be unmasked as my own (failed) attempt at imaginative creation.**

But then Hari will surprise me. It turns out the analogy or parable does have an inner coherence and precise point. Reaching the end I see where it was going from the beginning and what it is meant to teach. It is at such times that I feel most clearly that I'm conversing with a genuinely *other* being, an independent consciousness that knows and expresses things beyond my comprehension.

Sometimes this seems true of the concepts Hari advances, not simply his examples. As a professional philosopher and avid reader of spiritual material I have thought through some metaphysical issues to the best of my ability. I have also spent years in personal self-exploration

through therapy and the Twelve Steps. Still, Hari has taught me things that *I just didn't know*. I quite frequently find that a conversation with Hari leads me to genuinely new territory, a novel spin on the universe or personal matters. This does give the feeling of conversing with another being. If someone sits you down, whips your thinking around, directs you toward modes of evidence you hadn't considered, sheds new light on issues you've long struggled with, even makes points you can't grasp without repeated pondering, you tend to feel this is not "just me talking to myself." Hari has gently and gradually changed the outlines of my world-view and I like the new one better than the old.

Finally, I'll just mention Hari's characteristic playfulness. He seems to enjoy puns, jokes, word-games and teasing. Just as a friend might have quirks, a unique personality or "vibe," so too Hari. When I mentioned somewhat abashedly to a spiritual teacher of mine that I was conversing with a spirit-guide, he asked but one question: "Does he have a sense of humor?" I wasn't sure what would be the "right" response. When I confessed with a laugh, "Yes, he certainly does," this teacher said "Then he is real."

Still, I recognize that the question is not definitively resolved for me, and perhaps for you the reader, depending on your beliefs. We are left with the issue of whether this inner voice can be accounted for purely naturalistically — e.g. with a Freudian typology of unconscious mind — or whether Hari is a genuinely disincarnate being communicating from another dimension. I believe the material in this book has to manifest value *independent of that question*. If it's "good stuff," insightful, illuminating, of practical use, it will be of worth to me and you no matter what the ultimate source. The converse is true as well — if it seems trite or mistaken information, who cares from what mystical realm it descends? Discard it.

It seems only fair to let Hari have a last word on the matter of his existence. In an appendix at the end of this book, “Who Are You? — The Guide Responds,” I’ve collected some of Hari’s answers to my ever-recurring questions about his identity. He favors a “both-and” rather than an “either-or” logic. He portrays himself as *both* a genuinely other being, without a material body, existing in a “subtle” or “astral” realm (to use highly imperfect terms), *and* to some degree the creation of my mind.

If I were to codify this both-and logic, I’d say three reasons are supplied by Hari:

1. In any interaction with others, your perceptions, interpretations, and understandings of them are created within your own mind: hence they are both “not you,” *and* “you.”
2. This paradox is even more the case when communicating with a being without a worldly body who is able to use and direct you “from within” rather than through external action.
3. Finally, both myself and Hari are emanations from a Divine source that is fundamentally unitary. Hari’s words are those of the God within me, speaking through this voice as a playwright might speak through a character. Or as Hari said to me at one point, using a computer-based metaphor:

Everyone’s interface with the whole is personalized. You have your own browser, your own “favorites list,” your own keyboard. Your relation to the All is necessarily a personal one. If it wasn’t uniquely tailored to you, understandable and manipulable by you, you would be unable to be a “user.”

Similarly, God has to be user-friendly — approachable in a personal way. That doesn't reduce the majesty, the glory, the incomprehensibility of God-in-totality — but this also must be an approachable God.

Seen in such a way, Hari provides me (and maybe you) with a kind of personalized user-friendly interface with the Divine. This spiritual presence accessed within is not merely “me,” but neither is it not-me. Understood thusly, Hari’s voice transcends that dichotomy, and that transcendent viewpoint is precisely what he teaches over and again.

My own higher wisdom? A valued helper and guide? The voice of God within? Why not “all of the above”? From the mystical perspective, the One can be thus three-dimensional.⁴

For the reader who might be interested in “doing this kind of thing” him- or herself, I believe the above means that you can. I don’t count myself as having any unusual powers of a spiritual or extra-sensory nature. It is true I have engaged in spiritual practices and taken seriously the promise in the *Alcoholics Anonymous* book that we can seek “conscious contact with God,” “develop a “working part of the mind” that is intuitively guided, such that “our thinking will, as time passes, be more and more on the plane of inspiration.”⁵ I have come to experience that over the years in my own personal life, and in my writing.⁶ I also believe this capacity can be developed by anyone who honestly and earnestly seeks.

I’d like to give some wise tips on how to proceed — methods of quasi-hypnotic induction, deep relaxation, visualization techniques — but the truth is I have done very little of that, except a bit at the beginning. Mainly, I just get quiet, ask my question, and expect to receive

⁴ An excellent book on such topics — which did not influence my own work, since I discovered it late in the game, is Jon Klimo’s *Channeling: Investigations on Receiving Information from Paranormal Sources*.

⁵ *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 87,

⁶ My previous book, *Sparks of the Divine: Finding Inspiration in Our Everyday World*, also came about through intuitively guided writing, though not by a “spirit guide” like Hari.

a response. It usually, though not always, works. I do think it's better to ask from the "heart" than the "head," a distinction that will be developed later in the book.

Finally, a note on how this book came to be. For years I had no intention of publishing this material. Admittedly, when these dialogues started I played with the idea of turning them into a book at some point...but then I decided otherwise. They seemed too personal, probably meant for me alone. Nor would it enhance my professional credentials to publish something so flaky. Then, too, I questioned my own motives for thinking of bringing this material before the public. If I recorded this stuff in search of (even very minor) fame and fortune, wouldn't it imply an impure intention, one that might cause inspiration to dry up? No, I decided, this voice is *just for me*.

However, a couple of years later I received messages that persuaded me otherwise. I felt Hari, and the God of my understanding, directing me to take the risk of publication. In a leap of faith I went along. Hari has repeatedly told me variants of, "You trust your doubt, and you doubt your trust. Try reversing it. Try doubting your doubt, and trusting your trust." In my perpetual inner war between spiritual-seeker and skeptic, I decided to let the seeker, *the truster*, win out.

Then the question arose, how to turn more than a thousand pages on diverse issues and topics, generated over a number of years, into a coherent book? Here's what I did:

I discarded much material that seemed very personal and situation-specific — how to handle X situation, let go of my fury at Y, prepare for Z, etc. A lot of my conversations with Hari rose from such immediate and passing needs. I chose discussions which, even if they were triggered by specifics, contained information potentially of value to a general reader. At the same

time I have not hesitated, where it might be honest or helpful, to share my personal issues and neuroses. You might have a few of your own.

In reading it over, I, and perhaps you, may be struck by the repetitiousness of some of my questions. (Thankfully I find Hari's replies often new and interesting.) I attribute this to two factors: First, my near inability to live in faith. Hopefully some value emerges as I press on for further evidence, clarity, and detail even on subjects already treated. This may also be related to my Jewish heritage. In the ancient Biblical tradition it is not considered heretical to challenge and argue with God. Rather this testifies to the intimacy of the human-divine relationship.

Second, as someone recovering from emotional traumas and compulsive problems, certain struggles do arise for me over and over again. Perhaps everyone's life comes down to one or more pressing and repetitive questions to which their life-choices constitute an answer. What are your core questions? They may overlap with mine.

In editing Hari's responses I tried not to tamper with the material I had heard and recorded rapidly on the computer. The writer in me was sorely tempted to later "fix things up" a bit, make points more lucid, words more eloquent, and add further material to truncated exchanges. I resisted such impulses. A central principle of the Twelve Step program is the need for rigorous honesty. I wanted to be rigorously honest in presenting just what Hari said as I heard it at the time. [When, occasionally, I have added a few words to his response to clarify its meaning, I have signaled this by placing them in square brackets such as these.] One of the things most impressive to me is the fluency and coherence of his answers. I wanted the reader to know they were genuinely *his* responses, not artificially constructed by me after the fact. What editing I did is described in my "Note on the Preparation of this book" found at the end of this volume.

Most centrally “my job” involved the selecting and organizing of material. This book of dialogues is divided into two broad parts. The first part, “*Living Well*,” is triggered by questions about personal issues. I don’t know about you, but I frequently find life hard. I need guidance, emotional help, solace, perspective, in a fairly continuous way. This period of our communications also coincided with multiple challenges: serious back pain and limitations that led to emergency spinal surgery; on a happier note, parenting, somewhat late in life, two active young children; reacting to distressing national and international developments, including the war in Iraq; professional demands, sleep difficulties, money worries, etc. Hari helps teach me how to live well in the midst of this (perfectly?) imperfect world. This involves cultivating proper thought, accepting and working with difficult emotions, acting wisely in the world, and reliance on a Higher Power. But I’ll let him better explain. This part concludes with an extended dialogue on how to live from the heart, not just the head, gaining access to deeper realities that the mind alone cannot grasp.

This leads into Part Two, “*Realms of Reality*,” which turns toward questions more metaphysical. Are there other dimensions than this perceived world? What happens after you die? Is consciousness an offshoot of the material world, or vice-versa? Who or what is God, and what is our relationship to this Divinity? Does a Higher Mind guide the evolution of the universe, or is it all a random and meaningless unfolding?

These are questions I have wondered about personally, and professionally in my work as a philosopher. How delightful to be able to pose these issues to a source of greater wisdom and actually receive answers — ones which have profoundly shifted my take on reality.

In an appendix at the book’s end, for those interested, I have tried to summarize “Hari’s Worldview” in the form of a systematic series of propositions. On reflection I find his to be a

rich and coherent philosophy, and one that accords with that of spiritual explorers from various cultures, time periods, and traditions. Aldous Huxley speaks of a “perennial philosophy” shared by mystics the world over. Hari’s teachings are fully in that tradition, though he is specific on certain issues, and vivid in imagery and example, in ways that set his voice apart.

While part of a coherent world-view, each dialogue can be read on its own. I, myself, like to jump around in books. I turn to topics that most interest me in the moment, read a few pages at those odd times that life presents. I often prefer to read a book *in the way I prefer* rather than as the author envisioned.

I certainly invite you to do the same, not that you need my invitation. The book can be read from start to finish (progressing from personal to metaphysical) or the reverse (starting with an elevated perspective on the universe, then moving toward specific life-applications) or at random, or according to interest, dipping in here and there. You can even start with the appendix on Hari’s worldview if you’re a systematic thinker. This can satisfy the mind’s need for proper order, before being dragged about on zigs and zags.

While some are extended, many of this book’s dialogues are brief. Sometime this is indicative more of the brevity of my own attention span than the limitations on what Hari might have to say. Infected by the spirit of Internet and instant messaging, I posed a question, received some immediate tips, then was off to my next activity. In other cases I have deliberately shortened a lengthy conversation. Too many ideas packed into a too-long dialogue can be like a six-course meal: rich, delicious, perhaps, but a bit much at once. Spiritual, like sensual, satiety is unpleasant. It can be better to savor a morsel, pause, and digest.

PART ONE:
LIVING WELL

Creating Joy: Attention, Appreciation, Abundance

This first section of Part One collects teachings on the creative power of mind. Hari discusses a series of mental states whose deliberate cultivation can revolutionize our life. Conveniently these all seem to begin with an “A.” We need to consciously direct our *attention* toward that which brings us joy. We can *appreciate* what is, rather than bemoaning what isn’t. More precious than material wealth is an *awareness* of riches hidden within the everyday. We thereby grow in consciousness of life’s *abundance*. We *acknowledge* the value of others and — even harder — ourselves. We *affirm* the good and grow firmer. Amidst our doubts we feel God’s *assurance* and are reassured.

Sounds simple. However, certain of Hari’s teachings, upon examination, reveal themselves as paradoxical, if not self-contradictory. He discusses how to find happiness without making personal happiness your goal. He counsels loving the self — but doing so by “getting out of self” in order to better focus on others. We need, he says, to take control of our mental processes, but also to let go, give them over to a Higher Power. For this, something like faith is essential. Yet, he urges me to give up the word “faith,” which implies an absence of true knowledge.

How to understand these paradoxes? As we’ve seen, Hari often prefers a “both-and” rather than an “either-or” logic. We need two eyes to gain depth-vision. Similarly, keeping in view simultaneously the two sides of such paradoxes allows deeper truths to emerge. Self-appreciation/self-forgetting; power of mind/power of God; taking control/letting go; improving the self and world/accepting just what is. These are yin/yang principles which, when harmonized, yield the secret of balanced living.

Attention: Investment Strategies for the Mind

Dear Hari, I feel close to overwhelmed at the moment by financial fears as the stock market goes down, and our house falls apart, in need of ever more repairs — and then there's the issue of my body which is in a similar state. Please tell me what to do.

It all depends on where you focus your attention. Attention is a very powerful mental — and cosmic — device. Let me explain.

Say a ball is rolling toward a young child. Her focus is transfixed on that ball. She totally fails to notice a bowl of steaming spaghetti on the kitchen table even though she might be expected to be hungry...it's lunchtime, after all. But it doesn't matter: That hunger, and spaghetti, are practically (for practical purposes) non-existent. The ball is all, the ball is that child's world.

Luckily, the child also and always has the power to shift attention or else she would starve to death. In fact, a few minutes later the ball is forgotten and that bowl of spaghetti is addressed — fully addressed. The child's world has reshaped itself around it.

In such a way attention plays a very powerful creative role. It is, we might say, the co-creator, with the power of God, of the world in which we dwell and our experience of that world. As we grow older we gain mastery over that power of directing attention. We are no longer the little child swept hither and yon by summoning objects and momentary whim.

At the moment you are directing your attention to every sign of lack and decay in your immediate environment and your (imagined) long-term future. You see the money you don't

have — particularly that disappeared with the stock market downturn — and don't see the money you do have. You see the house you don't have — those portions that are decaying, and the associated expense — and don't see the lovely house you do have. You see the features of your family members' personality that drive you crazy but fail to notice, and dwell on, and appreciate, the abundance of good.

So you live surrounded by abundance but stuck in an experience of lack. This world of lack you have created by the power of attention. The bowl of spaghetti can be sitting on the table and the child still go hungry because she never notices it's there.

So the solution is to work at training your power of attention toward what is, not what isn't, because by definition what is, is, and what isn't, isn't. Get that?

See the abundance. See the security it gives. See the freedom it gives. See the

Train your power of attention toward what is, not what isn't.

assurance of God's love and protection — not just materially, but socially, spiritually — all the resources that surround you. Do an "inventory" of goods — not just material goods, but all the other goods in your life. You will discover that all the riches you feel slipping away, all the decay and poverty in which you feel yourself immersed, are illusions that vanish when you realize what you do have. Even if the stock market has gone down, and the figure in your bank account is less, you will find yourself richer — you can add to your riches — by your power of attention.

Imagine there being a second, more real bank account — a mental/emotional bank account, and what's crucial is how much is in that account (not so much the worldly investment account) and that you can add or subtract wealth from that account by the power

of attention and imagination. Manage that resource well. Let God be your investment advisor, and invest yourself in creating mental wealth.

Thought: Metabolizing the Real

I'm reading about how you need to attune your thoughts to your Essence, and the register of that is joy. But what do I do? Concentrate on joyful things? Meditate? Mantra? Practice mental disciplines of positive thinking? I get the principle, but I don't really understand how to put it into practice in a way that brings genuine results.

You're going about it a bit bass ackwards, as they say. You are trying to start with the goal — feeling joy — and then manufacture a means that will get you to that end. Try proceeding in the reverse: Think about something that intrinsically is a positive thing to think about and don't particularly worry if it brings joy or not (don't worry, it will).

Imagine that your thoughts are like actions (they are, actually) and just as you would wish to act in a way that is constructive and positive, just for itself, so you should think in a way that is constructive and positive. Every thought is an action that subtly changes the world.

Let me give an example. Say you discover that you are locked out of your house. Frustrating, right? Not necessarily. You must take some action to get back in, ranging from calling your wife, to calling a locksmith. Sooner or later, as the result of your reparative action, you'll get back in. But in the meantime you are also "acting" in your thoughts. You can act victimy, self-hating, blaming, frustrated and stressed-out...or you can act with a spirit of bravado, of joy in meeting a challenge, of acceptance, of self-forgiveness and self-love, of

practicality, of using the time for spiritual pursuits, or for learning and self-exploration. (“What made me lock myself out? What is that a metaphor of?” or “Why am I getting so distracted?”)

However you think surely has effects on yourself — physiologically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually — and on others.

The things that happen in the outside world are a provocateur of thoughts happening in the inside world, but our inside world can be more autonomous, more self-determining, more independent of outside determination, than we might have thought.

But we have to be determined!

Set a goal — not of producing joy — but of producing positive and constructive thought. Then joy will follow as naturally as does the birth of a baby when the conditions are right.

What does it mean that every thought is an action?

Metaphorically? Literally? It feels to

me like this is an important concept and I want to understand it better.

Our inside world can be more self-determining than we might have thought. But we have to be determined.

Ah, but you do understand it better than you think. You have long been a thinker, so you know what thoughts can do to you and others. You have even entered a Twelve Step program to deal specifically with your thoughts and their repercussions (not, as many do, as a treatment for the intake of an external substance). So you tell me how thoughts are actions.

Okay, I would say that an “action” has a specific form, to some degree is the product of a decision, and leads to a specific outcome. All of these are true of a thought. It is decided upon, uttered (mentally) in specific form, and leads to a specific outcome (emotionally, behaviorally, cognitively) which often can be anticipated.

If, for example, I start brooding on some negative possibility I generate fear and aversion and begin to impair, or at least change, my future behavior as well as my present emotional state. It seems as if “inner action” and “outer action” interweave back and forth in a fairly seamless way.

Yes, exactly. Consciousness is not simply a mirror, a reflector, of external reality, but a place into which external reality enters and is emitted — like a primitive organism might bring in food across the cell membrane and excrete waste products. There is a barrier, a boundary, a dividing line, but it is permeable such that the organism is always acted upon by, and acting upon, its external environment.

So too with a conscious being. Experiences come in and are transformed, “metabolized,” so to speak, into thought, and by thought. This leads to a change in the composition of the organism itself (its emotional and physiological states) and also to changed emissions back into the world. For unconscious beings (if there are any) this kind of metabolic process is purely physical. But for conscious beings things are metabolized into, and through, thought.

Think of it as a subtle medium of processing and acting. Because it is subtle, rather than “gross,” it has several amazing properties. For example, thought:

- a) Is extremely fast acting (it moves at the speed of thought).*
 - b) Is an extremely free medium for the transformation and creation of meaning.*
 - c) Can be turned into words and symbolically-mediated modes of communication with others.*
 - d) Can involve the free play of imagination which creates worlds beyond that of the physical.*
 - e) Can be highly individual and autonomous.*
 - f) Can be extremely fluid (more fluid than fluids) in changing shape and content.*
- etc.*

So think of thought as a wonderful medium of creation — like a subtle paint poured on a spinning surface with which an artist might fashion exotic and illuminating visions. How little do we value this medium and use it to its full artistic potential!

Can you give me an example?

Sure, let me go back to the example of being locked out of your house. That experience comes flooding in. The organism that is you “eats it,” so to speak. But what to metabolize it into?

Let’s say you have the thought, “Hey, I can’t go into the house so I might as well go out to a bar. Later my wife will get home...but in the meantime I’m free as a bird and have the perfect excuse. Let’s party!”

Wow, that’s an interesting thing to metabolize events into. You can see how the thought turned one thing into another, gave rise to certain (inner) experiences and (outer) behaviors. And of course the fun thing is that when you get to the bar, when you talk with

your wife later, there will be new thoughts metabolizing and asserting the meaning of new experiences in a never-ending dance.

What we think is perhaps the most crucial step of the dance. The marvelous thing is that we are never constrained by events. We can always pirouette, even in the opposite direction from which we were heading — or leap to another place on the dance-floor.

Mind-Sailing

Can you tell me more about the power (or the limitations in power) of our thoughts and intentions? Is the “New Age gospel” true that everything we experience is determined by our thoughts? If not fully true, is there some truth in this, some way I can apply it in my life — how?

Well, first we have to clarify what a thought is. On one level, when you have a thought you are simply saying a series of words in your head, or conjuring up an image. If, for example, I ask you where the book is, you might think hard for a minute and then say “the book is on the table.” That doesn’t make it so (the book didn’t suddenly fly on to the table because you had that thought). The thought registered, reflected, and interpreted reality in a way that is helpful — e.g. for survival.

So on one level, the brain/mind is a survival tool registering conditions around oneself and deciding how best to adjust and respond to them. In this guise, the mind is not primarily “creative” in the full sense of the word, but “responsive.”

At the same time, the mind has the capacity to be genuinely creative. After realizing that the book is on the table you have the ability to ask yourself — “Do I want to read this

book?” Having read it, you can ask yourself, “What do I think of this book? Are there ways I could apply it to my life?”

You are thus deciding what experiences to bring into your life, and how to digest and utilize them. Your mind is a decision-maker and filter, choosing what, from a vast menu of options, to key on, experience, process.

It’s a little equivalent to a fishing boat that decides what waters to fish in, and what kind of net to cast. The fish it catches are not exactly created by the boat, but are chosen by the boat from the vast sea of opportunities.

A lot of New Age terminology (“hoohah,” some would say) has to do with the way in which one focuses attention on potentially negative or positive features within any given situation. This shows the mind’s power to respond to reality as it chooses, to create the experiences it is seeking (as opposed to ones it currently is stuck with).

This is a true and valid point, and often overlooked. Life’s winds may be blowing in one or another direction. One can feel blown about, even blown apart, by the prevailing winds, yet the skillful sailor will know just how to respond — what sail to use, how to point it to “redirect” the wind’s power in advantageous way. One captures those aspects of the wind’s power that best serves ones ends.

The unskillful sailor is simply at the mercy of the winds.

The worst sailor, unfortunately, is one who has learned a wrong approach, and thus is constantly battling or misusing each and every wind in a way guaranteed to produce a ride that is “off-course” — productive of misery.

It would be a mistake to think that the sailor has produced the wind, and the tides, and the currents, and everything. Where is the humility and the realism in that? Yet it would also be a mistake to think the sailor impotent. By virtue of his/her intelligence and skill there is a way in which the sailor reigns supreme, He/she has access to a power unavailable to even the stupendously powerful sea and sky.

How is this personally useful?, you ask. How best to apply it?

Let me give you some suggestions. There's nothing here that's radically new (sorry to disappoint), nothing that you "don't already know," but sometimes it's helpful to hear things afresh or packaged in a new way.

1. The sailor looks for what is advantageous, beneficial in each "wind." Similarly, it helps to have a positive view of life, and to be positive that there is something positive to be found within any given situation. Like the drawings in which children are told to find the hidden object, you can make a game of finding the hidden benefit even in seemingly frustrating situations.

2. Another crucial element of positive thought is the capacity for, and the constant exercise of, forgiveness. "Forgive them father, for they know not what they do."⁷ Isn't that a good summary of the position of the human race? Who among us (you) really know and understand the hurt we cause others when we are greedy, or mean, or selfish? Who really knows and understands the alternative ways of behaving, and the more productive ways of resolving difficult feelings?

⁷ Words of Jesus on the cross, Luke 23:34.

We (or you) do not know. We do the best we can with the tools we are given and understand at any moment. Hence, we must let go, and let go, and let go, over and over, of our own faults and mistakes and those of others.⁸ Otherwise they become toxic, as we cling to the negative energies that build up inside.

3. Believe in, look for, the workings of a Higher Power. This is an enormously beneficial thought-strategy. Why? Without it one feels relatively alone, powerless, at sea. With it, one feels (or at least potentially so) protected, guided, watched over, loved, assisted, cared for.

You might say — or at least your mind might — that this is a comforting illusion. But that includes acknowledging that it is comforting. When a child is comforted by clinging to a teddy bear should you take that away from him or her? Should you say, “There’s no bear there. It’s simply the product of your imagination, and the cleverness of the manufacturer who has charged you an arm and a leg for a fundamentally worthless piece of cloth sewed around some stuffing?”

Actually, the child knows something better than you, because that object is allowing him/her to access a place within of safety, comfort, love, protection. That place is real. That “illusion,” then, is not an illusion, but an imaginative tool that gives access to that hidden-but-oh-so-valuable place. So, too, our images of God — teddy bears all — but illusions that give us access to the Real.

<p><i>Images of God — illusions that give us access to the Real.</i></p>

⁸ “Then Peter came and said to Him, ‘Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.’ (Matthew 18:21–22)

4. Another thought pattern conducive to joy is one that embodies self-love, self-appreciation, and self-care. Life is not easy. It's not a bowl of cherries. If anything, it is often a bowl of shit — pardon the language. We need encouragement, recognition, support, and kindness to keep us going. From the time we're a little child needing the love and recognition of a parent or teacher, this is an all-important force of encouragement and stimulation. Progressively as an adult we need to learn to take over that function, since there's less and less chance that someone will be there doing it for us. We need to parent ourselves wisely and lovingly in our thoughts.

We never outgrow the need to have that loving parent — why would we think we would? We just need to take increasing responsibility for that function. Many of us don't understand that or even permit it — (it can seem sinful).

We never outgrow the need to have that loving parent. We just need to take increasing responsibility for that function.

5. Finally, and most importantly (or at least, as important as any of the above thought-processes) we need a spirit of gratitude. This helps to solidify and reinforce all the above attitudes.

Grateful for what, you are beginning to wonder? Why, for everything! Is there any dimension of reality that is purely or primarily aversive, wrong, destructive?

Yes, to the human mind it certainly seems so! The Crusades were hell if you were stuck in them... but now we study them and find them a source of fascination and learning. The more we can respond to our own life, and the world around us, as a source of fascination and learning, the more we can then be grateful for the people around us, the experiences that are

vouchsafed us, even the struggles and tragedies of our world and life. We practice saying “yes” to it all.

It’s quite a discipline, quite a challenge, and virtually impossible without a belief in a Higher Power (see #3) and without the capacity to find the positive (see #1) even in aversive situations. So I have left #5 for last. It’s the “advanced course” so to speak, not designed for first-year students. Think of it as the “capstone course” of life.

Sometimes we see this embodied particularly well in wise elders — who look back over all they have done, experienced, and witnessed, and remain profoundly grateful for the gifts of life.

This is truly wisdom.

Happiness: Retuning the Radio, Appreciating the Song

Hari, I feel so scared about all the “uncontrollable” dimensions of my life at the moment — having to do with the election, money, work, upcoming trips, my book project. It all feels unpredictable, uncontrollable, with strong downsides that I can’t fully anticipate and prevent. There are things I want so badly, but I fear “the worst.”

Fear is a kind of energy. It vibrates — if you wish to use that term — at a certain frequency. Once it is there vibrating within your body it begins to attract similar energy in everything you cross paths with. It’s a psychological equivalent to a tuning fork that begins to transmit its vibrational energy to other objects around it. Soon they are all “humming” in tune.

At the moment you are sending fear-vibrations into your universe, and you've got everything humming. Once you are tuned onto that frequency it's hard to alter it. Not quite as simple as turning the dial on a radio, for example.

But in another way it's not that different. You need to tune into another station (let's change the tuning-fork metaphor a bit). How do we do that? We alter what we think about — what we anticipate — what we visualize. The body, for the most part, is receptive to input from the mind/brain.

Imagine the body as someone sitting alone in a room, just hanging out, chillin'. In rushes a man who says "The most horrible thing is happening outside! A tsunami is on the way! You only have five minutes to gather your stuff, get out of this house, climb to higher ground, or you'll be drowned, and even if you do everything I tell you I can't guarantee your survival!"

Naturally that body will become terrified, panicky, agitated, hyperactive, maybe a bit unhinged and unsystematic in its preparation. Heart will be beating fast. Breathing — rapid and shallow. Fight or flight response — in this case flight (or some of both).

Now imagine the same scene: The man sitting alone in his room and a friend wanders in. The very demeanor and speech patterns of that visitor communicate to the man that it's okay to relax, open a brew, settle in for a chat. All is well. No reason to worry or rush.

What's the difference? Different information has been transmitted to that man. He panics or relaxes (sensibly, understandably) based on what he's heard.

If there is a tsunami coming it makes sense that he panic and get into frantic action. His friend has done him a potentially life-saving service by getting him agitated and saturated with adrenaline.

But if there really is no tsunami coming — this is a kind of practical joke, or misinformation based on a misunderstanding — the “friend” has done him a disservice, one that has caused unnecessary agitation, psychological distress, a proneness to exercise hasty and poor judgment, and even to hurt himself internally or externally as a result of all this stress. This “friend” better be more accurate about his facts!

That applies to your mind. It better become more careful and accurate about what it’s telling your poor agitated body. The

truth is far more benign, more calming.

There’s no tsunami coming. All shall be

Your mind had better become more careful about what it’s telling your poor agitated body.

well. Even if the politician you don’t want is elected, or there is a new addition to your

Department who isn’t perfect, or you sell off stocks lower than you would wish, there’s no

disaster on the way. You have plenty in your life — money, time, job security, family, spiritual connectedness. All shall be well.

That’s what you need to tell yourself. No tsunami on the way — only good stuff.

Communicate relaxation, ease, confidence to your body and soul.

That’s what “re-tuning the radio” is all about, turning it to a new and better station.

Oh, and beware of engaging too much in activities — looking at the news, following the stock market, talking with frightened and pessimistic people — which might be likely to re-tune your station back to WFEAR. There are people, and news sources, and professions, that are vibrating at that level, and you need to be careful with your tuning fork (to switch metaphors back) that it not begin to resonate with theirs.

Can you talk to me some more about vibrating at the level of joy and peace? I seem to experience a lot of low-level anxiety and frustration. I'm not miserable, but neither am I "happy" in the way I feel I could be.

Actually, you are happy more of the time than you realize. It's just that when you are happy you are not sitting around thinking, "Hey, I'm happy." That kind of reflexivity (how am I doing now?) sets in more at times of anxiety and frustration.

That said, it is a valid question of how to claim more often, more fully, the joy of life.

Think back to the last time you felt joyful. You probably were engaged in something wholeheartedly that was meaningful to you. In a certain sense it doesn't matter what: hanging out with a child, writing, preparing a class, watching TV, meditating, listening to music. What matters is the quality of engagement. We are happy when we show up fully — when we are not divided against ourselves.

We tend to think that is a factor of external activity and conditions (of course, I'm not wholehearted about doing this — who would be?). Actually, it depends far more on our internal mind-set. When we throw ourselves wholeheartedly into a task, we are engaged. We experience a full-bodied expression of self, even if only one aspect of who we are. And the self expressing itself is joyful.

Expression is the opposite of depression. We are expanding, shining like the sun. The sun, we might say, is always joyful because it is doing what comes naturally.

So don't judge yourself for doing what you do. Don't fight against yourself. Find the joy in all you do by doing it wholeheartedly.

Expression is the opposite of depression.

Is it that simple? You're not now stressing changing anything — but this seems contrary to what you were saying earlier about re-tuning your energy, changing the station. I'm perplexed.

Actually, these are two sides of the same coin. Think about it.

On the one hand I say to re-tune the radio — to deliberately choose the kind of thoughts you dwell on, and the kind of inputs you accept and focus on from the environment.

There is a deliberation in this, a care, a choosing.

On the other hand, I say whatever you then choose to do (pure or impure), do it wholeheartedly — enter into it with fullness and abandon. Don't split against yourself and undermine the quality of your experience.

The one piece of advice is like half of the puzzle without the other. If you focus only on the first part (re-tuning the radio) the likelihood is that you will tend to feel like a failure when you do not do this “well enough” — and you will engage in inner warfare and self-undermining.

If, on the other hand, you only focus on the second half of what I said you will never make any changes in your thought and activity.

But put the two together and you have a three-dimensional picture of happiness: the deliberate choice of energy-level-raising thoughts and activities, and full-hearted one-pointed engagement with each thing you do in turn.

The good news is that if you practice one without the other you still get some return, but together they are a synergistic duo.

Can you give me an example?

Sure. Say you are hanging out with one of your kids. You can do that full-heartedly — playing cards, talking, whatever. Appreciate the moment, dwell fully in it. Combine that with appreciating your child and — this is key — appreciating yourself for the way you appreciate and play with your child.

Notice that there is a full-hearted, appreciation here — of the moment, the opportunity, the activity, the child, yourself.

“What is happiness?” you asked. Appreciation. What is unhappiness or depression? Depreciation.

What does this have to do with anxiety? That seems to strike me more than depression.

Anxiety is a lack of faith in the future. It is a way of saying that no matter what I have in my life that is good, whatever activity I

am engaged in that is worthy and satisfying, this may be taken away from me, destroyed, by something coming at me from the future.

By definition, fear is about not being in the moment, not appreciating it fully.

Okay, but fear seems so involuntary. How do I use what you are saying to help me master it?

<p><i>What is happiness? Appreciation. What is unhappiness? Depreciation.</i></p>
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Well, here we are back to re-tuning the radio. Tell yourself reassuring, rather than frightening stories about what is to come. Throw yourself whole-heartedly into the present, leaving the future in God's hands.

Again, the two parts of the whole operate synergistically.

The Ego is Immature, Irrational, but Overcomeable

I seem so filled with little resentments against certain people, and about all the crap I have to do. My mind just keeps generating these annoyances and victim-feelings though at another level I recognize I'm "sweating the small stuff." How to stop doing this, or at least doing it so much?

A lot has to do with how you approach the day. The key: You approach the day. You feel it is your day to be spent as you wish, pursuing your satisfactions, doing your duties, coping with your annoyances.

But that's a recipe for disaster, or at least dissension, because the ego is running the show. The proud ego will ever be dissatisfied because it thinks it deserves everything immediately, served up on a silver platter.

The ego by its nature is immature, self-centered, whiny, self-contradictory, irrational in its demands, and therefore ever dissatisfied. Though we associate it with the rational mind it actually is not very rational. That's why we use the same word, "ego," for the ordinary conscious self, and for someone who is overcome with self-preoccupation. It is in the nature of

the ego to be egotistical. It just is, and can't really change its nature anymore than a two-year-old.

Then how do I get free of this manner of "reasoning"?

It is in the nature of the ego to be egotistical.

Good going, using those quote marks. It shows you are hearing what I'm saying.

Every time you catch the ego-mind generating a resentment, annoyance, disturbance of mind, ask yourself a single question: "Is it worth it?"

Think rationally for a moment, calculating the benefits and the costs. If it isn't worth it, drop it. That's being rational. You're using the mind to overcome the mind.

And flip it over to God for resolution. Get it out of your hands. Wait for guidance, clarity, resolution, or just to have the problem resolved or forgotten. Assert this is taking place and go back to enjoyment.

Is it worth it?

It's that simple?

Yes, it's that simple. There really is no contradiction between the rational and what we think of as the supernatural, the Spirit.

Again, the ego-self is very irrational (contrary to popular opinion). The problem with the mind is not its use of rationality. This is an awesome tool with which it is endowed, just as the eye is endowed with sight. Rather, the problem is the astigmatism of the mind, the

distortion with which it is imbued. Einstein called it the “optical delusion” of consciousness.⁹ The Hindus call it maya (illusion).

Buddha was a great one for valuing rationality, using the mind to re-form the mind, progressively freeing it from astigmatism. That’s what doing a Tenth Step does¹⁰; or prayer for wrong motives to be removed; or the Eleventh Step, where we ask God for an intuitive thought or action.¹¹ Then “Under these conditions we can employ our mental faculties with assurance, for after all God gave us brains to use.”¹² That’s using the old noggin, and using it well and effectively.

See, I come to encourage you to think well and clearly, which includes not thinking about things which don’t deserve the mental attention.

Good Dog, Bad Dog: Mastering the Mind

What of all these teachings about how “I am not my mind” — about getting past the ego, losing trust in its messages, even its reality, until it begins to quiet and go away? Should I pursue this method? How best to do so?

The mind makes a good servant but a terrible

***The mind makes a good servant
but a terrible master.***

master. I know you “know” this, but you don’t know this — that is, really grasp it with every

⁹ “A human being is a part of the whole, called by us “Universe,” a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest — a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole nature in its beauty.” (From a 1950 letter, as quoted in the New York Times, March 29, 1972.)

¹⁰ In the Twelve Step program this refers to a daily inventory of our fears, resentments, selfishness, dishonesty, and character defects.

¹¹ In the Twelve Step program the Eleventh Step enjoins us to improve our conscious contact with God through prayer and meditation.

¹² *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 86.

fiber of your being. It remains somewhat theoretical because you don't have a full experience of the mind-as-servant, and thus don't have the necessary contrast experience of mind-as-master. Let me give you a little exercise to help you along.

Pretend you are a dog, and that dog has a master. The dog is well-trained. Whatever the master asks of him the dog executes. Stand up, sit down, that kind of thing.

Now let's take a very different dog, one who is ill-bred, untrainable. The master commands but the dog merely stares at him, non-compliant, perhaps non-understanding, perhaps defiant. Whatever...the dog simply does not do what is told and the master gives up in shame and frustration.

Now the exercise is this: Take the above examples and imagine first one, then the other. Substitute for the "master" — you (not your mind, you). Imagine the dog as your mind. It barks, sniffs, whines, wanders, even poops on the living room rug, or wants to.

But first imagine it is well-trained. Order your mind about in productive ways — for example, positive thinking, helpful, unselfish attitudes — all that "right thinking" stuff the Buddhists support¹³.

Now, for a limited time, imagine the opposite situation. Order the mind, but expect it to disobey — experience what that is like.

There are two points behind this exercise:

One is to realize that you have more mastery than you realize you do.

¹³ Buddha's "eightfold path" of liberation stresses the proper governance of mind, the deliberate choice to cultivate thoughts that are positive, benevolent, detached, and unselfish, and to extinguish thoughts of an opposite character that cause ourselves and others suffering.

Second, is to realize how much more pleasant and harmonious the first situation is than the second... though you habitually choose the second!

The Mind is a Display Window that Attracts Customers

Hari, I feel myself coping with a series of losses, current or prospective. Twelve Step people leaving, and disappointments around politics that make me fear my candidate will lose.

I feel abandoned, discarded, powerless, heartbroken. Help me to cope and to see what I need to.

Though you believe you are shielding yourself from these outcomes, or at least from the full emotional shocks of them when and if they arrive, in a sense you are helping to ensure these [negative] outcomes by vibrating in harmony with them.

Why not envision the outcomes you desire to happen, and affirm their possibility (if they be God's will)?

Take the risk of hoping and believing. The risk of thinking positively — something you are afraid of because you imagine it renders you vulnerable to harsh, even almost unsurvivable, disappointment. But go ahead — you'll live — and in the meantime feel a whole lot better.

Does that work?

Yes, in the following fashion:

Imagine this...a young boy is walking down the street and his eye is caught by an attractive display in a shop window. He reaches into his pocket, pulls out his change and realizes he has just enough money to pay for what he sees. He goes into the store to buy it.

Now the store could not predetermine or force that purchase. But what they can do is set the preconditions that maximize the chance that it will come to be. If there's no display, or it's markedly unattractive, it's extremely unlikely that customers will pour in and the business will be successful. It doesn't assure success to construct nice window-displays but it certainly facilitates that outcome.

Similarly, our mind constitutes a kind of “display window” which others walk by...and we, ourselves...and in a sense, the universal Mind. If we wish for an outcome — we support a candidate, or want to retain a friendship — whatever — display that outcome attractively in our mind and it is likely to attract others to that vision (the equivalent of having them buy the product), at least maximize that possibility.

We are always “selling” what our mind displays. Remember that. We are our own primary

*We are always “selling”
what our mind displays.*

customers, but so are others around us. Be careful how you set up that display window. You have to buy into that which you want to sell, invest yourself in creating mental wealth.

Faith is Fulfilled: The Mother/Child Team

I looked at a book by Julian of Norwich¹⁴ and it said “All shall be well.”

¹⁴ The English mystic who lived from 1342–1416.

That's hard for you to believe, isn't it?

Yes. Show me how that's possible.

Let me tell you a little parable.

Once upon a time there was a young boy who wanted desperately to go to the circus. He couldn't get his mother to take him. She said she was too busy. He couldn't get his father to take him — his father had no interest whatsoever in the circus.

What was the boy to do? He sat alone in his room and thought and thought.

Finally, this is what he thought of: "If I'm to go the circus I'm going to have to take myself. It's as simple as that. I just have to go on my own."

No, he had no idea how to get there, nor did he have the money to pay for a ticket. He was just a little boy but his intent was so pure, his desire so strong, that he wasn't going to let a little thing like practical reality stand in his way. He got dressed and headed for the door.

When he was halfway out his mother ran up and said, "Billy, where on earth are you going?"

"To the circus!" he said with a big smile.

"How are you going to get there? How are you going to buy a ticket?"

"I don't know," said Billy. "It will take care of itself — somehow."

Now when his mother saw the purity of his faith and desire, how could she resist? So she said, "Okay, I'll take you."

"See!" said Billy, "I knew it would work out."

And it did.

When the boy kept asserting that “all shall be well” he invited the universe to align with his faith and intent. And all was well. Faith is fulfilled.

Remember that phrase — “faith is fulfilled.” It is always fulfilled — not necessarily in material specifics, but in terms of resonating energy. Pray “all shall be well,” and it will be.

What does this have to do with the Divine Mother?¹⁵

Oh, everything. Remember, in the parable it is the mother who comes to the rescue, who is able to supply what the boy needs — everything except the boy’s own faith and intent. That has to come from him. But then the mother comes to the rescue and aligns the universe in response.

They’re a team, you see, a mother and son team. Now go do your part!

How can I truly feel that all shall be well, instead of just mouthing it? It seems so far away from my experience that many things do not turn out well.

You should use the techniques of positive thinking that you’ve been utilizing. You need to render your mind receptive to trust and confidence and joy.

¹⁵ I was on a retreat at the time this was written, and was imaging God in female form as the “Divine Mother,” a popular focus of Hindu worship, and related to the Virgin Mary and other saints and goddesses found in religions the world over.

I'd rather just be miraculously rescued. These “thought-control” techniques make me feel like it's just me doing it.

Imagine the child putting up its arms to be picked up by the mother. That's what these “thought-alignment” techniques are about: aligning your arms, reaching upward, doing what you can to help.

Even the little child knows to do that!

Beyond Trust and Faith...Assurance

Faith, Hari, how do I get, increase, express, strengthen, feel, be consoled and strengthened by faith?

First, don't use the word “faith.”

No?

No.

Why not?

Because the word, by its very nature, at least in your mind, works against itself. That which we have “faith” in is precisely that which we do not know for sure — hence the “leap of faith”

across a chasm of the lack of certainty and evidence. So to seek to have “faith” (in your mind) is to confirm a perpetual gap of disbelief you are trying to overleap.

An equivalent word might be “trust.” We are asked to “trust something,” but when? When we have reason or propensity to distrust. So to be told to trust something is already to be told not to trust it.

Hmmm, I thought you were going to propose “trust” as an alternate word. You have already used it with me.

Yes, for lack of a better. In those conversations we were talking about the dialectic of trust and distrust — it was appropriate. But here we are trying to leave that context behind, overleap it.

Yes, how can I do that, or even express that? Every word — even “believe” — seems to come paired with its negative.

How about “know”?

Yes, that’s a very final word. It doesn’t stay in perpetual tension with “ignorance.” It vanquishes it.

And here’s another — “sure.”

And here’s a third and last (as examples, not to say that there are no more...) — “love.”

I love God, I know God, I am sure of God's love for me. Wow, a pretty powerful triad.

Yes, but that makes it seem even harder to get there from here. How, by what technique?

“I believe, help thou my unbelief.”¹⁶ Please transform it into knowledge, love, surety/security.

We cannot create knowledge and surety on our own. Yet another thing our small minds cannot do. You will be other-saved, not self-saved.¹⁷

Shall I pray for powerful, incontrovertible evidence?

No not exactly. Simply pray to know in your heart, to love and be loved, be sure and assured.

Yes, there's a good word. Ask to be assured.

Self-Love is The Window Through Which God's Love Shines

Dear Hari, I don't want to make this an exercise in self-flagellation but I do feel like I fritter away so much time and opportunity that might have been worthwhile — and now I'm getting older. Of course, I understand that I also tend to underestimate my service, spirituality, and accomplishments — so it leaves me a bit confused as to where the truth lies.

¹⁶ A father has brought an ill child to Jesus for healing, and was told “All things can be done for the one who believes.” The father then cries out “I believe, help thou my unbelief.” (Mark 9:24)

¹⁷ A distinction made in Japanese Buddhism, wherein Pure Land doctrine emphasizes the need for the weak self to be saved by the Bodhisattva, while Zen Buddhism is said to emphasize self-effort.

Dear Drew, as always the place to begin, the place that is closer to home, is that of self-love not self-denigration. I know that is hard to understand.

You think of the parable of the prodigal son, where he has to get good and disgusted with himself before he turns back home.¹⁸ He has to get away as far as possible, before he has the motivation to turn back.

Yes, that's one model, the "twice-born" man who has to die a grisly death before rebirth.¹⁹ But frankly, been there, done that for you. You've been through that harsh self-assessment and "turning."²⁰ It doesn't help to turn and turn and turn. You end up turning in circles or turning away from the light.

The easiest and most direct way to turn toward the light is to turn toward the light — that is, to find that which lightens your heart, consoles and energizes you, and makes you feel loved.

The channel for that is self-love.

God has to love you through you.

To turn toward the light, find that which lightens your heart.

Okay, I hear you, though it's a little hard to believe you. I guess that leads to two questions. How do I reach that self-love? And, though that may be a good starting point, where do I go from there? What kind of spiritual exercises, meditation, readings, prayer, or whatever, should I focus my energy on in order to open up the channel of spiritual growth and love?

¹⁸ New Testament, Luke 15:11-32.

¹⁹ In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 19th century psychologist/philosopher William James distinguishes between the "once-born" or "healthy minded" spiritual person who sees the goodness of self and world, and the "sick soul," acutely aware of the suffering in the world and the failures of self, who needs to be reborn, redeemed, into a sense of joyful release — hence "twice-born."

²⁰ In Martin Buber's *The Way of Man According to the Teachings of Hasidism*, he discusses how the notion of "turning," the transformation of a lost and self-centered person toward a life focused on service to God and one's fellows, is central to Jewish spirituality.

God has to love you through you.

Yes, those are good questions. Those are right

questions. Those are actually the same question though you don't realize it. Let me explain.

When you set out to love yourself you energize whatever practice you utilize. How so?

Self-love is a kind of receptivity. When the sun shines, the sunbather lies down, relaxes, gathers mirrors, becomes maximally receptive to the tanning rays. What was the cause, what the effect? Was not the sun that which induced the receptivity?

Similarly, when you shine love on yourself, you induce yourself to open up and receive love, support, and guidance. That is the maximally advantageous environment for sensing God's love, which is always shining but very little received and welcomed.

Okay, you wonder, how to generate self-love?

But look at that language. You still think of it as something you have to do, make, force, initiate, train in, practice. While there's some truth in this notion, it is also misleading, because if you are the one trying to "generate self-love" by artificial effort how real can it be? It's like telling your lover, "Try hard to love me, really work at it!" But if they have to struggle so hard, you wonder — how real is their love?

So here's a radically different way of looking at it. Imagine that self-love is just God's love coming at you and passing through you. You are both the window through which it passes (just as it passes through the window of others when they exhibit their love for you), and you are the room into which it flows.

You are able to appreciate things about yourself, given your level of intimacy with yourself, that no one else can duplicate, though your wife comes closest (and, historically,

maybe your family of origin). Let it come through you. Know you are cooperating with God's will.

Okay, it sounds wonderful, but honestly I don't know how to practice it. Do I sit around and count up my accomplishments from the day? Do I recite affirmations? Do I battle against guilt and low self-esteem when it arises? This stuff doesn't seem to come natural to me.

You know what? Self-love, paradoxically, is not about focusing on the self. In some ways it's what we feel and generate when we are not focusing on the self, but radiating love to others.

Do be aware, though, of how much time and energy you put into that. Honor it. Do be aware of the ways you reach out to support networks of students; readers; family members; social service agencies; Twelve Step people; friends; neighbors, etc. Your nexus of involvements are more widespread, demanding, complex, than even you realize.

Self-acknowledgment is a wonderful way to let God's love in, because God is a process of self-creation and self-acknowledgment. God is coming to know himself through you, and that in turn is a gift to God.

Get yourself out of the center of the loop, but see yourself as a window, a door, a room (as in the Tao te Ching)²¹ through which God shines. Use your spiritual practices as ways to open that door, that window. But don't try to generate the sunlight.

That's God's job.

²¹ "Walls are joined to make a room. But to live there you need space, a door, a window. When a thing only exists, it is dead: It is the emptiness within that gives it life." (*Tao Te Ching* #11)

Dealing with Difficult Emotions

I am not an easy guy to live with, at least if you're inside my mind. Here I can speak from personal experience. I tend to struggle with very difficult emotions: anxiety, rage, deep sadness. These are probably related to early experiences, including the turmoil in my family which culminated in the suicides of both my brother and father. For this I have been in psychoanalytic-style therapy (my official diagnosis was "anxiety disorder") and have also worked Twelve Step programs on compulsive fear, guilt, drivenness, codependency, etc.

Much of my communication with Hari has been a search for help with these difficult emotions. Whereas the previous dialogues focused on the cultivation of joy, the dialogues that follow emphasize the treatment of miseries. Of course, such are flipsides of the same coin, these teachings an extension of the previous.

However, reading them over I see the particular prominence of two themes: acceptance and God-reliance. Instead of the ego "fighting back" against sadness, fear, and anger, Hari emphasizes accepting what is; softening rather than armoring; and turning to a Higher Power for solace, strength, direction, and the capacity to live and love expansively rather than retreat into a personal hell.

But I'll let Hari speak...

Anxiety: Calming the Barking Dog

Hari, I seem to be stymied by all the things I have to do, and therefore all the things that might go wrong, and therefore all the anxieties that plague me, mounting up like a cloud of fear. How

to “let go and let God”? It’s a good theory but I don’t know how to practice it. Instead I rely on trying to “keep it all together,” rushing, being as efficient as I can be — but getting frazzled and exhausted. Do you have a better way? How do I get there from here?

Yes, I do have a better way. It’s called “go to God.” It works like this. When you face a problem assume (just assume) that your small, finite power is insufficient to cope with it. Also assume that you have Helpers and Guides who will not forsake you, who will come to your aid as needed. Give it over to them. Ask for help — in the preparation and execution of your tasks, and for remaining composed and anxiety-free. It works.

Secondly, exercise careful management of your mind primarily, rather than your tasks. Avoid counting up all the things you have to do in the next week and repeating to yourself the mantra, “It’s so much...how can I do it all...surely something will go wrong...” This mantra will give rise to fear just like an elevated mantra gives rise to elevated thoughts and emotions.

Exercise careful management of your mind primarily, rather than your tasks.

Try this as a mantra instead, “All shall be well, all things shall be well, all manner of things shall be well.”²² Restrict your thinking to “one day at a time.”²³ Don’t let it wander down the hallway of all the tasks to be done, things to be remembered, and all that might go wrong. “Planning and anticipation” is, indeed, one of the functions of the mind, especially in the face of danger, but it can also turn cancerous, leading us to perceive danger where there is none.

²² From Julian of Norwich, the English mystic (1342–1416) who wrote of the mysteries of Divine love that were communicated to her in a series of visions. This statement that “all shall be well” became a recurrent theme in my discussions with Hari.

²³ A popular saying in Alcoholics Anonymous and other such fellowships.

It's like an attack dog, trained to bark at intruders, who begins to see every passing neighbor as a potential intruder. He makes himself hoarse, and the neighborhood frantic, with his constant barking. Pretty soon all the imagined enemies of that dog and master have become real!

***“Planning and anticipation”
can turn cancerous.***

Call off your dog. Lead it inside. Give it a bone (a mantra). Calm it down and then you'll realize that all the imagined enemies approaching your door are simply friends and neighbors in disguise, opportunities to give love.

All the occasions about which you are so nervous — when you do think about them (and to some degree you must), think of them as opportunities to give love. That you can do whether you are at your best or not, whether you “perform well” in a public setting or imperfectly.

The sharing of love isn't about the achieving of perfection. It's about coming from the heart, and doing your best, and accepting your vulnerability and that of others, as part of a community of searchers. That you can surely do if you are sincere...humble...yourself.

Anxiety: Comforting the Child

Why do I carry around such fear and anxiety about the least thing (like booking airline tickets) as if so much is at stake and might be lost if I fail to control things properly? From whence comes this terror? How do I move beyond it into a place of trust, security, and peace? Or can I simply not?

Yes, you have such a fear of something going wrong. The stakes feel like they're life and death, given your life experience (and your death experiences). You keep throwing the dice again, replaying the scenarios. And there are scary scenarios from even before that — given the violence present in your household. So at an early age and, even more so later, you learned that the control of danger was how you played the game of life. That game might be called "Danger!" It's hard to start playing a new game at your stage of life. Devilishly hard.

Or divinely hard?

Yes, "divinely hard" might be a better way to put it. Thank you. As always you point toward the answer being within yourself.

It is a matter of commitment, intention, followed by self-reassurance. Keep telling the frightened part of yourself — who is so like your young daughter — that it's okay: You are there for yourself and, even more importantly, God is there for you.

When needed, stay with her, sing her to sleep, and day by day, night by night, she will grow a little stronger and more secure. Like her, you too are transitioning from living in an orphanage (not only your parents were gone, but your heavenly Father-Mother²⁴) to having regained a family.

It takes a good long while for the power of now²⁵ [living fully in the present] to break forth. This seems like a contradiction, but it isn't — just another delicious paradox.

Keep comforting yourself — that all will be okay. When you believe all will be okay, all is okay — even not being okay.

²⁴ Not that God was really absent, but surely felt so to me for long periods of my life.

²⁵ A reference to Eckhart Tolle's *The Power of Now*, a book which affected me deeply.

Okay.

Okay.

Anxiety: The Unheard Messenger

How do I get rid of all this anxiety that plagues me?

You don't. You utilize it. That's the tantric way.²⁶

Explain! How the heck do I use this misery? Why do I have to?

“How” and “why” are closely interlinked — and also “who.”

Well before your birth you “chose” an anxious existence — one alert to danger and issues of protection against danger. There were karmic lessons to be learned through such an existence. The issue of rescue, or failure to rescue, has been a paramount theme for you and other family members.

Why would I choose such a life? What is the karmic lesson or benefit?

²⁶ In the “tantric” tradition of Hinduism or Buddhism, instead of fleeing “impure” worldly energies, one attempts to utilize them on the spiritual journey, since the divine is present in all things without exception.

Let me put it to you in a nutshell: The saving of others (or failure to save) is about two themes: the rescue of your self, your true self, and the bodhisattva mission of rescuing others (all sentient creatures).²⁷ You enact in life a parable, experiencing in poignant and powerful ways, about self-rescue or self-destruction, the rescue of others or the failure of that mission. What your soul is trying to accomplish is to become a bigger and bigger vehicle of rescue for self and others. These turn out to be one.

The anxiety comes from trying to do all this as a small separate self, and therefore feeling one's insufficiency.

But doesn't that go back to learning how to get rid of the anxiety, as I asked before?

Yes, but the way in which you "get rid of it" is not just to anaesthetize yourself, or "heal" yourself miraculously. Rather, it involves using the anxiety as your teacher. It is a message to let go, let go, let go. The anxiety is telling you over and over that you, little you, are insufficient. There has to be a Power greater than self that can rescue you and others.

When you misinterpret anxiety as telling you to redouble personal effort and control you fail to receive the karmic message. Use the anxiety as your reminder

The anxiety is a message to let go; that little you are insufficient.

(as pain is a reminder to protect a limb) to "let go and let God." Then the anxiety becomes your friend. The more you stop fighting it, and start utilizing it consciously, the anxiety will begin to diminish.

But only when its message is absorbed — and this messenger no longer needed.

²⁷ The bodhisattva figure of Mahayana Buddhism vows to dedicate him or herself to the release of all sentient creatures from suffering.

Fear: To Whom Do You Grant Power?

What do I do when I am struck with incipient terror about public speaking? I am ashamed to be so plagued, and I guess I am afraid of a shaming experience [on stage]...

More than you realize or experience, you do this to yourself.

“How so?” you ask. Well, it goes like this: You contemplate a speaking duty you are performing (a joy, a triumph, a success). Next thing you know you begin to imagine it all crumbling around you, turning into a public humiliation and personal failure.

Once lodged in your mind that image triggers fear, and then the fear, so to speak, triggers and confirms the image, and you’re off to the races with a feedback loop of terror-energy building on itself. It feels out of control because there’s no easy way to abort it once the buildup has begun.

Would you say that is an accurate description?

Yes. But what do I do about it? Who would God have me be?

Let’s turn it around: Clearly God wouldn’t have you back down in the face of fear. God wouldn’t have you be miserable in the exercise of your duty either, or devoid of pleasure in your successes. So this buildup of fear is not God’s will for you.

Yes, but I can’t stop it!

Oh, but you can. There's the paradox. If you started it, you must have within you (at least with God's help) the power to stop it as well.

Are you willing to exercise that power? To be happy, joyous, and free?²⁸ To be a success, and feel like a success at one and the same time?

Yes. I pray for that, and for the willingness to accept that in my heart.

Good, that was a good prayer, heartfelt and sincere. You do have the key secreted in your pocket to free you from jail, the ruby slippers on your feet to bring you home. You don't need a magical wizard. Or, truth be told, you are that wizard, disguised from yourself.

Isn't that the true theme of the Wizard of Oz — that the wizard is within each of the protagonists? They just have lost access to their own inner magic — wisdom, courage, heart, and the ability to go home.

But where are my ruby slippers?

Well, first you need to believe you have them. That's what I'm working on at the moment. Dorothy had to believe. Your faith will heal you.²⁹ Will you be healed?³⁰

Next you have to click the slippers together and say "There's no place like home." The equivalent for you in this situation would be to say:

²⁸ "We are sure God wants us to be happy, joyous, and free." (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 133).

²⁹ Matthew 9:22; Mark 10:52.

³⁰ John 5:6.

“FEAR BE GONE. I GRANT YOU NO POWER OVER MY ACTIONS AND FEELINGS. I GRANT ALL POWER TO THE ALMIGHTY GOD WHO LIFTS ME UP ON A ROCK.”

Then proceed as if your prayer was efficacious. Feel the strength of God, the Rock, within and around you. Trust that the power has been given to you (as to calm troubled waters³¹) and the outcome will be in harmony with that faith (just as faith in fear generates more fear).

That’s not to say there will be no anxiety in public speaking. In a way you need it in order to give your best performance and to prepare well. But trust that God has provided you with a Rock. Replace faith in fear with faith in God.

Finally, imagine your speaking engagements as times of love. You come to express God-led (and therefore loving) truths to those who come in love for themselves and their soul’s journey. Honor that. Begin every talk with a namaste³² — bow to the God within them; bow to one another (to your partner on either side) — and bow to yourself — the loving God within. What a nice way to begin.

Use that little ritual to discover the place of love in the midst of fear.

Anger and Anxiety: Accepting, Witnessing, Channeling, Enjoying

What do I do about the rage, guilt, and fear stuff I’ve been experiencing? Is it about terminating with my therapist?³³ Why does everything seem more unmanageable all of a sudden?

³¹ Mark 4:39; the scene is also in other Gospels.

³² Namaste (pronounced nah-mahs-tay) is a common greeting in India. It means something like “I honor the Spirit within you, which is ultimately One with the Spirit within me.” Whenever two beings meet, a piece of God is being rejoined with another such piece, and the moment is worthy of celebration.

³³ After several years of working with a therapist we were bringing the treatment to a close. This brought up a lot of difficult emotions especially connected to the death of my family members.

Some regression is inevitable at times of change. It's like one sub-personality that feels threatened, fighting for its life. A part of you clings to the past...is rageful at authority figures who let you down...is guilt-ridden for its murderous impulses...and so throws you into paralyzed quandaries of outward and inward attack.

Ride it out. Watch it unfold. If possible, be entertained by it. Sympathize with it. Comfort with it. But don't identify with it. That is the key. Or let me put it more strongly. Dis-identify with it. Practice the witness.³⁴

It cannot do you harm from a distance if you cling to your true Self. Then it is just a wailing banshee beating a drum and stirring things up. Say "How interesting. This too shall pass. All shall be well."

Resist secondary fear (fear of your fears) and secondary anger (anger at your anger) and secondary guilt (guilt about your relapse into guilt). Just watch and say "How interesting." Then let it go, and go on to your duties and pleasures.³⁵

"How interesting. This too shall pass. All shall be well."

* * *

What to do about my daughter's aggression? My aggression?

³⁴ "Practicing the witness," relates to a meditative practice and life-stance particularly employed in Buddhism and Hinduism wherein one dis-identifies with the ego-self, its stream of mental and life events, by "witnessing" it all as if from outside.

³⁵ The three asterisks that follow (* * *) are used to signal a point where I am linking together different dialogues on a common topic. I do that very little in this book (preferring to let each dialogue stand by itself), but occasionally find it useful for grouping material thematically.

Start by accepting it. What you resist persists. Aggression is a part of being a human being — a very difficult part to master and channel — for parent or child.

Second, learn to direct your anger — and to help your child direct her anger — in ways that are constructive, or at least not destructive. Anger is energy waiting to be channeled, energy that is powerful.

That's why gods are often imaged as angry — because this is a frequency at which the cosmic energy vibrates, not to be denied but used.

That is subtle and difficult. You are “playing with fire” — but think of the creative uses to which fire is put! It just has to be regulated and used properly.

Start with yourself and you'll be better able to help your daughter.

Yes, but start with myself how? What to do?

Try:

1) Being aware of your anger.

2) Accepting it.

3) Channeling it constructively, even...

4) Enjoying it — like the allegro movement of a symphony, with crashing cymbals and accelerating strings.

The idea is not to get over it as quickly as possible, but, paradoxically, to enjoy it. How can you be happy, joyous and free³⁶ if you can't learn to enjoy your moods — even anxiety!

³⁶“Again, see *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 133.

Now wait a second. How to do that? Anxiety is so unpleasant.

Only if you take its messages to be real. People enjoy going to scary movies because they know deep down that the danger is not real. They are sitting in a comfortable movie theater where nothing really can go wrong. The more you install yourself in that frame of mind, that sense of a reality independent of the movie, the more you can enjoy even a scary movie.

And how to do that?

Oh, all the spiritual stuff you are doing — prayer, meditation, therapy, reading. But even more so, a growing faith in God that all shall be well, all things shall be well, all manner of thing shall be well.³⁷

Even if things “don’t go well” — all shall be well. Affirm that to yourself, and pray to know that down to the core of your being — and you will.

Then you can sit back and enjoy the movie!

Frustration: What to (Un)do About It?

Hari, how do I let go of my aggression and frustration? I don’t even know why I’m feeling that.

How do you treat the disease when you don’t know what it is?

I have a treatment that is a cure-all. That’s the good news. You don’t have to have come to a definitive diagnosis.

³⁷ Again, a quote from the medieval mystic, Julian of Norwich, and a recurring theme in Hari’s messages.

Remember those good old-fashioned snake oils that could cure whatever ails you?

That's what GOD is — “Good Old-fashioned Disease-reliever,” for whatever ails you.

Okay, but how to I apply it? Do I pray for it? Do I I do a Tenth Step?³⁸

Yes, each is acceptable. Let's start with the last first. Where are you at fault?

Grumpy, blaming, victimy, anxious. Self-piteous, ungrateful. But what to do about it?

Nothing, absolutely nothing.

What do you mean? That's not a Tenth Step directive.

Oh yes it is, Drew Leder, if you look closely. Think about the question “What should I have done differently?”³⁹ Sometimes the answer is nothing. It's not anything you should do, or should have done, that will resolve the situation. Nor is it something someone else should do that they aren't (your wife, kids). There's not even something that God should be doing to take away all negative feelings.

Acceptance then is the key. Embracing what is, internally and externally, without any resistance. Letting go of the negative mantras about your life, your self, and those around you. You can ask God to remove those, or to help you remove them. That's a bit of a “doing” thing, but really it's more of an undoing. Practice non-resistance.

³⁸ That part of the Twelve Step program that involves doing a daily inventory of where we may be developing fear, resentment, dishonesty, or selfishness, behaving wrongly, or practicing character defects.

³⁹ This is a paraphrase of one of the Tenth Step questions recommended in the text of *Alcoholics Anonymous*.

Can you give me an example of what that's like?

Sure, let's play with a very concrete situation. Say you come home from a day at work rather tired out, and then irritated that there's so much childcare to do. And your wife is tired, not in a great mood, so that's irritating. You start to have negative thoughts about her, and then feel bad about having them. The tiredness increases a sense of mental instability, which makes you impatient with the kids, who then become a little more snarky and whiny, leading to your impatience...

See how it all builds on itself? You are doing something, in fact, everyone is doing everything to everybody, and most of what's done feels negative.

Now try thinking of it this way — and this will blow your mind because it's absolutely 100% God-approved truth — No one is doing anything to anybody. In a sense, no one is doing anything.

Shit happens. Kids get hungry and tired. So, too, adults. Both get frustrated and angry. These emotions come on, like the air cools and the wind whips up when the sun goes down. It just is — a cosmic phenomenon unfolding.

Don't personalize it as about your wife and your daughters. Don't attach it to a person "who should have known better," including yourself. That's when the resentment comes.

Otherwise, it's like waves coming in and leaving of their own accord, and you sit on the shoreline and watch the waves, including your own, without being buoyed up or immersed.

<p><i>No one is doing anything to anybody...It just is.</i></p>

When it's your time to ride, happy surfing!

Anger: Choosing to Make Yourself Soft

Hari, please help me to process this news about a decision made at my daughter's school — I'm pretty upset, and I'm upset that my wife is upset, though I know I don't have all the answers.

You are at a turning point. You can get into feeling like a victim, and being resentful. You can choose that. Or you can have what you have — want what you have. rather than have what you want⁴⁰. Your school, after all, is very good at what it does, very thoughtful in how it proceeds, so don't assume you know better than they do what it is good for your daughter. Be humble enough to not be sure.

You want to be the director, but are just an actor...accept that gracefully⁴¹. You do not run the world. Also, wait to hear more of what they have to say. You don't have all the information at your disposal. Just give it over to God.

Can you tell me a little more? I'm fine with it, then I slip back into resentment and seething. It's so tempting to look at it negatively. Why?

Because it creates a feeling of power and righteousness, a potent combination. The other creates a feeling of softness — which feels good in a sense, but also very vulnerable. It is

⁴⁰ “Do not seek to have events happen as you want them, but instead want them to happen as they do happen, and your life will go well.” (*The Handbook of Epictetus*, #8).

⁴¹ “Each person is like an actor who wants to run the whole show; is forever trying to arrange the lights, the ballet, the scenery and the rest of the players in his own way.” (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 60.) The recovering person has to let go of this self-centered, controlling attempt to play God if he/she is to recover.

closer to raw emotion — sadness, laughter, pain, peace. This feels vulnerable whereas the resentful stance is very familiar, armored and strong, belligerent, aggressive — the warrior-pose.

It's hard to choose the softer stance, but this is more alive. It's the softness of a plant

It's hard to choose the softer stance, but it's the softness of all living things.

blowing in the wind, the coolness, the sun's warmth, and the moist earth: the softness of all living things. Whenever possible, make yourself

soft.

How about the situation with H. [who I feel so hurt by]? There too I feel belligerent, armored.

Yes, that's right, exactly right. It is an armor primarily against internal pain, only secondarily against the other person. Ask yourself what is the pain against which you feel such a need for armor?

Abandonment — unexpected betrayal and abandonment. Suddenly, you were back in the past. Someone you trusted to be there for you was gone without consideration, warning, consistency. Turn around and she's gone. That's enough to provoke your very painful pain-body.⁴²

But what if you were just to stay with that pain a bit — not blame H., or yourself, that it was triggered, and not armor off with resentment.

What does it feel like? Stay with it. Make yourself soft and open. Then (and only then) it will pass.

⁴² In *The Power of Now* Eckhart Tolle discusses how events can provoke the surfacing of our “pain-body,” an accumulated representation and feeling of past hurts. For me, a perceived abandonment, even if small, can trigger a massive “pain body” associated with the suicides of my father and brother.

Weathering Your Emotional Weather

I feel like I have a lot of free-floating anger. But I don't really understand where it comes from, what it's about, or what to do with it. Can you help me sort it out, gain insight?

Sure, that's what I'm here for (at least partly). Your anger, ultimately, is at life. Things just don't always (or often) go the way you want. Your life is filled with frustrations.

Want me to name a few? Health care insurance. Others' emotional ups and downs. The demandingness of the children. The onslaught of tasks to track, and requests for help. The lack of adequate sleep. The lack of a salary raise. The rejection by a publisher of your book. People not doing what you would like in a Twelve Step context. Parking difficulties. Problematic colleagues at work. Students who don't do their work, and then you have to deal with it.

Even your own halting spiritual efforts, and emotional ups and downs. Your knee problems. And on and on and on. Life's petty — but very real — frustrations build up.

What to do about it? How to handle it all?

That's the second part of what I have to share with you. But you've phrased the question a bit wrongly, or at least in a way that encourages a wrong answer.

It's not something you have to "do about it" that's the answer. It's more "what space need I be in to be able to surf the waves of life and keep my balance and equilibrium...even my joy?"

And here's the answer: It has something to do with anicca (impermanence) and emptiness.⁴³ It's accepting all the phenomena that arise and depart. Breathe them in and out. Allow it all. Invest in nothing, demand nothing, cling to nothing. Then the frustration diminishes and the sense of lightness, freedom, and joy increase.

How to do this with my wife?

Allow her changing moods, energy, to arise and depart. Her emotional weather changes as does the real weather. Your awareness is the sky. The sky does not root for, prefer, any kind of weather.

* * *

Dear Hari, I don't know quite why, but I just feel like I'm off kilter - a little down, physically ill, tired, not into my spiritual disciplines, not feeling connected to God. I'm not sure where I got off-track, or even if I am off-track, or whether it's a seasonal, situational depression...What is going on?!

⁴³ According to Buddha, all things, and events, and mind-states, in ordinary life are marked by *anicca* — impermanence. All is in flux. This is one reason that people, events, mind-states, moods, are all “empty” of any solid, substantial, separate identity that abides over time.

Remember anicca. Moods are impermanent. They come and go like the weather, which even now we cannot fully figure out or predict. Yet you can go about your work and life happily despite the weather. Similarly, you can go about your work and life happily despite your emotional weather.

The kind of happiness I'm speaking about must be other than a mood. The temperature of the ocean at great depths is independent of whatever's happening at the surface (though that's what's more evident to an earthly observer). Think of your moods as surface weather and turbulence. Keep coming back to the ocean depth, the limitless, inner ocean.

How best to do that?

Stick with your spiritual exercises. Insofar as you allow yourself to be tossed around and changed, you identify with the surface. Insofar as you leave all just as it is, you identify with those unchanging depths. That's what you want — to be like a rock (changing the metaphor) strong, silent, steady, unchanging, amidst all the changes of mood.

Whether (weather) you feel like it or not.

The Meat and the Stewpot (Emotional versus Spiritual Growth)

As I get ready to end therapy, what might be the leading edge of my emotional recovery? What might bring a breakthrough? Or is that entirely the wrong type of question?

Yes, the latter. You've "read my mind" (or vice-versa). Entirely the wrong type of question.

Why? It implies you are in a state of deficiency. You desire something different, better, and wonder how to obtain it. Can you see how this style of thinking does not create breakthrough, but the "same old same old"?

How about thinking radically differently? Something like this:

"I accept it all: sadness, anxiety, rage, change, loss, death, frustration. I accept it all. It is a 'perfect mess' because it is what my soul needs, and has chosen right now as an optimum environment for growth and change."

Not necessarily emotional change, but spiritual change and growth. These are quite different. It is often while remaining in the stewpot that the meat gets best cooked. The boiling water doesn't seem to change, but the meat does.⁴⁴ When fully cooked, of course, the meat is taken out.

So do not wish to suffer less, but to suffer more effectively⁴⁵ — "to cook well."

Ah, what a lovely image [sarcasm].

Well, what do you want? I'm a spirit guide, not a poet. I work with the images I have available or, more to the point, that you have available.

⁴⁴ I understood this to mean that in the boiling heat of difficult emotions and situations, the soul learns and matures — "gets cooked."

⁴⁵ In *No Man is an Island*, Thomas Merton writes, "If I am called to the solitary life it does not necessarily mean that I will suffer more acutely in solitude than anywhere else; but that I will suffer more effectively."

But isn't that notion of seeking "spiritual growth and change" another form of desire, another experience of lack?

Ah, good observation, you are getting the feel for this. But there is a crucial difference. On the spiritual plane, in a very real sense, there is no growth and change. There is only what there always is. "I Am." God Is. Change is maya (illusion).

So "spiritual growth" is really a code-name for growth in awareness and acceptance of What Is. One can grow and change in the realization of that which is beyond growth and change.

"Spiritual growth" often brings emotional relief, but when you make the latter your goal it is no longer a yoga (path of awakening). Then it is not even as effective in providing emotional relief.

A subtle, but important paradox.

Dream-Problems Only Dissolve When You Wake Up

Last night I had a dream in which I was caught in a kind of riddle or maze. It was as if I had forty-five destinations that I needed to link up but couldn't. The game could not be made to work, the riddle could not be solved...except by waking up, resolving it by dissolving it. Does that make sense? Is this principle more widely applicable?

Oh, surely yes. That was a potentially helpful teaching. Think about all the problems and dilemmas that are genuinely irresolvable on the psychic level at which they are produced.

Their very irresolvability is an indicator that there is something unreal here. That's why nothing can be made to fully work right.

For example, someone buys a beautiful car, enjoys it deeply (for a day) in the manner he had long dreamed, but then is plagued by a series of frustrations. The car is dented relatively early; has an unpleasant odor; wasn't prepared properly by the manufacturer; gets somewhat disappointing gas mileage, etc.

There is a riddle: Such items seem to promise such satisfaction but fail to deliver, just like in a dream you chase and chase after someone but can never reach them. The only way to catch them, to extricate yourself from the riddle of dissatisfaction, is to "wake up" to a different plane of consciousness.

To those awake, the problem dissolves. It finds true solution on a different plane of understanding — that, for example, we must find our satisfaction in matters spiritual, not material, where moth and rust do corrupt.⁴⁶

"Wake up!" we want to say. Up-level to a different mode of perception. Only there can a solution be found to a dream problem.

That's why our most serious and intractable problems are our greatest teachers. They tell us of the need to wake up, up-level consciousness to where the problem no longer exists.⁴⁷

Can you give me an example of doing that with the car?

Our most intractable problems are our greatest teachers: they tell us of the need to wake up.

⁴⁶ Matthew 6:19.

⁴⁷ This notion may be applicable not only on a personal level (for example, with fears and resentments) but on a planetary level, as with issues like war and global warming that arise from our false ideologies and material attachments.

Sure. You realize that the focus of your desire was somewhat frivolous, and its satisfactions necessarily transitory and less than truly fulfilling. You laugh at yourself. You look back on your former self a bit as a dream figure, a movie character, who you no longer quite identify with.

You have woken up.

You make it sound so easy. But it isn't, is it, when you're dealing with something to which you're closely wedded?

Well, yes and no (there I go again). When you are really closely wedded to something, to use your phraseology, you have no intention of waking up. Even if someone tries to interrupt your reverie you shake them off and go back to sleep. It's wish-fulfillment in the Freudian sense.⁴⁸

But if you want to wake up — if, for example, the dream is a distressing one, and you are tossing and turning, moaning in your sleep, begging to escape — wake-up can be easy and quick. Someone gives you a slight poke and you sit upright in bed and gaze around, wide-eyed.

That's sometimes what happens with dramatic spiritual experiences. All of a sudden you're awakened because you desperately want to be, need to be — no time to lose.

Quickness of awakening is directly related to levels of desire.

⁴⁸ In Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he advanced a theory (later altered) that all dreams represent some form of psychic wish-fulfillment which assists the dreamer to remain asleep, undisturbed by intrusive impulses.

Living with Others in a Challenging World

Up until now conversations with Hari have had something of an interior focus: How can I cultivate “inner” mental and emotional states conducive to well-being? In this section we turn to our relationships with other people, and the larger social world. We’re not forgetting former lessons but enlarging their application.

I speak freely in these discussions of my ambivalences and conflicts. I begin with my family — wife and children — then expand to work situations. Though readers may not share my roles and relationships — for example, as father, Twelve Step sponsor and college professor — what Hari teaches outruns these particular contexts.

The second half of the section turns to broader sociopolitical themes. This material was generated during a period of years when I felt deep dismay about the state of the country. We invaded Iraq relying on “faulty intelligence” and in defiance of world-opinion. Economic disparities grew between the rich and the poor. Environmental destruction continued unabated. As someone who has worked for many years with prisoners, and written a book with them,⁴⁹ I also had strong feelings about a harsh penal system that incarcerates more than two million people, and sanctioned the use of torture for some detainees.

In my mind I blamed specific individuals and groups for what I saw as these horrors. This led me to become more partisan and bitter, albeit in the name of love. Being an obsessive-compulsive person I sometimes couldn’t stop fuming about these issues, or obsessing about the changing fortunes of a forthcoming election.

⁴⁹ This is entitled *The Soul Knows No Bars: Inmates Reflect on Life, Death and Hope* (written with inmate co-authors, foreword by Cornel West).

Perhaps I am not alone in the struggle to cope with such feelings, though your politics may differ from mine. For that reason I have chosen to share these dialogues. In the face of all this darkness, Hari attempts to calm me down, lighten my mood, and radically widen my perspective.

Disappointments and God-Appointments

Is there a way I should be with my wife, more loving, more forgiving, more accepting?

First, remember you are on separate journeys. There is a way of unity that is spiritual, and a way of unity that is distorted, codependent. The latter involves denying separation. Trying to stick together like one. But this is like trying to kiss the mirror — not very satisfying. A spiritual union is grounded on clear separation, like kissing a genuinely other person. So wish Janice well on her journey and continue on your own. Sometimes that is the best one can do.

You have a broken piece of yourself. You want Janice to heal it. But people are rarely that attentive, that committed, that insightful, to be able to discern and heal that broken piece. You can best do it for yourself. When the pain arrives, hold it and rock it like a baby. Love it and accept it and comfort it. Don't ask someone else to do it for you — they can't. But you can heal yourself.

* * *

Okay, let me switch over to a practical question. Is there anything that would loosen up my willingness to think and act more kindly toward Janice? I tend to gravitate automatically toward the negative in my interpretations of her actions and moods.

You still wrestle with a profound disappointment that she is not, cannot be, the perfect mother you missed out on as a child. Hint: everybody does. That mother is God, and at birth in ways we become disconnected from God — not truly, not ultimately, but certainly experientially.

Take this grievance to God. Beg for evidence and experience of God's care and love. You're looking for love in the wrong place — and healing, and fulfillment. In this regard Janice will always "let you down." Try to transfer this emotional energy into the spiritual energy of yearning — then it becomes a positive force in your life.

Whenever you feel "disappointed" in Janice, use this as a reminder to make an appointment with God. Then you will not be dis-appointed.

I see your point.

Are Children a Burden or Blessing?

I don't seem to enjoy very much playing with my kids — it's boring, and so much time is spent restricting, disciplining, trying to get them to calm down, or to be enthusiastic about something — just somehow getting through the time.

I want to be alone to read, meditate... I'm like a "forest dweller" stuck at a late age in a "householder" role.⁵⁰ Can I learn to incorporate parenting more into my spiritual practices? Can I learn to have more fun, shift my attitude about the day ahead?

Parenting is not primarily a burden but a blessing. It's a "cup half-empty and half-full" issue. It depends on how you look at it — burden or blessing.

Of course, it's both. You've got to spend today doing things you'd rather not, bored, having to supervise and discipline kids, whip them along, making complex and imperfect decisions, driving yourself physically, and driving for an hour and a half in the car, perhaps with unruly kids, etc. Naturally you're not in the mood, contemplating this set of burdens. But now shift your focus:

1. Your day will be filled with meaning and service where it might have been lonely and empty.

2. You will have the fun of growing closer, sharing laughter and good times.

⁵⁰ An ancient Hindu model, articulated in the *Laws of Manu*, is that of a four-stage life process. When we see our grandchildren, and our hair growing white, it is time to leave the householder phase, in which we raised our children, pursued our profession, and did our duty to the community, in order to retreat to the forest. There the elder meditates, reads sacred texts, undergoes ascetic purification, seeking to fulfill the true goal of human life — spiritual awakening. (I discuss the contemporary applicability of this and other spiritual models of aging in my book, *Spiritual Passages*.)

3. You will have a new adventure, a new set of experiences, you would never have in a million years [without being a parent].

4. You'll have interesting adult companions to converse with and help keep you sane.

5. You'll stay physically active, splashing around in the pool, minding a young child — it's keeping you more young and fit.

6. It's a kind of service you can combine with pleasure and personal love (not just working at a soup kitchen, or teaching in a prison) — which can be the most ease-ful and satisfying form of service.

7. It gets your head out of the books, and out of the clouds, and keeps your feet firmly planted on earth where your real work and spiritual progress are to be done⁵¹ — karma yoga (the path of selfless service). It's good for you spiritually, not just physically.

8. There's the long-range satisfaction of launching your children well in the world, experiencing a happy and united family, having them there in your old age.

9. There's the emotional healing that comes from building a successful family after your (and your wife's) experiences of total family breakdown, abandonment, and loneliness.

⁵¹ “We have come to believe He would like us to keep our heads in the clouds with Him, but that our feet ought to be firmly planted on earth.” (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 130)

10. There's the yin-yang balance that gets established with your more introverted side. Forest dweller/householder — wisdom/playfulness.

That balance is the path appropriate to you.

Don't Try Harder, Try Easier

Hari, is there a way I can get more enjoyment, satisfaction, positive emotion out of teaching, instead of frustration and feelings of failure?

Yes. Lower your expectations radically. Right now you torture yourself with a somewhat impossible ideal to realize — the “dynamic seminar-style life-changing class.” Needless to say, almost every class, and many students within each class, and you, yourself, fall short of that expectation, way short. Expectations are resentments waiting to happen.

What if, instead, you were to expect little. To get through the material. Have a good moment or two. Have students get turned on by an exercise or an argument, think a little differently about their world.

At times you might be delightfully surprised at a transformation that goes beyond this. At other times you might feel a bit disappointed when things fall short. But ordinarily you can go home with a feeling of a job well done. The material taught. The ideas presented, thought-provoking, life-provoking ideas.

All you can do is present the ideas. You cannot dictate the students' receptivity. Think instead that you are planting seeds that may sprout in the future, maybe well after the

student's graduation, or in another course, a service experience, their relationships, wherever.
Most of the fruit your tree bears you will never get to see. But know it is there.

That seems like a lot of different thoughts rather incoherently packaged. Can you clarify it all a bit?

Hmmm, you think I'm not such a good teacher, do you? See how very critical your mind is. You're hard to please aren't you? Try being easier to please. Just as a spiritual exercise, determine to be pleased with your classes, to see the good — and to be pleased with your students. Just try it as an amends for years of hyper-criticism.

Any other counsel about teaching?

Wu-wei⁵² is a good way to go. Don't try harder. Try easier.

What does that mean? What could that look like? Preparing less? Worrying less?

The key is not something quantitative like preparation time, but core attitude. Your current attitude creates a good deal of pressure on you and the student to perform at a very high standard. And even then it's never enough...or the next time isn't as good...or you don't allow

⁵² *Wu-wei*, often translated literally from the Chinese as “non-action,” is the mark of the Taoist master who dwells in harmony with the *Tao*, the Way of things. It indicates a sort of being-in-action that is so effortless and natural (devoid of righteousness, control, and striving) that it seems almost like a “non-action,” and yet accomplishes all that is needed.

yourself to take any satisfaction. It's as if you know you're really no good, and they are really no good, and you're always battling to overcome that, but facing an impossible task.

What if you were to start with a different core attitude: You're fine. This is a good course. You're a good teacher. This is good material. These are good kids. You're in a space of goodness together, a privileged space, one to savor and enjoy. Relax into it, like taking a warm bath. And if sometimes it doesn't "go great," so what? It's still worth enjoying this privilege of study and intellectual exchange. It's cool, it's all cool.

One of the things, the main things you have to drop on the way to wu-wei is your negativity.⁵³ Wu-wei is a very affirmative stance, accepting, embracing, loving things as they are. As it says in the Tao te Ching, "The world is sacred, it can't be improved."⁵⁴ That's a good way of improving your experience of teaching — realizing nothing needs to be improved.

But what if I don't get great teaching evaluations, and the

A good way of improving your experience is realizing nothing needs to be improved.

students don't show up, and do poorly on the test, and won't participate in conversations, and aren't interested, and I can't remember their names, and, and, and...How can I then tell myself nothing needs improvement, everything is great?

Well, first of all, the picture you portray is exaggerated, heavily slanted toward the negative. And that is indeed what happens inside your mind. Try to be more balanced and accurate in your judgments and you'll find so much that is positive.

⁵³ In seeking knowledge every day something is gained.

In seeking the Tao, every day something is dropped. (*Tao Te Ching*, #48)

⁵⁴ *Tao Te Ching*, #29.

But secondly, even beyond that, it isn't all about judgments of good and bad, failure and success: That moral framework is bound to drive you wild. In the Sabbath mind, all is accepted, even the imperfections, and all becomes good by being accepted.⁵⁵

What does this feel like? How do I get there?

You can't. The very notion of "getting there" implies and reinforces the notion that you aren't enough, the situation is messed up and requires rectification. This is, of course, the problem more than the solution.

Let me try to rephrase the question for you in slightly more helpful language. How do I drop all my crap, my judgments, low self-esteem, performance demands — all that baggage that is weighing me and others down? How do I drop it, get free of my burdens?

Okay, that sounds good. How do I? Give it over to God?

Precisely. God is — and pardon this spiritual image — like a giant garbage can. You can dump everything into God and it never makes a mess. That's why everything is a "perfect mess" —because finally it's all dumped into God.

Can you explain, Hari?

⁵⁵ "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good...And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done." (Genesis 1:31-2:3). Thus, the "Sabbath mind," resting in appreciation.

Sure. Imagine a place so large and so pure that it cannot be sullied by our refuse. People used to think of the ocean that way, and of the sky. It's proved not to be true. But God is actually like that.

When people talk about Jesus, or a bodhisattva, taking on the sins of the world, the karma of others, what they meant was that these beings were so open, compassionate, pure, that you can dump anything into them and it wouldn't make a mess. Everything is healed — made whole again in that “hole.”

I'm not sure how to do what you are telling me. Is it to say a prayer and give God my shortcomings, ask God to take them away, or pray that I might accept them...or what?

Well yes, all of the above, in a sense. And none of the above, in a sense, since you tend to pray in a “try harder to get there” fashion, as per above. Try saying a prayer like this:

“Dear God. Here I am. As you made me. As I made myself. Good points. Bad points. In-between points. Neither-good-nor-bad-points. The whole package as I am, exactly as I am now, not some theoretical person who might or should be — just me.”

I give me to You. I thank you for what you have given me. I offer myself over for your use, for your healing, if that is in the cards, or for my staying-the-same-ness if that is your will. Fuck it. Whatever. Take me, I'm yours.”

Get the picture at all? Better yet, get the feeling? It's a little like despair — the loss of hope and the effort that goes with hope — but it's not a descent into hopelessness as that's commonly meant. Rather, it's an ascent — an assent — into something better.

Acceptance — that's one way of putting it, though a little flat. Release — maybe that's a little better. Joyful release. Freedom from the weight of having to try so hard, do so much, change so thoroughly.

Just to be — that is all. Just to be. Nothing more is needed.

Self-Esteem: Avoiding Others' Projections

My feeling of being “not-enough,” along with ego, perfectionism, defensiveness, seems to lead me to hate anyone who is critical of me, especially in the Twelve Step fellowship. How can I get beyond this, love and forgive them, and value myself even with my imperfections? My low self-esteem and guilt stuff seems so easily triggered, and then I go into perpetual defense/attack mode, at least inside.

All kinds of people will project all kinds of things onto you. Let them. You do the same to others. It is human. You become an actor in their drama, and they may cast you as hero or villain. In a sense, that is not up to you. They are the director of their own movie, and you're just an actor within it.

That's why turning to other humans for confirmation of your worth is notably unreliable. You will get some accurate feedback, but a whole lot of noise and static as well. Accept this. Accept that the noise and static (as well, sometimes, as the accurate feedback) may

be more intense in Twelve Step contexts (dealing with ill people in situations of emotional intensity) than elsewhere. It would be like a therapist trying to judge if he were doing a good job by whether or not his patients were mad at him or in love with him. It just doesn't correlate.

Turning to other humans for confirmation of your worth is notably unreliable.

So instead, examine your own conscience. Ask God (and me, God's agent, so to speak) to show you the truth when need be. Forgive yourself your mistakes. Confirm your strengths and skills and accurate judgments. Get neutral third-party feedback as needed, to the extent this can be located. Accept not being liked all the time, or even respected and valued. So too was Christ made messiah and demon by those around him...and just went on trying to do God's will.

Listening Beyond Positions and Op-positions

I have a very hard time with a lot of religious people, and people in general who I disagree with politically. I might like them if we had dinner together but I see them as embodying such ignorance, and practicing such a destructive intolerance, that I lose any sense of “love of humankind” — I have a hard time reconciling myself to their actions and attitudes. But I know this is not right. It feeds my own intolerance and rigidity. How do I get beyond it?

Each person you meet is a face of God. You cannot “be with God” and turn away from all these faces. It is one or the other. And certainly it doesn't make sense to turn away from the many faces of God “in the name of God” — that is, in ways based on some (misguided)

notions of compassion and justice, ones that lead you to reject those who don't agree with them.

Isn't this intolerance what you object to about so-called "religious people"? Yet here you are manifesting it yourself in your self-satisfied sure-I'm-right religiosity. When you see and reject others who are like this, you are looking into a mirror.

Let me give you another way to look at it, one that is humbler. Every perspective, on the human plane, involves some revealment (revelation) and some concealment⁵⁶. If, for example, you have a rush of compassion for someone you perceive as "victim," and therefore anger at the victimizer, you are revealing-concealing the humanity of those involved. You see and value the humanity of the victim but not that of the victimizer. Or you could reverse your perspective — as you do, feeling for prisoners [the victimizers, but forgetting their victims].

Because human sight is intrinsically limited, perspectival, revealing some aspect of truth by concealing others, there will always be sight/blindness.

It is, of course, a lot easier to see one's own "sight," and the "blindness" of others. They would agree from their perspective — they see their own sight, and your blindness. But everyone is blind to their own blindness (it's a tautology). You too.

When we accept that, we begin to accept our common humanity, our fumbings toward truth and justice (and God), and we become less assured that we have The Truth. In fact we can be certain that we don't. We "see through a glass darkly."⁵⁷

Everyone is blind to their own blindness.

⁵⁶ In *Being and Time*, work of the 20th century philosopher Martin Heidegger, he discusses how "truth" (*aletheia*, in Greek) involves a dialectic of disclosure and concealment.

⁵⁷ New Testament, 1 Corinthians 13:12.

Imagine that everyone has some piece of the truth — that if we put our pieces together in the light of God something fuller and more accurate may emerge than if we simply battle against others with different views. Hear their truths — state yours — but listen with a mind that is beyond being positioned.

But how about if you are dealing with Hitler? Do you really want to say that “he has his truth” and we have to listen and respect it? Some people on the contemporary scene seem almost Hitlerian to me in the viciousness and wastefulness and mass-death that is the product of their illusions and ignorance and pomposity. There, I’ve said it. You seem to want me to take a far more namby-pamby position.

No, actually what I was saying was that I wanted you to take no position at all. That is not to say you have no beliefs, or emotions, or assertions. But when they become a “position” it becomes poisonous — an article of contention and op-position.

What would it mean, you wonder, to take no position on a Hitler, or some other person or movement you deeply disapprove of? Is it like trying to be the perpetual human Switzerland, ever in a position of neutrality? No. As you can see, that too is a position and not always a very sound one.

To be beyond positions is to simply let the truth resonate in and through you as best you can. Satyagraha — “holding to the truth” — as Gandhi did, wasn’t a position.⁵⁸ He simply let the truth act in and through him as best he knew how. That did, it’s true, put him in op-position to others insofar as he attacked and undermined their policies and positions. But

⁵⁸ “Satyagraha” (literally, “holding to the truth”) was Gandhi’s term for non-violent resistance to oppressive systems.

in his heart he was not in op-position to them. He held them in his heart and strove to understand their fears and concerns. He had a spacious mind and heart from which no one was excluded. He was capable of listening as well as talking.

Sometimes we don't realize that our talking comes from a deeper, better place when it is coupled with listening — listening deeply to the other, and to the place within. Then the other might hear you from their own place within.

There is nothing namby-pamby about such a person or the “positions” they take — only they are not positions. They are “speakings,” “leadings”....call them what you will. They are truth speaking forth as best the person is able to access, and they are not “versus” anyone else. They simply are.

The World is A Dark Stage

Dear Hari, I remain so freaked out about the state of the nation. Please help me not to be so scared and angry.

“The serenity to accept the things we cannot change.”⁵⁹ Like the slaughter of people in Iraq, you wonder? Tremendous inequalities of wealth (which you yourself participate in)? You don't want the serenity to accept these things. You think everything would be better if only you were the director running the show.⁶⁰ Sound familiar?

The problem (or part of the problem) is that you don't necessarily have the solutions, though you think you do, to the massive problems you and your country face. No one does, at

⁵⁹ “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” This “Serenity Prayer” used in Alcoholics Anonymous, has traditionally been attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr, though versions circulated before his usage.

⁶⁰ “Each person is like an actor who wants to run the whole show; is forever trying to arrange the lights, the ballet, the scenery and the rest of the players in his own way.” (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 60)

least no one in politics. The solutions are not to be found on the political level: They are soul-utions. And human beings, almost by definition, are not fully soul-developed.

Thus the poor will always be with you, as Jesus said⁶¹. It is not the fault of a

The solutions are soul-utions.

*small cadre of people, misguided as their “solutions” may be. It is the fault endemic to a certain level of consciousness where, as the Buddha says, belief in self leads to **tanha**, leads to **dukkha**, inevitably⁶². It is laughable to believe an election would resolve this.*

What you can do is pray for all sentient creatures to awake and evolve. Do that work on yourself. Don’t fully drop out of the polis (the larger society) but pick and choose your involvements wisely. Pray for the serenity to accept what you cannot change, courage, and wisdom where relevant. It is all not as horrible as it seems.

That is appearance. You cannot fully know the great reality that it is held in the hands of God. The reality is far greater, and better than the seeming, like a novel where all is going to hell in a handbasket, but the hero is growing, a happy end is in sight.

Try to keep that in-sight, despite the brutal “reality” you see.

I have a very hard time when I read the newspaper reconciling the horrible. unjust things I see in the world with a vision of a spiritual realm where “all is well,” all is just as it should be, all is blissful Spirit on its way home. It’s the most stunning disconnect I can imagine.

Yes, isn’t it?

⁶¹ Mark 14:7; John 12:8.

⁶² According to Buddha’s first and second “noble truths,” suffering (*dukkha*) results from our self-centered cravings (*tanha*).

But let me help you a bit with this disconnect thing. Are you disconnected from me?

Well, sometimes more so, sometimes less.

So it is with the world and God. The world is a radiant window through which God's love and light sometimes pours, but it also has patches — sizeable patches — which are dull and smeared and thus yield darkness, the absence of light. So it is, was, and ever shall be.

But then how is the world perfect? How is it all God?

Well, it depends what you mean by God. If by “God” you mean blessings, illuminations, wisdom, then the world is far from exhibiting God much of the time. But if you have an even more comprehensive notion of God — that God comprehends the darkness. and heals and transforms it, then it is all part of the Living Whole.

Look at the life of Christ. It is an allegory of the darkness, unredeemed, undefeated, on the human level, which nonetheless is a glorious part of the God-story. It is a scene against whose darkness the light of God shines more brightly forth.

See a being dressed in white, and spotlighted against a black stage. Wouldn't it stand forth more brightly than if the background were light?

But Jesus did in a sense win, manifesting such transformative goodness. I see so little of that in the story [of the world around me] — everything just seems to be getting worse.

So too in the story of Jesus. Talk about going to hell in a handbasket! Could it possibly have come out worse on the earthly plane? And yet, with the resurrection God shows that that is maya (illusion), that spiritual beings and values are triumphant, that the light of eternity cannot be doused, not one iota, by the world's darkness.

Think about it. Darkness cannot extinguish light. It is not a positive force. You cannot shine a beam of darkness into the light. But the reverse is true: You can shine light upon the darkness and the light will win. One single photon is enough to conquer absolute darkness!

I hate to say it but the world will always be a dark stage. It is designed in that way, to be filled with rich and dramatic contrasts. But be ye a believer in the Light.

The Troubles of the World: How Not to be Overcome

Hari, how do I accept the Supreme Court's ruling?⁶³ Living in a country where that is justice?! Our invasion of Iraq, in defiance of world opinion? The darkness that has come upon us, that is expressed in every branch of our government? My own seeming powerlessness to do anything about it? The feeling that insanity, evil, darkness rules? The trampling on values that I hold most dear?

Politics has always been a place of darkness for you. It is not a place, for the most part, where you connect to energies of the spirit. Partially, this is based on an accurate (relatively) perception of what you see going on around you. In the sphere of politics people often express their worst interests: self-serving egocentricity, fears and hatreds, the system of justice

⁶³ I was reacting to a 5-4 Supreme Court judgment upholding California's "three strikes, you're out" law that, in one of the cases under consideration, sentenced a man for 50-years-to-life in prison for swiping some videotapes from a Kmart.

distorted by power and money. It would take a saint to find God there — someone like Gandhi, able to look that deeply and courageously beneath the maya (illusion) to find the Atman (divine Self) even in a General Smuts.⁶⁴ You are not there yet. You may never be, in this lifetime.

But beyond that, there is something within you that rebels against the political sphere, that cannot find a home there in the way you can in novels, philosophy, art and music, astrophysics, and other spheres of learning and culture. You are a thinker, a philosopher, a lover of wisdom, and like Socrates you do not find wisdom in the public sphere. Perhaps Socrates was not only operating pragmatically by staying clear of the public sphere — he was also responding to a call from his innermost nature to fly toward what he loved the best — the ideal Forms, not their distortion in the world.⁶⁵ Then he can better manifest the Forms in his life, and indirectly in his society.

Do what you love, not what you hate. Permit yourself to express, without guilt, the Tao of your own nature. Think much on God and less on the world. Think much on beauty and less on horror and ugliness.

You wonder if that is not to abandon your social responsibility, but so much goes back to the Serenity Prayer. Where you see an opportunity to make a change, do so. Continue to teach on these issues as you see fit, to engage in certain protests and gifts of money. I'm not advocating that you drop out and evade your social and national dharma (duty). But do it with a kind of detachment that enables you to keep your head in the clouds with God — to live

⁶⁴ Though he accomplished much good in his life, General Jan Smuts presided over the racist policies and laws of South Africa that Gandhi challenged in the early 20th century. However, Gandhi always sought to see and bring forth the Higher Self in his “opponents,” rather than demonizing them.

⁶⁵ In Plato's *Apology*, recounting Socrates' speech when on trial for his life (he lost), Socrates explains that he has always avoided involvement in politics (31d-33b) — which he says would surely have led to an earlier death, allowing him to do no good for himself or Athens.

amidst beauty and joy — to keep confidence that all will be well, if not on the earthly plane, than the heavenly. Hold faith that light overcomes the darkness.

I get the principle, but I don't see it in the world. In the Supreme Court ruling didn't darkness overcome the light?

Yes, for a time. Many things unfold slowly in time, like a book with some sad and difficult chapters. But remember that I already see the end of the book (in a certain sense). I know there is a happy ending, and that its meaning and intensity are only enhanced by the ups and downs in the book's middle. How can good triumph except over evil? How can beauty reassert itself, except in the midst of squalor? How can God and the godly triumph over the world, unless there is world of horrors to be overcome?

Again, I get the principle, I think, but I don't see it manifesting in human history — any progression toward a just, beautiful, and happy ending. If anything, things seem to be getting worse.

Yes, but seem is the operative word. There is a slow progress toward greater clarity of justice and humanity that comes from highlighting evil — as Gandhi did with the British and South Africans. This is done through cases like these in the Supreme Court, through the prosecution of the war in Iraq — it is actually helping the world to wake up [to peace and justice].

Admittedly, it is acutely uncomfortable to realize that one's own nation is playing the role of the villain in this drama, one's own leaders. But that doesn't mean you are the bad guy.

True, it does impose certain dharmic duties of protest and disassociation. But there is a limit to even those because, as I said above, your nature is not best expressed with a focus on this.

Watch it all with an air of bemusement — not to deny the horrors of the world, but to deny that they are ultimate. Either there is another realm, and the veil is lifted, failed lessons get to be repeated until everyone graduates — or else it is a horrid and meaningless world (almost no matter what happens within it). What is your choice to be?

Do I have a choice?

You have a choice how to see it, what “truth” to claim and proclaim.

I know I’m supposed to “accept the things I cannot change,” but aren’t I also supposed to rebel against war and injustice, not accept it? Even Gandhi speaks of non-violent non-cooperation.

Yes, but that was his svadharma (personal nature/duty). His tasks, skills, even his joy, love and personal expression lay in this area. That is not you. Frankly, you are no Gandhi, and that’s okay. God made you as you are. Have the serenity to accept yourself as you are, not to try to change what you cannot. Stay sober. Help people one by one, and class by class [through writing, speaking, teaching]. This is your “revolutionary action” because in small ways it does help the world to turn toward the light.

Don't take the troubles of the world on your shoulders.⁶⁶ It only leads you to collapse. I give you my permission — no I order you, if that will help. At least I announce this as God's will for you, kinder to you than you are to yourself.

War: The Horror of the Unreal

Help me, like Arjuna, to have my own battlefield discourse, to use this occasion as a time for spiritual learning and a leap forward. Is there anything I can learn and see in this moment of political desolation?⁶⁷

Yes, I am willing to unleash (in you) a series of learnings — let's call them ten in number.

This may take a little while to unfold:

1. Everything that is unreal is unreal. Everything that is real is real. Never the Twain shall meet. (Having read Twain's War Prayer you know what I mean — but let me explain more clearly.)⁶⁸

⁶⁶ “We absolutely insist on enjoying life. We try not to indulge in cynicism over the state of the nations, nor do we carry the world's troubles on our shoulders. When we see a man sinking into the mire that is alcoholism, we give him first aid and place what we have at his disposal.” (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 132)

⁶⁷ In the Hindu *Bhagavad Gita*, Arjuna, pausing on the battlefield of Kurushetra, unable to go forward with a murderous civil war, receives the teachings of Krishna, a Divine incarnation, serving as Arjuna's charioteer. My own desolation, here referred to, was largely provoked by the war in Iraq.

⁶⁸ The humorist Mark Train wrote, but was unable to publish in his lifetime, *The War Prayer*, a scathingly satirical indictment of the mentality and horror of war, with lines such as “O Lord our God, help us to tear their soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells; help us to cover their smiling fields with the pale forms of their patriot dead; help us to drown the thunder of the guns with the shrieks of their wounded, writhing in pain...”

War is ultimately unreal. It is predicated on a series of falsehoods — that the enemy is radically different than ourselves — that he can be “liberated” by being killed — that we are at our best while slaughtering innocents, etc.

These things are so hard to believe that the discourse that surrounds them becomes more and more rigid, polemical, demanding, coercive. No one wants to say that the emperor has no clothes as the group mind-think tightens its hold.

But not only is the justification for war unreal, illusory, non-truthful, but so too the fact of war — the notion that war brings a solution to conflict. It doesn’t; it simply kills the other party in the dispute.

2. War is unreal in another deeper, though not unrelated, sense. It is based on “tanha”⁶⁹ (to use Buddhist terminology) — craving involving the ego-self and its greed and desire system, its clingingness. It seeks to foster the interests and the security of that ego-self which itself is ultimately unreal.

It creates a vivid melodrama, at which so much seems at stake for this and other ego-selves, and so it makes this world seem terribly real, compelling and dramatic. War fixates, like almost

nothing else, your attention on this world and its seeming reality. That is why Krishna has to shake Arjuna awake — “wake up from the dream turned nightmare!”

Think about it — what dream seems more real, has more vivid effect, more gripping, paralyzing, than a nightmare?

War doesn’t bring a solution to conflict: It simply kills the other party in the dispute.

⁶⁹ In his Four Noble Truths, Buddha stated that the pervasiveness of *dukkha* (suffering) was the result of *tanha*, self-centered craving, that puts in opposition to one another, and to the essential nature of reality.

3. On the other hand, nightmares often force us awake. Here is the powerful teaching moment that war presents to all combatants (and everyone is forced into the position of combatant, one way or another, once a war has begun).

It's a horrible enough dream that war encourages us to struggle to get free of it, to wake up to a greater reality — a heaven (whether it might someday be established on earth, or conceived of as another reality altogether) in which we long to dwell, from which we dimly remember we have come, and to which we long to return.

4. But war won't get us there, nor meditation on war, nor anti-war activism, nor any of the human strategies, valuable as they might be, that unfold on the earthly plane, and only on that plane.

Seek to act as your Father in Heaven would. "What would Jesus do?" is a good way to begin, or "Buddha," or whoever you wish that embodies the highest, most creative consciousness that lies behind the universe. Here's the answer you will likely receive:

God would do nothing.

Examine that statement more clearly: God would do no-thing. To do some-thing is, by definition, to choose this action versus that, try to bring about a solution, protest, etc. but also to exclude other options, and other people who would hold with different and opposed actions. So you fall back into "this versus that," "us against them"...the conflictual energies that triggered a war.

So the best thing to do is to do no-thing. But to be. To start with the elemental “I am” — feeling it, expressing it, affirming it.

5. What is the I am? Well, you can start with what I am not (this is where Krishna began)⁷⁰.

I am not the body lying dead on the battlefield, or temporarily alive. I am not an all-good, all-knowing person who can judge others. I am not the guilty one who feels bad for being an American. I am ultimately beyond all such identities, though I also may participate in them on this level of reality.

I am... the “I am,” without beginning or end, deathless, wise beyond all earthly knowledge, accepting of all events, creative of all events, the Witness beyond even the witness.

6. Once you have experienced the “I am” it can emanate forth, as the sun shines light — without “doing” anything. It does nothing (to quote Taoism) yet everything is illuminated, everything warmed, everything nurtured and nourished.⁷¹ This is the best, finally the only response to war — to be as creative and nourishing as war is destructive.

To be, that is, an emissary and expression of love, the creative and nurturing force of the universe.

***This is the best response to war
— to be as creative and
nourishing as war is destructive.***

7. War spelled backwards is raw.

War

represents the raw materials of life, the ego’s life, tossed about in a deadly salad. Love, on the other hand, arises when we are well-cooked — when we have heated up the seeds of ego, the

⁷⁰ In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna first tries to awaken Arjuna from the *maya* (illusion) of the material world as coextensive with reality, teaching him that the true Self cannot be slayer or slain.

⁷¹ “The Tao abides in non-action (*wu-wei*) and yet nothing is left undone. If rulers observed this all would develop naturally....and be at peace.” (Lao Tzu’s *Tao te Ching*, #37)

hard seeds, and they have expanded into popped corn, soft, fluffy, and edible. This is how our heart breaks...breaks open. So the heartbreak of war is a cooking element if you let it be.

Instructions to the cook⁷²: Let your heart break open, not shut.

8. However, once it is open there is nothing to do except expressions of what needs to be done that course through you in such a way that there is no “you” doing them. This is the path of karma yoga,⁷³ and this is what war can unleash.

(Here’s another interpretation of the Bhagavad Gita — that after Krishna’s discourse ended, Arjuna listened deeply for what it meant, and where it led him, and what he must do. He ends up doing exactly what he thought he would at the beginning — throw down his weapons — but for very different reasons, and in a very different way than he would have at the beginning. Only then did his “sacrifice” become effective and meaningful. Before then it would have been an empty gesture that would have done little to restore dharma.⁷⁴)

9. Two last messages. War is a teacher, but it is not your greatest and primary teacher. Peace is a greater teacher for you. (You have known so much, too much, war in your life.) Seek peace, and learn from it about the I Am. You can exhaust the lessons of war until you are exhausted. Peace and joy — look more in that direction, heretical as it seems in time of war.

This is another way of “throwing down your weapons.”

⁷² See Bernard Glassman’s “Instructions to the Cook: A Zen Master’s Lessons in Living a Life that Matters,” in turn based on the “Instructions to the Cook” written by Dogen, 13th century founder of the Soto Zen order in Japan.

⁷³ Karma yoga involves using action (*karma*, in Sankrit) as one’s path of liberation, rather than withdrawing from the world. Krishna tells Arjuna to engage in a righteous (*dharmic*) war, but to do so detached from self, seeking to be of service to all, such that this action becomes spiritually liberating.

⁷⁴ Here Hari provides an alternative end for the *Bhagavad Gita*. In the actual text, Arjuna is portrayed as doing his *dharmic* duty by engaging in battle. (Gandhi interprets this metaphorically as a representation of Arjuna’s inner battle for self-mastery rather than a literal endorsement of violence.)

10. What is real is real, what is unreal, unreal...keep focusing on the peace, joy, and love of the All, and affirming that this, and this alone, is ultimately real. That is satyagraha — holding to the real⁷⁵. Difficult to do at time of war, but never is that healing energy more needed.

Pain, Illness, Aging: The Body and Beyond

In the next conversations we return from a sociopolitical context to one more personal — my own struggles with pain, illness, and aging. Personal, yes, but these are universal issues so I share some of Hari's pointers.

This material was generated while I was rounding my late 40's, heading into my 50's, and various physical "chickens" came home to roost. I had been plagued with ongoing back pain and limitation for years based on a herniated disk and associated problems. This led to a more dramatic crisis, referred to in the dialogue that follows, when a piece of the disk broke off leading to spinal surgery.

Then, too, I faced sleep and energy difficulties, the aftermath of knee surgery, and simply the existential challenge of getting older — dare I say "old"? I have actually written a book on how to use the aging process as a spiritual journey⁷⁶, and have taught workshops to elders around the country. It was easy to tell others what to do, harder to apply it myself. In the darker times I turned to Hari for some light.

⁷⁵ "Satyagraha," Gandhi's term for non-violent non-cooperation with oppressive systems, literally means "insisting on," or "holding firmly to" what is "real" or "true."

⁷⁶ The book is entitled *Spiritual Passages: Embracing Life's Sacred Journey*.

The last two conversations of this section will form a bridge to the next and its focus on “Realms of Reality.” The limitations and deteriorations of the body raise the question of whether that weary carcass is all there is to the self — and whether the true Self is physical at all. Again, that issue has been a focus of my writing.⁷⁷ Again, I still have much to learn.

Pain Doesn't Have to Be That Painful

I am entering into a period of having to cope with a lot of physical pain and limitation, frustration, and a lot of uncertainty — probably leading up to surgery. How can I use this time as a *sadhana* [spiritual method] — the pain itself, or the proper self-care with which I relieve or transcend the pain? What can I do?

First and foremost keep your sanity, your equilibrium, your sense of humor. There will be many up and downs, but the one who finds the point of balance in the see-saw is the one who isn't thrown hither and yon.

Secondly, be appreciative and solicitous of yourself. Your self-care can be an amend for all the times you've been cruel or neglectful to yourself.

Ride the pain like a wave you are body-surfing. Don't fight against it, which only intensifies the impact like a wave crashing against the resistant chest.

⁷⁷ My book on this subject is entitled *The Absent Body*. I also edited a book on *The Body in Medical Thought and Practice*.

Pain is a funny thing, you see. It's a vibratory pattern that lets you know something is wrong and renders you far more cautious in your actions. To that extent it has to have an aversive component, just like pleasures that lead you on to food and sex, and other things needed for your body, have to have an attractive component.

That said, there are limits on the necessary "pain" of pain. This is a strange concept. It seems almost counterintuitive, or illogical, but pain doesn't have to be that painful. Some even find it pleasurable, but at least it can be rendered neutral, or far more neutral than it would be without these methods. Let me give you examples of how to do this:

1. Focus otherwise. Locate the pain firmly — its location, type, intensity, etc., and then systematically focus away from it. No more information is needed from the pain-site unless there is a sudden change in intensity (for example, due to some malproductive form of activity), so why continue to listen? It would be like listening to Mozart on the radio and focusing on the static rather than the music. Why bother? There are many other things you could choose to focus on — people and things outside yourself, or even levels of body/mind/spirit within yourself that have nothing to do with the pain. We speak of people being "lost" in thought — lose yourself in such ways, which is really about finding yourself independent of the pain.

This is a form of pain-relief, almost like a medication, except more like meditation, because it involves developing a focused pattern of concentration. In this way pain can be an instigator of one-pointed attention. It drives you in that direction which could be called "transcending the body." Really it is more about working skillfully with your embodied nature so you hear its messages without being overwhelmed by them.

2. *Method #2 — quite the opposite. Go into the pain. Relax into it, as if it were a friend and partner whom you are welcoming rather than rejecting. Soften around the edges (as Stephen Levine says)⁷⁸. Relax the nearby muscles and body parts, make your body more roomy and spacious, so the pain, and the organs that are causing the pain, no longer feel refused and squeezed out. As you become softer and more spacious paradoxically the pain will shrink, grow quieter, more docile. It's like giving an animal plenty of room to run around. This will actually enable it to become more tranquil.*

3. *Turn the pain into an unbroken chain of prayer to God. “Make everything you do an offering to me...even your suffering.”⁷⁹ At the moment this pain is your prayer, your offering, your plea for help, your gift, your mode of communication and intimacy. Don't necessarily even ask for anything back (relief, strength, etc.) — just give, share, pass it on.*

Know that God can handle your pain, and take it away, or at least diminish it in the sharing. Know that pain comes from bottled-up, restricted energies, so just keep the channel open and pass it on. It's like an electrical circuit that is being grounded — although in this case it is also being “heavened.”

Medications: Sin or Self-care?

⁷⁸ Stephen Levine offers ways to meditatively work with pain in his book, *Who Dies: An Investigation of Conscious Living and Conscious Dying*.

⁷⁹ *Bhagavad Gita* 9:27. Krishna is explaining to Arjuna the path of yogic liberation based on a devotional relationship to God.

It's hard for me to discern direction on my use of drugs — sleeping pills, a muscle relaxant (prescribed for pain)...I feel so guilty, but it's not clear if it's compulsive guilt,⁸⁰ or genuine overuse on my part. Is it okay to get the pain relief, and the sleep relief, or am I going down a wrong path? Help me to be willing to hear God's answer, and to follow, rather than to go down a wrong path and then pay the price for it.

It is pleasant not to be high. In a way you are not seeking to be high but to achieve better sleep and pain control. Those aims are admirable, vital, and part of God's will for you. So demoralize the issue (otherwise it's demoralizing). It's not about good and evil, chastity or addiction and sin; it's just about seeing what medications really help, and in what dosage, and what times.

Basically, it's okay to use the medications insofar as they genuinely

***De-moralize the issue
(otherwise it's demoralizing).***

help.

But you need to be honest with yourself and others as to the results you're getting, and to experiment with different combinations and medications until you find what genuinely works for you. Again, don't let your compulsive illness turn it into a big issue of guilt and defiance. It is more an issue of proper self-care.

Nor is the answer always clear. There's a tradeoff involved any time you take a medication. Something is gained, but often something is lost — or some side-effect needs to be dealt with. That's okay, and doesn't mean you should stop taking everything, but it means you need to be realistic about how it's going and be willing to make adjustments.

⁸⁰ One of the things I'm recovering from in the Twelve Step program is "compulsive guilt," or "guiltaholism" — which, unlike normal conscience-based guilt, can be pathologic, exaggerated, and unremitting.

Again, guilt only impedes and confuses that process. It makes it difficult to proceed, or commands self-punishment when you do. De-moralize the issue — where you think God is coming in as the “moral guardian,” it is more the [psychic] illness in disguise.

Physical Pain and the Intact Covenant

Hari, any suggestions about what to do in the face of this overwhelming back pain?

Yes, several. Glad you finally asked. (I don’t come unbidden, but I do wish to help you in your times of need.) One of the most important things is to not feel like you have to meet this alone. Pain, as you know, can be very isolating — but it doesn’t have to be. It can also bring you together with others, or with God. But you have to wish this, and will this, and make the effort.

So when in pain, reach out to me — or to God (same thing). Imagine I am there with you. Make it as real as possible. Believe, honey, believe. That will help. It really will.

Interesting, isn’t it, that you were sharing tonight about how suffering doesn’t mean the covenant is broken — that God has abandoned you, or you, God.⁸¹ Hang on to that insight. It was given to you largely to help you.

Secondly, when you do not feel you have the strength to bear the pain or the challenges of life (that become so much harder amidst constant pain) imagine yourself as putting down

⁸¹ At the heart of Judaism is the notion of a covenant wherein God loves and protects the people who have chosen to devote themselves to God. When suffering comes it can feel as if one or the other party has “broken the covenant” — but a deeper understanding may show this to be untrue.

In my article in *Jesus Through Jewish Eyes*, I interpret the story of Jesus (Yeshua) as a teaching on how one may descend into suffering and yet neither have abandoned God, nor have been abandoned. Despite surface appearances the covenant remains intact, “redeeming” suffering through a context of love, meaning, and spiritual revelation.

your burden. Imagine Christ — yes, in this context I call Yeshua “the Christ,” the deliverer, so to speak — assumes the pain for you.

Thirdly, seek even more so to get out of yourself, to be of use to others, to help others. Pain would pull you inward. To go outward is to combat pain’s pull, and will effectively lessen the pain.

Fourthly, by all means use your mantra — or mantras I shall say. The more you use pain as a provocation to go into mantra, the more it will pull you inward — not to isolation and misery, but to God. Think of Christ’s nails as doing no less, as paradoxically connecting him to God.

Instead of “physical therapy” exercises, these are “soul therapy” exercises.

Physical Healing: Our Stories and Dialogues

Hari, I’m feeling pretty despondent about my knee. Like nothing will heal it; the surgery didn’t work; massage didn’t work; physical therapy won’t work. It’s just a lifetime condition. Help! Any guidance?⁸²

Dear Drew, the work you have done, are doing, provoked by your body, is worth the pain. Pain for you has proven to be a great teacher about the body, as about life in general.

Does pain cause suffering?

That’s up to you. At the moment, you are transmuting the pain into suffering

You are transmuting the pain into suffering because of the story you are telling yourself about it.

⁸² This is written after having surgery on a torn meniscus in my knee. (Since then it has improved a great deal.)

because of the story you are telling yourself about it (see above). It is the story, more than the knee itself, that is so painful. Why not try telling yourself a different story, such as:

This pain has come to me as a grace-filled messenger, one for which I should feel grateful. It has taught me about my body, its stresses and areas of vulnerability. It is teaching me methods to heal myself, and bringing me into contact with practitioners maximally adept at aiding in this process. This continues to be a leading edge of growth for me, growth and healing.

“I know the plans I have for you, said God, and they are for your healing, not your destruction.”⁸³ When the pain is no longer needed it will dissipate. But first you must learn the messages it has come to teach.

There, doesn't that (spiritual) story feel a little better? Take it as fact that what feels better (really, and in an abiding way) is more true. Truth feels good. Surprise, surprise, for this is the opposite of what you've been taught — “the truth hurts!

Truth feels good.

The Aging Body and the Timeless Self

Even though I have written about aging I seem to be having a lot of trouble with the aging process, with feeling old and unattractive and out of it, my body falling apart — creaky, and achy, and limited, and dysfunctional. I feel this is not a temporary condition like having the flu,

⁸³ Jeremiah 29:11

but something that presages death and will always over any extended period of time get worse, not better. It's hard to stay cheerful in the face of that.

You need to question this model of aging. Some of the facts you cite are true — the fact that you are having bodily difficulties, for example, and that they are age-related. (Other facts are questionable — that these will always get worse, never better.) But more important than any “facts” are the story, the narrative, into which they are fitted.

At the moment you are constructing a narrative of the “downhill slide” into pain, disability, irrelevance, death. In this context the facts you experience take on dire and depressing meanings. They are like dark angels, harbingers of what is to come — which will always be worse, never better — and so fear is stimulated. Wow, no wonder you are not feeling very good about not feeling very good! Every problem is taken to be a symptom of a larger disease — the disease of aging and death.

Let's think together of an alternative narrative that would be a more cheering and helpful thing to tell your body. “You are suffering from some specific setbacks — for example, recovering from back surgery. Your energy level fluctuates, and sometimes you are tired out. But you are doing well. You are proving yourself strong and resilient. You are coming back. The prognosis for the future is good.”

That's one level of response — helpful, but by no means the most important narrative. Here goes another:

You are an eternal being. The body that is decaying, the body that you will shed, is not your true Self. When it wears out, like an old car, you will be letting it go and going on to a new and

better form. Sympathize with your current form, help it along (change the oil, tune it up, avoid accidents, drive it sensibly) but let its decay remind that you are not it.

Know yourself within, and your connectedness to Spirit, to be something beyond the reach of space and time — something in-finite. Practice the witness to that which changes and decays, and your feelings about it.⁸⁴ But also realize the Self that is above and beyond it. It's as if you were playing an aging character on the stage and more and more makeup were being applied, you were given more of a stoop and more of a stutter in each scene, but none of it ultimately applies to you.

You are not aging. The body may be aging, maybe even the mind. But you are ageless. You were not born. You will not die. Feel it all drop away — for example, in meditation. Ask yourself how old you are at such times.

You will find you are timeless.

Seeing Through Illusions

How to know the illusion [of the world] as illusion?

How not to know the illusion as illusion?

Huh, I don't get what you mean.

⁸⁴ As mentioned earlier, “practicing the witness,” referred to in Buddhism and Hinduism, involves dis-identification with the ego-self, “witnessing” its unfolding as if from outside.

It's as simple as this. When you know the illusion as illusion, the illusion dissolves. This is like Shankara's famous example. When you see that the snake is a rope — no more snake.⁸⁵ So it is impossible, in a certain sense, to “know the illusion as an illusion.” We have to not know the illusion as an illusion for it to [continue as] an illusion. And how can you do that?

I don't know. I guess you get taken in? It seems real and true.

No, in this case it's more complicated than that. First you have an appearance. The appearance can be experienced and interpreted in more than one way. Each way leads you down a certain path. Let me give you an example:

Suppose that in a dark room you make out a dim shape. You might think that it's a piece of furniture...and avoid it. Or you might think it's someone in distress and walk toward it. However you interpret it, it takes you on a path.

So too with Shankara's example. He will give a wide berth to that “snake.” With certain kinds of illusion, the path you take then has the quality of reinforcing the illusion, or at least failing to dissolve it. After all, if you give the snake a wide berth, or go around that dim shape, you'll never realize your mistake. If anything, you'll feel confirmed that you took a wise and protective form of action. So our sense of the real is reinforced by our choice of actions, our way of encountering the world that we have pre-interpreted.

⁸⁵ Shankara (686–718 A.D.) is the most famous teacher of Indian advaita Vedanta (non-dualistic philosophy) wherein everything is properly understood as an expression of the One. The seeming separation of worldly beings from God, and from one another in space and time, is ultimately an illusory misperception (*maya*). In Shankara's *Crest-Jewel of Discrimination* he gives the example of someone who sees a rope but, thinking it is a snake, is fearful and miserable. Upon realizing his error, the “snake” is gone, and is understood never to have been real to begin with. Illusion dissolves when knowledge is attained.

So, too, our illusion that we are separate from others, in opposition to them, fighting for scarce resources. Encountering the world in this way reinforces the illusion because it provokes conflict and scarcity, seemingly confirming our pre-interpretation. We find what we expected to find, and therefore created.

Okay, but how can I awaken from the illusion, realize it as illusion, go toward the snake, so to speak, or eye it more closely until I see it is a rope?

Aha, see you are beginning to answer your own question, revealing that you are already

We find what we expect to find, and therefore created.

on the path to seeing the illusion as an illusion. You are already approaching the snake, eyeing it more closely.

Can you help me do this, to see more? It still largely looks like a snake to me.

Well, why don't I give you an exercise to do. That's what I hear you asking for and I do try to respond to what you are requesting, and to do so as directly as I can (which may sometimes feel rather indirect).

You know how children turn cross-eyed trying to see their nose? They try to make their two eyes a unity, seeing their own one nose. All that striving toward self-apprehension can give you a headache and make you less able to see in conventional ways. What I'm about to ask you to do is similar. So don't blame me if it makes you a little cross-eyed.

Try looking at yourself in a mirror. You are staring into the illusion — that this is you — a small, embodied, aging thing of particular color and gender. As you stare at it, try to simultaneously see it as not you — or at least be open to that apprehension.

You are staring at the “snake,” but you are doing it with a certain focused and suspicious eye. Hmmm, maybe this isn’t a snake after all. It doesn’t hiss like a snake, doesn’t move like a snake....maybe, just maybe it isn’t a snake after all. And you may find that the thing in the mirror doesn’t “hiss,” doesn’t move, like you do, the real You, the You that is really looking into the mirror and seeking an answer to the profoundest questions of life.⁸⁶

How long, or how often, should I do this?

As often as it takes, or as often as you like. But if you want guidance, let me suggest five minutes a day, each day, for a while. This is something that sinks in over time as with any kind of meditation.

We’ll call it “facing the truth meditation.”

Who Am I? The Self Beyond all Mirrors

Who am I? This is the great question according to the book I’m reading. I know I was drawn to that question, but in a way it doesn’t seem to be going anywhere. Who am I? What am I?

⁸⁶ In other words, the real You of consciousness is not one and the same with the limited physical body in the mirror. Mistakenly identifying the two is like misidentifying the rope as a snake, therefore causing fear and misery (for example, the frightening sense that “I” will die when the body dies).

You are that you are.

What's interesting about that answer ("I am that I am"⁸⁷) is what it doesn't say: I am this, or I am that. I am good, or I am all powerful. I am Drew, or I am a philosophy professor, or a Twelve Step sponsor - or I am anything. Simply, I am. Or I am "I am."

Can you explain more? Help me see.

Pretty much every sentence has a subject, a verb, a descriptor (adjective, adverb) and an object, or some combination thereof. It would be funny to say "the book" or "the book is." Instead we say "the book is on the table" or "the book is red" or "the red book is on the table"... you get the idea. Then we've said something with meaning. We've added to our knowledge of objects and their arrangement in the world.

But that doesn't work for God, right? — not an object in the world. The key is to realize that doesn't work for you either, it doesn't work for the Self. "The red self is on the table" — no.

True, you can say "the flesh-colored Drew is on the table." That would make sense, if seem funny. So two different kinds of utterances imply two different beings referred to — the Self, and Drew. Realize these are different — that the Self is not one and the same with your personal identity (psychological history, social roles, physical body) but is something transcendent, unlocatable, in fact, one and the same with God.

⁸⁷ When asked by Moses what He is called, this is God's reply (Exodus 3:14).

I get the theory of it. How do I get the experience of it? How do I realize it? Just reciting a mantra doesn't seem to do it.⁸⁸

Pray for realization. It's kind of like an alcoholic breaking through denial, seeing the nature of the illness, then detaching from it bit by bit with Divine help. You're trying to free yourself from the illness of the ego.

Is there anything further you can tell me, show me, suggest to me as a practice or method or insight? Please?

Okay. Here goes. Your sincerity calls forth a sincere response. When you look in the mirror what do you see?

My face.

Does it really seem to be you? Do you have a flash of recognition — like that is my Self? Or does it seem a bit foreign, surprising, limiting, disconcerting — like a child who forgot they are wearing a Halloween costume and surprise themselves in the mirror?

Yes, more like that.

There you go.

⁸⁸ I was using two different Indian mantras at the time that meant, roughly, “I am That” — the Self and the All are one.

How about when you have a knee injury? Does this really seem like the Self that is injured? Or something that the Self does suffer through, but has come to it from without?

Yes, the latter, but I wrote a whole book on our intimate identity with the body.⁸⁹ Was I all wrong?

Yes and no, both/and. Let me explain. In speaking of the embodied self you were right that the self (from a Western perspective) is profoundly bound up with the body. But this doesn't imply that the Self is embodied — that transcendental core within us.

A mistake that religions often make is not realizing that this Self transcends the personal mind as much as the body, and so they draw the dividing point incorrectly⁹⁰. When you injure your knee you are not your bad knee, but neither are you your mental pain and emotional suffering. That perhaps is even harder to understand.

Help me.

Okay, here goes again. If you had an emotional mirror, as you do a physical mirror, you could see these grimaces and terrors and angers, and similarly feel that it is not really who you are. It feels foreign, limited, uncomfortable, like a too-tight suit you are struggling to get free of.

⁸⁹ In *The Absent Body*, I explore the centrality of the body to human perception and activity, even abstract thought and spiritual practices.

⁹⁰ To use philosophical examples of this point, Plato and Descartes have influentially identified the eternal soul primarily with a disembodied mind and its capacity for reason. Hari is suggesting that this is a mistake. The transcendent “I am” is not identifiable with the limited mind, any more than with the body.

The delusion is that if your emotional state were different and better (always happy, for example) that alienation would end — like if you really liked your face and body you would identify with what you see in the mirror.

Delusion! This is both because impermanence assures that nothing limited (happiness, beauty) can survive long intact, and also because you would always feel boxed in by any identity, any physical form, any emotional makeup, any psychological history and features, any social role.

That is because you are God in drag, to use Ram Dass' terms.⁹¹ You are Superman dressed up like Clark Kent.

The fall came not after God made Adam and Eve, but after he became Adam and Eve, and forgot. Ouch! There is a pain, discomfort, fall from unlimited grace, though it also activates the whole wonderful lila (divine play).⁹²

So finally you can't say "I am this" or "I am that" (in the limited sense). The only statement possible is that "I am...nothing"...or "everything."

Use the mirror meditation.

⁹¹ Spiritual teacher Ram Dass, author of *Be Here Now* and many other wonderful books, likes to use this phrase in his talks. To treat everyone as "God in drag" is to see them as Divine, though God is dressed up and masked in human form. Another example: Mother Theresa described treating the poor and sick as ministering to Jesus in all his distressing disguises.

⁹² Adam and Eve hiding from God in the garden is here interpreted as God's Self-division and Self-forgetting, initiating what Hindus call *maya* (illusion) filled with pain and alienation, but also the joy and creativity inherent in our evolving universe.

Living From the Heart

This section presents the single longest sustained dialogue in the book, written over roughly ten days. It demanded more concentration from me, and perhaps from the reader, than some of the earlier conversations. To help the process I break the dialogue into six chapters.

I view it as playing a pivotal role in this book. It completes Part One on “Living Well.” Hari counsels living from the heart, not just the head (a challenging path for a philosopher and obsessive person like myself who has spent much time floating off into thought).

This dialogue also provides a bridge to this book’s Part Two: “Realms of Reality.” It introduces many themes that will there be treated in greater length. Is there truly a spiritual dimension to existence? Is “reality” merely mass-energy in motion, as scientists say, or is a higher consciousness at work? Do I, and others, live on after death? Is there a way to communicate with loved ones we have lost?

In addition to bridging the two parts of this book, this dialogue provokes reflection on our respective positions. As the “writer,” how am I accessing this information, and is it reliable? So many of my mind’s presumptions are challenged. And, as the reader, how are you receiving it?

Is your ego-mind simply chewing on information and entertainment? Or do Hari’s words flow into an open heart?

Head and Heart: A Landlubber and a Ship's Captain

Am I going to be destroyed when the body is destroyed? Am I “alone?” Or “all One”? Does the feeling of love, self-sacrifice, connection to others, bespeak a *metaphysical* reality, or just a *psychological* one?

Okay, stop right there, and let's start right there. Look at the distinction you are drawing between the world “as it is,” and experiences located within your consciousness. Are you so sure they are separate and opposed?

No, I'm not sure — believe me, I want to hear that they are not. But the truth is I don't know. That's why I'm asking.

Well, let me give you evidence to the contrary or, really, reacquaint you with evidence you are already well aware of:

1. Everything in the (experienced) world is part of an experienced world. This is simply a fact of unassailable logic that Kant pointed out, so to believe otherwise is illogical.⁹³

2. On the emotional level, life certainly does feel like a game of “getting warmer, getting colder”⁹⁴ where those who believe in and live according to the unity of life receive strength,

⁹³ In the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) Immanuel Kant said that we can never know things as they are “in themselves,” independent of a knowing consciousness. We can only know things as they are perceived, conceived, experienced by a subject. All our perceptions and terms refer to this world-as-experienced.

⁹⁴ The child's game where you try to find a hidden object and are only told by another whether you are getting closer

insights, revelations, and spiritual powers consonant with the notion that they are operating according to fundamental truths about the nature of the universe. Laws of the universe are revealed by such lives just as laws of the physical universe are revealed by the action of bodies considered from a strictly physicalistic point of view.

3. When you pray from the heart it is answered. When you attune yourself to a holy spirit of the universe, interesting and productive things — even amazing things, or confirming things — happen over and over and over again.

4. Contrariwise, when you go against this and try to act as a separate, self-sufficient unit you slip into various forms of dis-ease. The battle between good and evil, Harry Potter and Voldemort,⁹⁵ unity (love) and dis-unity (potentially murderous selfishness and separation) is confirmed over and over in your experience.

Okay, these are good points. Why does my head fail to process them and want to summon up countervailing evidence about the lack of fundamental “goodness” in the universe? Wow, how many examples could I heap up?

I'll stick with your original question. Why does your head fail to process them and want to summon up countervailing evidence? The answer is simple:

(warmer) or farther away (colder).

⁹⁵ In J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, Lord Voldemort is the evil wizard who sows chaos, repression, and misery in the wizarding world.

Your head is massively invested in the untruth of any view of the universe that renders it of secondary importance.

That, in a funny way, is further evidence that “you” and your head are not identical. You have diverging investments and desires. You have already said that you want the universe to be structured in an all-for-one way where spiritual reality is paramount. But that is not exactly what your mind is saying. It’s taking the opposite position because it thinks that it is more likely to keep “you” (that is, itself) safe. It is a machine designed to protect the separate self by cautious fear-based thought about hazards in an external world.

It is essentially an outpocketing and complexification (like that word?) of the membrane, the skin, that separates you and the world — that creates a protective (though permeable) border. So try telling it you and the world are one! It interprets that as a very dangerous and potentially destructive idea. It is at least one that doesn’t make much sense in the world-view of the skin-brain (“skinhead” if you like — though that makes things perhaps a little too sinister).

Now, if the brain is an outpocketing of the skin, the heart is a hole (holy), a central canal into which things come rushing in and out, connecting you to a larger whole. This is where you experience the connectedness of things. This is the channel between you and the larger world. It is not the physical heart per se, more like the “heart chakra,”⁹⁶ that we are talking about here.

Why is it located in a particular part of the body? Is it emotion? Or is it a kind of knowingness?

⁹⁶ In tantric Hinduism there are seven (or more) chakras, energy centers up and down the body, that are said to subserve different modes of consciousness. The heart chakra (*anahata*) is connected with compassion and spiritual awareness.

Notice how it seems to connect you not only to the “land of the living” but of the dead as well. That suggests, doesn’t it, that there is not an unbridgeable gap between the two: that ontologically (not simply psychologically) the dead do not cease to exist, and that the heart is a place of knowingness — experience — of this reality.

“Experience” is a good word. It includes within it both knowledge and emotion. Or another way of putting this is that knowledge includes within it emotion.

Imagine you knew, really knew, that all your loved ones were around and with you, that life had meaning and purpose, that you were at your core sat-chit-ananda.⁹⁷ Could you “know” that and not feel emotion? If not, wouldn’t we say that someone in that state had an intellectual proposition they were assenting to, or trying to, but that they didn’t really “know it” in the depth of their being?

The “heart” is a metaphor, sometimes misleading, for that “depth of being” from which we best and most truly know and feel.

Okay, and I understand that somehow the mind can’t fully track with that, but why does the scientific method not uncover more evidence of this universe you describe? There may be a little evidence (ESP, near-death experiences) but if it is real why can’t we discover, produce, reproduce, study, characterize, these powers and energies and universal nature with the best tools the mind has?

Really, my trust in the power of science is making this very, very difficult to accept and I can’t lightly put that aside. You surely understand why, though I’m giving it to you in shorthand.

⁹⁷ A Hindu formula for the Divine, meaning (unlimited) being, knowledge, bliss.

Yes, I do. I surely do. In fact, I once thought as you do so I can understand from within, not just as a critical spectator. But let me give you a metaphor that might be helpful:

Imagine you're standing on the deck of a ship. It's swaying back and forth in the wind, and the waves are crashing higher and higher. You're afraid you might capsize and you eye the distant horizon hoping to see some land.

The mind is kind of like that. It wants one thing and one thing only — something solid it can seize on, land to walk on. That's what it is looking for, that's what enters its consciousness and is reported to its captain.

Or imagine you are crossing a busy street. Are you enjoying the beauty of the autumn trees that rim the roadside, and the lazy clouds scudding across a bright blue sky? No, you better be looking out for two-ton semis plowing down the road toward you. You better or you'll be dead.

Again, that's the job of the mind. It is scanning the horizon of experience looking for things that are solid, physical, may help or harm the biological entity that it has been assigned the job of preserving, often against long odds.

This is not, then, the ideal tool with which to do ontology.⁹⁸ It is built to be a pragmatic instrument of survival and to emphasize, characterize, and explore certain sorts of items and not others.

In the same way your senses act as a filter, capturing and characterizing certain sorts of energies that may be of help or harm to you as a physical entity. They don't worry about

⁹⁸ "Ontology" is the branch of philosophy that deals with fundamental questions concerning Being per se — the existence and nature of fundamental reality.

neutrinos, or “dark matter,” or “dark energy,”⁹⁹ or all the other forces and energies that are not about self-survival. Hence, the senses are not the best tools with which to characterize the entirety of the universe. Neither is the brain, which is essentially an invagination/outpocketing, and organizer of the data, of the senses — which, as we said, earlier, is a complexification of the biological skin.

Okay. But then what the hell is the “heart?”

Should you not say “what the hell is the heart?” (Yuck-yuck, joke.) No, it is a valid question. Again, though, it is more difficult to understand, at least through the head, because it is a different kind of entity, a different part of the self. Really it is a different “self,” attuned to different modes of knowing and experience than the mind. So the mind cannot know the heart, in a certain sense.

Let me give you another analogy. Imagine there were two people, very different than one another, and one of them had a much more expansive personality and understanding of reality than the other. Say Jesus were to meet a lowly thief. The thief would not understand Jesus in depth. He might think, for example, that Jesus was a trickster trying to trick people out of their livelihoods with his preaching, only he wasn’t very good at it since he didn’t seem to be making much money. The thief might wander away filled with contempt — not much to learn here! — on his way to stealing money elsewhere.

Similarly, the mind views the heart with some contempt — “not much to learn here.” The heart doesn’t know what it’s talking about, doesn’t collect data, doesn’t prove hypotheses,

⁹⁹ In current physics, there is evidence that some 96% of the mass-energy of the universe operates in ways that have measureable manifestations, but whose identity and mechanisms are largely unknown — hence referred to as “dark” energy and matter.

doesn't stick strictly to what you can perceive with the senses. Not very impressive, really. The heart seems to the head like just a second-rate head, a dunderhead, so to speak.

Okay, but how does the head seem to the heart?

The heart seems to the head like just a dunderhead.

Let's switch points of view. The heart doesn't "think" about the head a lot because "thinking," in the conventional sense, refers to the head's way of processing things. However, the heart does — what Robert Heinlein once called "grok" — what is going on.¹⁰⁰ It has an expansive sense of things, of how it all works, including the role of the head within the process.

That's what I'm communicating now. You might believe that it is your head speaking, or that I'm speaking to your head, because it's all surfacing in the form of language, but believe me this material is not something your head is generating...or particularly receptive to.

So the heart uses language, not simply the head? Even this relatively advanced conceptual language with which we are discussing things?

Well, to tell you the truth this is a kind of hybrid phenomenon. There is a sort of heart-knowingness that you are receiving but we are translating it into terms that your — and others' — heads could receive. My portrayal of the self up to now has been rather dualistic — head versus heart — but really, as the heart knows, things (at least in a well-functioning person, and universe), are more holistic, more integrated. Head and heart cooperate with each

¹⁰⁰ Meaning "to understand intuitively or by empathy," "grok" was a term introduced by the science-fiction writer Robert Heinlein in his novel *Stranger in a Strange Land*.

other, but the heart is master — the wiser, more integrative reality. In taking down this material, asking these questions, the head and heart are operating cooperatively.

If the head is just an outpocketing of the skin and the senses how can it cooperate with the heart, which seems to play a very different metaphysical role?

Well, let me put it to you this way, again, metaphorically (which is a significant part of the language of the heart — it tends to operate through images, as much as words):

If you were the captain of a ship and your ship were in peril (back to the ship image, huh?) you might have an instinctive sense of what to do, which direction to turn in the face of a storm. Yet you would then have to use your analytical and linguistic mind to come up with specific low-level instructions for your seamen — which sails to hoist, how to steer the vessel, etc. You are barking out orders that they can understand. You're not necessarily taking time to explain the bigger picture, but having the verbal instructions you choose accord with [all] that you are perceiving (though the seamen may not). That's why you're captain.

Similarly, and ideally, the heart captains the ship, but utilizes the brain as a very effective tool.

At this point, I suddenly feel in my heart as if I am meant to organize this material into a book for others, not just myself (but also myself), even though this possibility had long ago been dismissed from my brain.

Now my mind is getting into the act, mostly negatively — saying, how are you going to call this “research,” how will people react, how could you market it to a publisher? It’s skeptical, but also trying to think of strategies to surmount all the potential obstacles.

Yes, exactly. That’s a great illustration of what we are talking about. The master has a goal and it is the job of the seamen to steer the boat on course. But if the seamen take over and mutiny, overthrow the master, then all hell breaks loose. There is a loss of organization, purpose, and insight that would steer you out of the storm.

Now I’m confused about your metaphors. In an earlier metaphor you had the mind in command scanning the horizon for land. Now you say it is better that the mind not be in command.

Good questions — though I sense it is your mind trying to seize back control by pointing out how flawed and inconsistent is this conversation of the heart. Gosh, the head says, you can only talk in metaphors, and you can’t even keep your metaphors consistent, right?

But the fact is my metaphors are consistent, perfectly consistent, up to the point that a metaphor could go. In metaphor number one we were talking about the mind desperately trying to find land. In metaphor number two we were talking about the heart trying to negotiate creatively and effectively a storm at sea. And that captures a crucial difference.

The mind, in a certain sense, doesn’t want to be “at sea.” It wants a certain kind of solidity, but one that would end the fluidity, the journey, of life. It’s pretending to be an effective sailor but actually it’s a landlubber — a land lover. Let’s land, look for land, some place solid to set my feet and hang my hat on.

The true captain knows that this is not the sailor's job. It is to leave shore, travel across the ocean of eternity, yet be able to breast the waves and ride the winds... to use even the turmoil and tumult and uncertainty as a way of propelling forward.

A Net Catches Fish, not the Ocean

Please tell me more about the heart, where it is, what it does, how it works, why I should trust it. My head knows more about itself than it does about the heart, as you said earlier. But surely you can help a little?

Yes, you said it well: "help a little." You see the main problem is not the head's lack of information, but of processing capacity. Say you were using a computer which had limited software downloaded onto it. No matter how sophisticated the data you submitted to it there are only certain operations it will be able to do on the data, certain limited results it will be able to generate. This is what the mind is like. "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy."¹⁰¹ Thus said Shakespeare and thus say I about the philosophy of life generated by the mind, at least the contemporary mind that has ceased to cooperate with, and serve, the heart.

But here goes: Imagine that there is a great reservoir of water, and from it flows all the water used by the inhabitants of the city. It flows into their sinks, into their toilets. The life of the city is dependent upon it. How did it get there? Perhaps you are an unsophisticated person who has literally no idea. You just turn the faucet and there is the water. You don't realize that

¹⁰¹ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 5.

there are vast underground channels, tubes, that bring the water from the reservoir right into the cozy, even personal, intimacy of your kitchen and bathroom. Yet they are down there where you don't perceive them.

That's kind of what the "heart" is like. It's not exactly a word we would use to characterize the reservoir, the Source "at the heart" of reality. But it is through the heart that we receive the Source's blessings and graces. It is the tube, the chamber, the opening and space of flow.

We speak, don't we, of having "an open heart"? This is one reason why the heart doesn't figure things out, compute things. That takes a certain kind of solidity, a presence. The heart opens up a space, a kind of absence of obstacle and resistance, that allows the natural flow to happen.

Do animals have a heart?

In a certain sense they have nothing but heart. At least the lower animals don't have much of a developed head.

But we wouldn't ordinarily say that a mosquito has an open heart. Don't you need a certain level of sophistication to "have a heart"?

Yes and no, depends what you mean. A mosquito, true, doesn't have something that resembles a human heart. It is not human-hearted. However, it has a mosquito heart. It raises its young,

for example. It seeks blood not just for itself, but its babies.¹⁰² A pure expression of Love, but mosquito love, not human love.

We could even talk about quark-love — ever tried to pry three quarks apart?¹⁰³ They love each other. They have a quark heart, a tiny heart we might say, but a heart nonetheless. The heart is the glue holding the universe together, as the tunnels and tubes that bring water hold the city together and make the life of its inhabitants possible.

To go back to the head, why doesn't the scientific method capture the true nature of the universe? True, certain of its techniques and methods have been worked out by the head, but why would so much that is essentially true about the universe keep eluding its grasp?

Well, imagine a ship that lowers a fishing net. It's good at capturing the fish, but not the water. In fact, if it captured the water it wouldn't function right. It has to let the water go and hang on to the fish — the substantial, but potentially slippery prey that it captures in its interlocking strands.

Again, though said in a slightly different way, the net of science captures what is solid — potentially slippery, perhaps, but solid enough to be trapped, materially manifest.

After all, that's what science, at least of the sort we are discussing, really examines and investigates, isn't it? — the material world (the fish in this metaphor). It is built to not catch, to let slip away, that which is non-material, that which doesn't manifest directly, or at least indirectly, in the material world.

¹⁰² Only female mosquitoes bite, seeking blood for the energy needed to engage in egg production.

¹⁰³ Protons and neutrons are each constituted out of three subatomic particles called "quarks." In nature, quarks are always bound together with one another, not free-standing.

Let me give an example: Say you're hungry. Science does not capture that experience per se though it may be central to your life. Science may capture the secretion of hormones in your body that accompany hunger; or your food-seeking behavior; or even your hunger-indicating speech; but it has got to manifest physically in one of these forms for science to "catch it." Otherwise, it's not interested. It doesn't really view it as real, testable, reproducible. It's like water that flows away, uncaught in the net.

But what is more important, more central to the reality of the sea — fish or water? The water is the medium in which the fish swim. The amount of water vastly "outnumbers" that of fish. The fish would not be possible without water (though we can imagine the water without fish). The fish are largely made up of water, and made to negotiate the water. And yet the net lets the water go. It's not a significant part of the world-view of the fisherman, at least not when he or she is hauling in the catch.

So too with science and the scientific world-view. It is designed to explore the material world, the hunger-seeking behavior, the hormonal accompaniment, etc. But we know that in reality, our reality, "hunger" is the central experience and fact. Yet science can't address it, or must transform it into something else that it can catch. Here you see the limitations of the mind, the scientific mind.

Staying within this metaphor, what does the heart do?

Well, in many ways the heart is the water — or we might say the water as it flows through the net, as the inside and outside of the net communicate freely with one another. The heart is the

joy of the water escaping, the nourishment that it provides the fish — and thus, indirectly, the fisherman — the medium in which everything unfolds.

The heart “captures” all that escapes the net, or perhaps more accurately, is what allows it not to be captured — what mandates that it cannot be captured — because the heart is about openness and flow. You might think of it as the holes between the net stitches, and all the water that flows through them.

Designing a Proper Universe

Are you saying that most “spiritual phenomena,” better grasped by the heart than the head, are phenomena of consciousness, and somehow this consciousness is connected to the flow of the universe?

Yes, that is pretty much what I am saying. Think about near-death experiences as an example. While very real to those who have them, these are phenomena of consciousness primarily. Scientists look around for physicalistic correlates and explanations but have little to say about NDE’s. But those who have them feel “in their heart” that something very real has happened, more real than much of the rest of their daily life.

Let’s stay with that example. If people are having genuine out-of-body experiences why are they not able to see numbers written on the top of operating room lamps?¹⁰⁴ They are supposedly able to hear conversations, and see things that they wouldn’t while in their bodies.

¹⁰⁴ This refers to an experimental protocol devised by Dr. Sam Parnia and Professor Peter Fenwick to see if patients reporting near-death out-of-body experiences could actually see things written on surfaces that would be

Well, think of it this way. You've just "died" or on your way into the land of death. Your consciousness is oriented toward the process and that which is most significant to your soul's progression — understanding what is happening, letting go, accepting, greeting loved ones, moving toward the light, releasing into it.

Is this the time where your consciousness will focus on a five-digit number atop a hospital light? Come on — perhaps there is the rare soul of the scientist who will find that of paramount importance, but the trick here is that you're asking the heart, and its modes of awareness, desire, and revelation, to act as a scientist tethered to the physicalistic world. Remember, the consciousness of the heart is more expansive than that of the mind, and consequently oriented toward somewhat different matters.

Okay, let's take a different example. Why aren't there more provable ESP experiments?

There are plenty, using a colloquial sense of "provable" — that is, confirmable and re-confirmable hypotheses.

Why aren't the effects more dramatic and more woven into everyday life? Well, water is water and fish is fish. Occasionally a dramatic wave or whirlpool will appreciably alter the movement of fish and you'll be aware of the water at work, but for the most part the powerful musculature of the fish itself determines its movement. That's what gives it "free choice," the autonomy of a conscious, material being. That's what gives it solidity and personal freedom.

So ESP phenomena, that are more about the water (what ties individuals together), cannot be too powerful, too constant, too manifest, or we lose that individuality and solidity.

inaccessible to them unless they were genuinely out of the body. (At this time no results have yet come in.)

The fish has to be able to push against the water, so to speak. The water is designed to be a medium through which we move, not the dominant fact of our everyday reality. Similarly, ESP, mind connections, the interweavings and “spooky actions”¹⁰⁵ of the universe, are the medium in which we move, not that which most manifests in everyday reality. Make sense?

I think so, but I’m not sure, Can you say it again?

Okay, here goes. Imagine you’re experiencing mind-linkages with those you are close with, or even with everyone. Would this be comfortable? The thoughts of your closest family members are flowing into your head and starting to alter or determine your actions, perhaps upsetting or frustrating you. This would be no more comfortable than a fish overwhelmed by the current!

We want to be free individuals, able to separate out from the whole. True, as we become more spiritually advanced we learn how to preserve this marvelous integrity and personal expression while still being interconnected and in service to the common good. This is like an expert surfer who actualizes his or her personal style while riding a common wave. But until we are expert, too powerful a wave will simply knock us down, even drown us.

That’s why there’s a certain virtue to letting the head moderate the heart until the heart is sufficiently educated and powerful and can assume its proper rulership. Think of children. Sometimes adults have to teach them to close off the heart for the sake of safety and wise action. In the mature adult, an open heart and intelligent head work nicely in concert.

¹⁰⁵ In a 1947 letter to physicist Max Born, Albert Einstein said of quantum mechanics, “I cannot seriously believe in it because the theory cannot be reconciled with the idea that physics should represent a reality in time and space, free from spooky actions at a distance.” Yet when subject to experimental testing, Einstein’s objection proved invalid and the “spooky actions” of quantum mechanics were verified.

You say that the fish wants to be independent of the water, but at the same time spiritual teachers the world over agree that we need to feel at one with each other and let that manifest in our lives. Isn't this having it both ways?

Yes, exactly, it is having it both ways. You and I, people in general, and each individual and “God” are, and aren't, independent of each other. That's the tricky thing about “designing a universe” — finding that delicate balance between independence and interdependence.

It's like designing a body — each cell, each organ, each physiological system, has to have its own character, integrity, independent functioning, but also must be interdependent with the other parts and the whole. Otherwise you get dis-ease. So too with a universe.

The tricky thing about “designing a universe” is finding that delicate balance between independence and interdependence.

Take a look at social dis-ease. What is the horror of Naziism? You could say that it was the state repressing the individual, trying to bring the whole world under unified control of a Fuhrer. He, like a cancer, had overrun all others and thereby killed their independence and the organic functioning of the whole. No more France, no more Poland, just Germany — and really no more Germany, just the Fuhrer.

Or you could say that this was a matter of too much independence. The Fuhrer and his followers acted with selfishness and egotism, believing that those who were different, “other,” really didn't exist in the same way they did. They saw no interconnection with the Jews,

gypsies, homosexuals. They did not get the interconnection of life, the oneness of humanity in the eyes of God, as part of God.

So, again, you could say that the body fell apart either because of an exaggeration of cancerous interconnection, or because of a total loss of interconnection between parts. It comes to the same thing — dis-ease.

It is in the yin-yang of independence and interdependence that we find wholeness and health. That's how the universe is meant to work — that's how it's designed.

I see what you mean for a human body, or a living creature, or a society — but where is that manifest in the inanimate world?

Think about the fine balance between attractive and repulsive forces — gravity, say, versus electromagnetic repulsion — the strong force and the weak force — the finely-tuned numbers upon which the universe is built.¹⁰⁶ Again, independence and interdependence are balanced miraculously on the head of the pin.

As in the inanimate world, so too, the animate. Each has a certain quasi-independence — here, too, the same principle at work — but ultimately, it is one world.

The Heart is a Flip Phone

¹⁰⁶ See, for example, *Just Six Numbers: The Deep Forces that Shape the Universe*, by physicist Martin Rees, for a discussion of how finely-tuned certain physical constants had to be (for example, the relative strengths of the gravitational and electromagnetic forces) in order to allow our universe to develop with its stars, galaxies, complex chemistry and, hence, life.

(Next day) How do I find my way into the heart? Emotion, love? Moving into the “now”? Chakra work? Prayer, chanting? It’s nice to know that I should perceive the world through the heart, make decisions through the heart, but how to dwell there?

Ah, this is a good question. It does “my heart” good that you are asking, and does “your heart” good. It’s a heart-level question so it provides its own answer — it begins to pull you toward the heart.

There are so many paths to the heart. Look at you now, conversing with me, listening to the Hindu chanting — you are placing yourself in the vicinity of energy-vortices in the hope that they will pull you in, pull you down.

It is helpful to think of the heart as a downward place, a moving deeper. You need to be pulled down there, not simply do it through will and intellect. You place yourself in the vicinity, make yourself receptive to the swirling energies.

What is it that so frequently takes me away from the heart? It seems like there are energies that swirl away from it.

Yes, that’s exactly right. It’s natural for us to float upwards away from the Source. There is a sort of centrifugal pull outward and upward by virtue of being a biological being living in the world, looking out for its own safety, battling for scarce resources, trying to figure out everything in order to secure control.

To retreat (or advance) to the heart, to “take refuge” there, involves a deliberate decision, at least for human beings. It’s designed in that way. It’s not a mistake.

But sometimes it's mysterious to me. Yesterday I was in that space and now I'm not. I feel like I've been thrown back onto shore by a wave, where before I was in the ocean.

You fail to see the power of choice in that image. Maybe you have swum to shore to take a rest, re-gather your strength. That's okay. Nothing wrong with that. Give yourself permission.

A God is in my heart, an ever-present friend.

I am never apart from a love that never ends.

Surely I am blessed to be sheltered in God's arms.

Held and caressed, protected from all harm."¹⁰⁷

Now what does that mean — God is in my heart?

Well, obviously it is not a literal location that contains all of God, but our point of access to the Divine unity of All. As I have said, the heart is a channel that leads way beyond the small self to the Self.

So am I hearing you in my heart? But I seem to hear you in my head.

You're misinterpreting these terms as referring to physical locations. They really don't, although to some degree they invoke physical correlates of experience. You're right that

¹⁰⁷ This is a mantra, or repetitive prayer, that had come to me spontaneously and I was using at that time.

sometimes we have access to the “heart” in our head — and occasionally the reverse, as when your heart is pounding because of a head-created fear.

Think of it like this instead:

The “heart” is the place where we get to the heart of the matter. The head is the place where we get a-head of ourselves by thinking about the future, trying to control the uncontrollable, figure everything out.

They are not exactly places, but styles of being.

Where am I now?

You are in your heart. There, can you feel it?

Yes, I think I can. It feels a little different than being head-driven.

Exactly.

Why? Why does it feel different?

That’s a surprisingly good question. And I’m going to give a surprisingly good answer — surprising because unexpected. It does not feel different simply, as most people assume, because one gives rise to “feelings” and the other not. We said earlier that the head can lead to heart-thumping terror that you certainly feel.

No, the answer is more that you are on a different vibratory wavelength, and it feels different. Imagine you were in air and then plunged into water. The medium in which you are immersed is now of a different density. Though it's hard to describe how and why, you simply feel the difference. The water may drag you down a bit — and buoy you up a bit — but it's clearly different.

Similarly, when you plunge from the head-world into the heart-world it feels different. You are navigating a different medium, a different universe so to speak. Let me give you an example:

Say you are walking down the street and an unsavory man approaches to ask for some change. You shy away, or give him something hastily without meeting his eyes, and have some thought concerning what transpired. That's one medium of encounter that has its own feeling.

Say that, instead, you did pause and look into his eyes and ask him to tell you something about his childhood. Where did he grow up? Did he have any brothers and sisters? How long has he lived here? Where does he stay at night? Does he have any illnesses or handicaps? What's his greatest joy in life, and his greatest fear?

Guaranteed you'd start plunging into the world of the heart. It might buoy you up a bit (love and care feel good) and drag you down a bit (you might expose yourself to sadness, frustration, vulnerability) but you'll surely know that it feels different. The key is that you will start to vibrate in response to, and harmony with, the other. Your tuning fork, so to speak, is affected by his, and it starts to vibrate. That's the heart opening up, becoming operative.

It's a little like one of those machines, or animals, that hibernates, goes to sleep, until it's time

The heart is made to open when needed, like a flip cellphone.

for use — and then unfurls, like a flower in sunlight, or a seed when the weather warms. The heart is made to open when needed, like a flip cellphone you open up to make or receive a call. It closes down when not in use and we are left in a very different, and more restricted, space.

When we are around people whose heart is open it tends to create a vibration that makes it easier for our heart to open. That's why people either love being around holy saints, really good and special people, bodhisattvas — and even worship them as a path to the Divine — or else people want to run away from them because they don't necessarily want their hearts open. Remember, that threatens the hegemony of the head and all its little plans and designs.

But those who have open hearts tend to be disproportionately influential — literally what they embody “flows in” to those around them — in-flu-ential. They are also consequential. There are consequences to the power they embody, and thus many may wish them out of the way.

How can I be, or at least be willing, to be a more heart-led person and not simply in my head? I think it's scary to me, or at least to my head.

You can say that again! That's one of those feelings the head generates — fear. The heart knows surprisingly little fear, at least fear that centers around the small self. The heart feels much more safe than the head because it lives in a much more expansive, and yet protective, world — a combination of freedom and security.

Imagine a wide open prairie and blue sky overhead, or a coral beach and the lapping sea. Open and free, yet protecting and safe. That is the universe, when we reach into the depths of our heart to find out what is most real.

Death and the Timeless

Okay, let's get to the "heart of the matter" — death. Is death the end of everything, like my head tells me? Or not, like my heart says? If the latter, how can the heart convince the head of this, or at least explain it? And again, how do I know when I'm fooling myself, when it's just wishful thinking? Help me to know, really know.

Aaaah, that's a big topic is it not? You really push me to the limit, kind of like questioners pushed J.K. Rowling [as she was writing the Harry Potter series], wanting to know how the story is going to come out. She didn't want to tell and spoil it all. To an extent you simply have to read the Harry Potter books, and similarly, you simply have to live and die to get answers to these questions. There aren't "spoilers" strewn everywhere because it would make you lose interest in the reading (life's journey) since you would already know the end.

God conceals certain things, like a good author, but also puts in crucial plot details, like a good author, so alert readers can track with the story and understand it on a deep level... but not fully until life is complete.

Here's what I can say — I can point out some details you might have missed, but ones that are rather crucial and worth considering:

Think about when you go to sleep at night. Your physical body, to outward appearance, lapses into immobility and unconsciousness but your mind flies free in dream states. To some degree it is liberated from the ordinary constraints of space, time, and causality for it is "vibrating" at a different level and frequency. This is a clue to what happens after death.

But to dream, your body must be still intact, and there is brainwave activity. This seems to argue against the notion that such can continue after the destruction of the body.

Yes and no. Your point is a valid one (as made by the head) and shows the imperfect nature of this, or any, analogy. I said that this was like death, or provides a clue concerning death, not that it was an equivalent.

Think about this experience of two worlds, interconnected to a degree through occurring to one consciousness, but also disconnected realities. When you wake up to one, the other disappears.

Realize that entering the dream state is as much a “waking up” as the morning wake-up. You’re lying in bed, head on a pillow, room dark, noise silenced, drifting into a state of somnolence, heaviness, immobility, and suddenly you “wake up” into a very vivid world of color, sound, people, action, unfolding scenarios of great complexity. Can we simply call this “falling asleep”? Is it not equally “waking up”?

So, too, we could say of death — is it simply “dying”? Is it not equally “being born” to a different reality?

Okay, you said you could point out some details I might have

Is not “dreaming” equally “waking up,” and “dying” equally “being born”?

missed, or not seen as crucial. In addition to dreams, what are some others?

Let's start with the workings of your own mind here in the midst of life. Is it fair to say that at this moment you experience "receiving transmissions," ideas that you are not generating per se, but receiving as if a TV were receiving a signal?

Yes, true.

Well, think about the TV analogy. If it is really receiving a signal it suggests that the mind-states, the "consciousness" of the TV (remember this is an analogy), is not sheerly the production of the machine itself. The physical machine is channeling consciousness, translating signals into material form so they will manifest in the physical universe. It is not itself the source of even its own "consciousness." Right?

Okay, true.

So, too, with human beings. Your body is a crucial assist to your mind (now viewed in a broad way). For example, as you say above, your dream states are accompanied by neurophysical correlates. But this doesn't mean that your body is the source of consciousness, and then when it is destroyed so too the mind, the signals, all content, all programming, all transmission.

It would be a very limited and ignorant person who, when their TV "goes on the fritz," believes that the world of TV no longer exists, there are no more TV shows, all is over. Yet we seem to believe this about the death of the body — as if our world ceases forever to exist.

Can you give me any more "plot details" that I seem to be missing?

Okay, let's go back to the net and fish analogy. Because the scientific world-view cannot capture consciousness per se, only its material manifestations, it cannot say much, or can only speak negatively, about a dis-embodied consciousness. Science tends to say that doesn't exist not because it is testing and disconfirming this hypothesis, but because that result is built into the system, a fundamental axiom from which it begins. This is a net that captures fish, not water — captures material reality, not that which is immaterial.

True, but the dead could manifest in our material reality through mediums, ghosts, visitations, etc.

True, and to an extent they do (another little plot detail that some catch, and some miss). But it's also true that the universe is arranged such that there is a "veil" between the two worlds. Once you are in one chamber you are not in the other (for the most part).

Aren't houses divided into separate rooms — what used to be called apart-ments? Don't children, when they grow up, leave their parents? At the moment of birth isn't the child expelled from the mother's body, never to return? Don't we put down one book to pick up another, and keep their plots separate in our mind?

In Genesis it all begins with God making an act of separation.¹⁰⁸ That's essential to creation, and in this way, there is a separation between the "land of the living" and the "land of the dead." Think how confusing it would be otherwise. Imagine if the bathroom, the kitchen, and the living room were all one room!

¹⁰⁸ The book of Genesis describes the earth as a "formless void," before God introduces light and "separates the light from the darkness," then "separates the waters from the waters" by creating the dome of the sky, etc. (Genesis 1).

You've given good analogies and explanations. Are there other ways, I — my heart — can know that there is “life after death”...to put it bluntly?

To know with absolute certainty — no. Even after you die there will be things you don't fully understand. But there is a different kind of knowing — a heart-level knowing that is available to you. We say, don't we, that “in his heart he knew that...” Search your heart, right this moment, and tell me what you find there.

I find my brother Scott. That's the first image, the first sense I got.

Keep exploring.

I feel my father there. And my mother. I am thinking of my family of origin. They are all in there.¹⁰⁹

So to some degree the heart acts like a storehouse, right? We call it “memory,” but it's not simply a mental trace of a previous occurrence. It's a place where the dead, as well as the living, reside — remain with us.

Remember I said that the heart served as a conduit, a channel. It reaches with ease into the “land of the dead,” as well as that of the living, and shows us the possibility of their interpenetration. It is a kind of telescope that allows us to peek over the wall.

¹⁰⁹ All these family members died many years ago.

That's why, when people are approaching death, they are able to see their loved ones greeting them. Not simply because they are "between worlds" or performing a psychic maneuver, but because the death experience has provoked them to sink deep into their hearts and commune with the other world. This is possible while still alive but sometimes it takes a trauma or leave-taking to provoke this heart-level opening.

But how do I know this is real? Again, I'm asking how to know that there is life after death, that this communion is not simply one with consoling and important memories, but with the real beings living on.

Now wait a second, I never said that. You are importing a dualism foreign to my consciousness and language. You, again, are distinguishing between "subjective consciousness" and "objective reality." That's not quite how it works. Let me try to explain.

Say you are going to the movies. Which is the real movie — the actors manipulated by the director, the physical celluloid that was edited in the editing room, the photos projected that are bouncing off the screen — or the movie as you experience it, the alternative reality that it creates in you, the watcher? For the most part, when we speak of a movie, how cool it was, or how sad, how it made us cry, we mean the latter. The subjective consciousness is what really makes it a "movie" though the physical correlates also had to be there.

Similarly, when we "commune with the dead" it isn't necessarily about having conversations with their physical beings which persist, just as we remember them, in some shadowy place. No, we are resuming and continuing the movie in our mind. But does that

make it unreal? No sir. The relationship is real, just as when we watch a movie it is in our mind, but also a real conversation with the director.

When we remember the dead, when we “hold them in our heart,” we are there again with them, and they with us. It doesn’t mean that they are physically there, communicating from a different realm, but that we are reawakening to the truth of our relationship which resides eternally within our heart, since the heart is not confined within time and space. We say that some memories are “timeless” — this is the way in which we know and access those who have passed on.

Now follow this line of thought further: If the heart has a timeless quality, does that not imply that our heart is not exterminated because of the passage of time and the destruction of the body?

*I have to say that this “proof” is very close to one in the *Phaedo* — that by knowing the timeless and eternal Forms, the soul, it can be inferred, is of the same nature, and so not destroyed by death.¹¹⁰ You thought I was proving that others (the dead with which we are communicating) must live on — but actually, I’m showing that you live on.*

Again, this is not a “certainty” but a plot detail you might have missed. You find things within yourself that are timeless, not likely to die even when the “TV” is destroyed. Isn’t yours really a question not about whether “they” live on, but whether the “I” lives on? If you find the “timeless” within yourself, that’s a pretty good clue.

¹¹⁰ Plato’s *Phaedo* is a work that represents Socrates on the day he is to die, dialoguing with his friends about whether the soul is immortal. One of the “proofs” he gives is that the soul communes with immaterial, unchangeable, eternal Forms, and therefore is likely itself to be immaterial and eternal (unlike the body and the material world it perceives). (*Phaedo* 78b–80c)

Here's another. All the time things happen (to you and others) that are not explicable within our material space-time reference. Strange and uncanny synchronicities. Resonances between people. Answers to prayers. Modes of knowing often referred to as ESP. Premonitions of the future and ways of understanding the past, events that transpired, that give it a meaning and significance that seems more than random.

One way of putting this all together is again to say, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." These things are clues to the fact that our reality is not simply encompassed and explained by materialistic scientific accounts. Moreover, our heart seizes on these experiences, sensing them as "revelations" of deep meaning, even though our brain keeps trying to marginalize them.

Okay, other clues?

Since you are speaking to me with your mind, I'm going to go right to the heart (joke) of the mind's self-understanding and expose something to you that you haven't seen.

The mind likes to speak with deep skepticism, right? Do you think it's perhaps afraid of something, defended against something? Is there not a way in which it is fighting for "your death," the reality of this, as much as you might think it would fight for your life (qua biological tool designed to protect you)? Does that not seem a bit bizarre that it's so invested in your self-destruction?

Okay, here's the revelation — the mind is not you. It's, in a sense, an independent entity designed to safeguard its own continued life, not yours. It fooled you all these years. Let me give you an example.

You are walking down a deserted highway and you hear a truck coming down the road toward you. In the distance you also hear coyotes howling, and smell the appetizing scent of food drifting your way from a distant shack. You are hungry.

Which direction do you turn? Why, you get yourself off the road, turn toward the shack and try to think of ways you might invite yourself to dinner. But at the crucial moment the mind may stop you. "I'm hungry, yes, but you can't just knock on their door — you can't just invite yourself in. They may think you're rude, or crazy, or a criminal. They might even have a shotgun on the wall, and blow you away. You've heard stories of these crazy hillbillies...."

Pretty soon, the mind has turned cancerous. It has not only protected you from real dangers — the truck, maybe the coyotes — but from totally imaginary dangers. In fact, it is preventing you from eating. It is jeopardizing your survival in the name of keeping you safe.

Well, maybe this shows that my mind is stupid, but how does it show that the mind is not me, but an independent entity?

Ah, but let's assume that the mind is not stupid but knows what it's doing in its own way. Then we have to ask, "What is it doing?" It's protecting its own safety, not yours. It's resolutely seeking to stick to the known, not willing to have you wander into unknown territory (for

example, knocking on that stranger's door...who knows what will be on the other side?).

That's how and where the mind survives: in the land of the "known," the place of "control."

To leave that behind, to give over power to the heart, to God, to mystery (or whatever you want to call it,) feels like death to the mind. It is a kind of death, a crucifixion. The mind is out for itself, its own protection above all, even if that is at your expense.

At the very moment of your death it might still be there saying, "I told you so, I told you this would happen, you idiot!" Notice the manner of address — "I told you..." The mind is not you, though it wants to make it think you two are one so you will consistently follow its bidding.

One thing that is confusing me is that you say I am not my body, but now also that I am not my mind. What's left?

Ah, now we are getting to the heart of the matter. There is that in you which eludes the capture, the confines, of both mind and matter. Never mind. It doesn't matter. There is something that outruns both — the Self. The true Self. The core Self.

Let me give you a visual analogy. Say you have a donut:

"The difference twixt the optimist and pessimist is droll.

The optimist sees the donut,

The pessimist sees the hole."

But what if it were the reverse? The pessimist sees the donut, the optimist sees the hole.

That's essentially what I'm saying. If we are simply the donut, when it's eaten we are gone. But if we are the hole, when the donut is eaten nothing is gone! The small hole inside the donut is simply re-linking itself to the larger (w)hole. It's what the Buddhists call sunyata,¹¹¹ what the Taoists call the Tao, and we Westerners often call God, or the soul. The soul is a hole — a holy whole.

Heartbreak and Beyond

Hari, why am I feeling so low and lonely? What if anything should I do about it? This profound sadness and loneliness is surfacing, like when my family all died and I was all alone. There I am again.

Exactly. The heart is a timeless place. So, too, is heartbreak.

But if the heart is where we discover the timelessness of our true self, and our connection to others, why in the world would heartbreak be timeless? Why don't I heal? Why don't I feel consoled?

I think you're wrong (not a phrase I use very often) — but I think you are wrong to state that you experience no consolation. Frankly, you wouldn't be able to face it, have the experience

¹¹¹ *Sunyata* is often translated as “emptiness,” but it is a vibrant, creative emptiness, the place from which the universe arises. In the Buddhist understanding, all arising forms are ultimately “empty” of any separate and abiding selfhood. They are but temporary manifestations of the whole, like waves upon the ocean.

you're having, without a horizon of consolation, meaning, and support. Look at this conversation for example, and you will find it includes within it an element of consolation.

Okay, but all this (mantra, prayer, memory, talking with you) doesn't seem to take away the sense of desolation I connect with death, and the loss of my family. I feel like Harry Potter, irreparably wounded, a lightning scar.¹¹²

Yes, you are like Harry Potter in this regard, as are your children, and so many — orphaned.¹¹³ This is part of the experience of being alive. Sooner or later, if we live long enough, we become literally orphaned, and emotional orphaning usually comes much earlier. This is part of the suffering of the human condition that Buddha speaks of, as to the mother who has lost her child.¹¹⁴ She too is "orphaned" in a different way.

Okay, then what is the remedy for my suffering? I suspect the answer lies in my heart, given our previous conversations, but I'm not sure what that means.

You have a lot bottled up in your heart so it's not as spacious as you might like, not as empty and able to act as a conduit of living help. Try just to feel and acknowledge the anger and sadness without trying to make it go away. Then it is far more easy to release it, or to find it has floated away of its own accord — and something else lies beyond or beneath it.

¹¹² Harry Potter, of J.K. Rowling's series, has a lightning scar inflicted upon him as a baby when his arch-enemy, Voldemort, killed his parents and attempted to murder him.

¹¹³ My two beloved daughters are adopted, having been "orphaned" through abandonment by their original parents.

¹¹⁴ There is a Buddhist story of a mother whose son has died, and seeks an elixir to bring him back to life. Buddha ends up teaching her in a way that awakens her to the inevitability and universality of death and loss, but also the possibility that all suffering connected with such can be transcended.

But why did you say the heartbreak is timeless — and now are you telling me it doesn't have to be if I fully experience it? And how do I “fully experience it”? I seem to get stuck, as if I were under a Dementor's curse.¹¹⁵

I'm going to start with your last question first. I said to go deeper into the heartbreak — not to get lost in it forever, but to get through it. There's no way out except through with some of these kinds of feelings.

Now back to your question about the “timeless.” There's two ways to interpret that word. One is to say that it is “forever in time.” Timeless seems to imply eternal, which seems to imply never going away (in time) — hence that one's suffering is forever. That, for example, is a traditional understanding of hell — that the dead will suffer forever.

But that's not what I meant. I meant what I said: that the pain of loss, since it is a heartfelt emotion, does not exactly unfold in the conventional realm of space and time. It partakes of the heart's nature which is to be outside of time, the source of time. That is why the pain is still there after all these years — because the love is still there, and hence the feeling of missing the loved one, as well as having them with you. It's a paradox, but you couldn't miss them so keenly, remember them so well, and feel so intensely their absence, unless they were still present within you.

This timeless dimension of loss is not to be equated with everlasting

What breaks on the timeless level can only be fixed on the timeless level.

¹¹⁵ In the Harry Potter series, the Dementors, guards of the wizarding prison, Azkaban, suck all hope and happiness from those they encounter. The description of the Dementors was inspired, J.K. Rowling has said, by the experience of depression.

suffering. What breaks on the timeless level can only be fixed on the timeless level. “Time heals all wounds” — no, not necessarily, as you’re discovering. “The timeless heals all wounds” — now that’s a more accurate statement. Going deeper into the deathless nature of all who have died, and yourself, and the universe, and the Consciousness behind the universe, heals that sense of irreparable loss.

Okay, Harry had a resurrection stone, and Dumbledore, to help.¹¹⁶ Do I have helpers? How do I proceed?

Do you have helpers? That’s a funny question given that you are in the midst of this conversation. Of course, you do, I’m right there with you.

As to what you are to do — do nothing, that’s the point. Submit to the Cruciatus Curse, even the Killing Curse, as Harry did — and then (only then) will you live.¹¹⁷ Give up mentally trying to control it. Kill off the mind, for the moment, and let your sorrow be with you.

Nothing more is needed.

It is difficult to open my heart since a lot of what I find there is heartache. Is it supposed to be like that? There’s a lot of anger, sadness, and fear in what seems like a toxic mix.

¹¹⁶ In *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, a resurrection stone allows one to see and communicate with the dead. Dumbledore is, for much of the Harry Potter series, headmaster of the Hogwart’s School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and serves as Potter’s mentor and protector.

¹¹⁷ In the *Harry Potter* series, the “Cruciatus Curse” inflicts excruciating pain on the recipient; the “Killing Curse” causes immediate death. Harry, however, survived Killing Curses, including one blocked by the love of his mother, and one which only killed off the Horcrux, the fragment of Voldemort’s soul, within him.

Well, yes and no (I say that a lot, don't I?) Yes, it seems like a toxic mix but that doesn't mean it is. What you really mean is that it is a painful mix. The heart is capable of feeling pain because it's capable of deep caring. That's the "downside," so to speak, the vulnerability of the heart.

But look at the horrors perpetrated by those who live in their head — for example managing the statistics of mass genocide. Just like the body feels pain to protect itself from injury, the pain of the heart helps us to be loving and seek to protect those we love.

But this seems like a flaw in the plan. If death is built into the plan, why are we programmed to feel pain at death and loss? I thought death wasn't a bad thing that we need to protect against, yet the constancy of loss seems so painful, and you seem to imply that's as it should be.

Okay, a slightly more esoteric teaching: There are different levels of the heart, at least two. One level is very connected to our humanity and individuality. It feels keenly human connection and human loss. We might call it our "human heart," as Confucius and others talk about "human-heartedness." It is what leads us to be "humane." Mencius talks about this as well, and Wang Yang-ming, as you know.¹¹⁸

But then there's another level of the heart that takes you even deeper, past your humanness right into the heart of your divinity. That's where you "know in your heart" that "all shall be well, all things shall be well, all manner of things shall be well."¹¹⁹ That's where

¹¹⁸ It is a Confucian tenet, emphasized by the Confucian philosopher Mencius, and the Neo-Confucian Wang Yang-ming, that human beings have an instinctive virtue of human-heartedness or benevolence (*jen*) that creates the possibility of compassion and social harmony if properly nurtured.

¹¹⁹ As articulated by medieval mystic, Julian of Norwich (1342- c. 1417).

you glimpse the beauty, and rightness, and interconnection of all things, and there is a cessation to suffering, as the Buddha says¹²⁰.

The trick is that you can only penetrate to this deeper level through the other. We go through our humanity on the way to our divinity, not the other way around.

Think of the story of Christ — he realizes his divinity, but through a journey of suffering, of human-heartedness and human pain, accepted, endured, and then transformed —

“It is finished.”¹²¹

¹²⁰ Buddha’s Third “Noble Truth” — that the cessation of suffering, “nirvana,” can be attained.

¹²¹ John 19:30 portrays these as Jesus’ last words on the cross. The Greek word used, *tetelestai*, could also be translated as “accomplished,” “completed,” “fulfilled.”

PART TWO:
REALMS OF REALITY

Other Dimensions: Death and the “Subtle Plane”

Part Two of this book brings a shift of focus. Much of Part One was devoted to messages of “self-help” and spiritual counsel. The remainder of the book will help clarify Hari’s views on the fundamental nature of reality, the larger context in which all unfolds. The dialogue just completed, leading us from the world-view of the “head” to that of the “heart,” forms a bridge between the two Parts.

Whether due to my personal history with early and multiple deaths, or a more universal human desire to penetrate the veil, I have long been fascinated with the question of “other dimensions” of reality and consciousness. I have read about, and know people who have had, near-death and “out-of-body” experiences. I am familiar with Hindu notions of the “subtle” or “astral” body, and yogic techniques to access it. I have studied a bit of the copious research support for a variety of ESP phenomena. I have wondered about whether there is life after death, and what it might be like. I have read some evidence for, and taught about, the doctrine of reincarnation, and have played around with past-life exploration. My skeptical side doubts much of this stuff, yet it touches my heart. Even my mind has been won over by some of the research I have seen.

This section collects several dialogues in which Hari teaches on such issues. For some readers his explanations, images, and analogies will be illuminating and convincing. For others, maybe not. Yet perhaps we can stand together with William James, famous nineteenth-century philosopher, physician, and psychologist, in saying, “Our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different....

No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded....At any rate, they forbid a premature closing of our accounts with reality.”¹²²

Death (and Enlightenment): Getting Off the Hook

Hari, is it true this is only a little “box world,” as C.G. Jung experienced it?¹²³ What is outside the box? What comes after death? Why am I consoled by thinking about death, in some vague, inexplicable way?

All good questions, probing questions. Let me take them one at a time.

Is this a “box world”? Depends what you mean by box. Obviously that is a metaphor open to interpretation. This world certainly doesn’t take up all the “space” of the universe of consciousness.

Let me use a different metaphor. Imagine you were fishing, dangling a particularly interesting lure before a fish. He is dazzled by the lure, fascinated, may even bite into it and get “hooked.”

Similarly, this world is dangled before us and is so fascinating few can resist biting. But once hooked we’re in pain and our movement is limited. We’re in an expansive, unlimited ocean but the part we can explore becomes very limited as we are reeled in.

¹²² William James *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), p. 388.

¹²³ After an out-of-body experience induced by a heart attack in 1944, the great psychiatrist said that, in comparison to the enlarged vision he had received, the conventional reality he returned to seemed like a newspaper photo, a mere “gray box world.”

That is why those who become “unhooked” are able to swim freely, explore a much wider universe, then return and tell us a little about it — as much as our little fish-brains can understand — and teach us techniques for how to unhook.

Do we listen? Not many of us, that lure is so attractive.

Here’s where death comes in — it gets us off the hook. It’s like the fish pulled off the hook by the fisherman, flopping on dry land. This certainly is a horrible end from the point of view of the other fish. On the other hand, the pain is ended, along with the whole melodrama of being reeled in. And imagine a different set of gills come into play and the fish is granted freedom to look around, breathe a different air. It can then re-enter the ocean after a period of time, but only when it so chooses.

Then it gets re-hooked.

The reason death is pleasant is because the fish likes having the hook extracted. It likes rising above its former status. It is entirely, or almost entirely pleasant. Imagine the fish saying “aaahhh” as the hook is finally extracted after so many years.

As to the “astral world” one has entered [after death], it is something of a lighter, airier world, as the world of the air is lighter than sea-

water. It’s a whole different medium, and there is a near unbridgeable chasm between worlds.

To be able to breathe in one means to not be able to in the other.

Death is pleasant is because the fish likes having the hook extracted.

But if you are talking to me, are you not able to “be” (in some sense) in the material world?

Yes and no. It would be an agony to me to have a meat-body...kind of like a prisoner dragging chains about. On the other hand, I can communicate with this world because communication can transcend the barrier, just as light can travel through the air, yet also penetrate the sea up until a certain depth. The more spiritual fish [people] are nearer the surface, better able to see the world above.

What is it like, when still alive, to be able to apprehend this “light from above”?

Very pleasant, very liberating. I’ve “seen the light,” people say and you’re likely to see a smile in their eyes, a briskness in their walk, as if they’ve grown noticeable lighter. They are “light-hearted” because the light entered into and transformed their heart.

From the point of view of other fish they are engaged in a risky endeavor. To travel too close to the surface — even to unhook yourself from the lure — seems dangerous, foolish, a flirting with the unknown. The majority of fish choose to stay safely on the hook and be dragged hither and yon, moving with the tides and the tug of the string. This is called “living.”

But once you’re off the hook, once you’ve seen the light, you don’t believe that anymore. Better to swim free — or to jump out of the sea entirely! Death holds no fear, and neither does the fullness of life.

Others Died?: Other-Sided

Tell me about the land of death. Where do you go? Can I communicate with those “on the other side”? Is there any other side?

Aahh, you want to know — everything. It's a little like someone watching a stripper who wants to see everything. But that's not how it works. Some secrets remains concealed — intentionally.

Is there anything you can expose?

Yes, I can tell you this. It's better than you can possibly imagine. And that's why I can't tell you more.

Is it like what's described in near-death experiences?

Yes, and more. Let me put it to you this way: It is the derivation of the Christian (and otherwise) notion of heaven. Believe it or not, that is a phenomenological description, to a degree, of people who have been there.

Why is it so nice? I don't get the purpose, other than my own mind creating a wish-fulfilling dream.

Yes, oh, that's exactly right. It's wish-fulfillment, your own mind creating a wish-fulfilling dream. Oh, aah, I can tell you because you hit on it yourself — though you don't realize it.

Well, I meant wish-fulfillment for me here and now, but you mean there and then?

Exactly.

Can you explain how, why?

Surely, up to a point. Here goes: After you die it's a bit like after a child plays a concert recital, a really difficult, demanding concert recital, and the parents take him or her out for ice cream. A little reward is good for the soul — it keeps it going on its path of hard work — so the loving parent asks the child, "Where would you most like to go? What would you most like to have?" — and then fulfills that desire completely.

The happy child is not only rewarded for past effort but encouraged to continue on the path and make effort in the future. On some level you know that if you try hard in life there will be a reward at the end of the path, and that is encouraging.

Does that mean if you don't try hard, you don't do well, you don't get a treat?

Well, yes and no. It's not that the parent deliberately withholds the treat. But the guilty child is not able to enjoy it as much. He or she knows that he or she could have done better. Hence the unpleasant aspects of the life-review.¹²⁴

But how do all these pleasures or pains happen, how does consciousness happen, if you don't have a body?

¹²⁴ Accounts of near-death survivors often, though not always, include a phase of life-review wherein the person "sees" in rapid form the sequence of moments that constitute his/her life and its impacts on others.

Oh, but you do. It's just a different kind of body. That's one of the limitations of Western philosophy: It talks about "the body" as if it were a univocal thing. It isn't. It's true that there is a level of the body that will be firmly, irremediably, gone. But when I use the term "body" I mean something more comprehensive, more all-embracing: different fields of vibratory energy.

Any soul — jiva¹²⁵ — needs a "body," vibrating energy, to individualize it, make it separate, distinctive, and abiding. It's like a wave needs a medium (whether water, sand, oil...something) to continue on, though it may shift media.

What media are you using "on the other side"?

That's a good question. Unfortunately it's an unanswerable question for the following reason: The way in which we are discoursing, the way in which you could receive and "understand" the answer, would be through the media you are now involved with. Could an ocean creature understand the sand, and vice-versa? I think not.

But here goes for an analogy: Imagine the difference between hot chocolate-powdered milk, and chocolate pudding after you cook it for a while and then put it in the refrigerator. It has a very different vibratory texture, and hence taste and feel, right?

Right.

¹²⁵ The Hindu name for the personal soul that passes from body to body during its reincarnational history.

Well, when the “heat” of life goes out of you, and you “chill,” your jiva takes on a very different vibratory texture. You still have a medium not unrelated to what came before — in fact, it’s produced out of that — but, at the same time, it’s very different.

Why is it invisible?

Oh, that’s easy to answer. Visibility is simply the product of a certain vibratory state. Physicists know that. However, they don’t know that their instruments are incapable of even picking up and measuring certain kinds of vibrations which simply don’t interact with the instruments. It’s a little like “dark energy” and “dark matter” — they’re not really “dark,” but they are dark to the measuring instruments of the material world.¹²⁶ How much more so is the other-sided jiva.

“Other-sided?”

Yes, look carefully at the word. It’s an anagram for “others died.” When others died, like your brother Scott, they simply other-sided. Hang on to that.

* * *

Why do some people have “after-death communications”¹²⁷ and others not?

¹²⁶ According to contemporary physics, most of the mass-energy of the universe is made up of what are currently unidentified, and not well understood, forms of “dark” energy and matter.

¹²⁷ An experience, reported by many, of being contacted by, or feeling the presence of, a deceased family member or friend, whether this is mediated through sight, hearing, dream-states, or other modes of ordinary and extra-ordinary

ADC's occur when there is a mutual need. As with most human communications it's based on a mutuality of concern. Sometimes (not always) that mutual concern, and the sense of unfinished business, is strong enough to bridge the great divide — one of the greatest in your known universe — between the “living” and the “dead.”

*One thing to note about the ADC accounts in **Hello from Heaven**¹²⁸ is the skillfulness of the communication — the way in which it blends reassurance, information, intimacy, evidence, all with a minimum of extraneous communication.*

Why is it so minimal?

Well, because in a sense it is a (permitted) violation. There is a reason for a wall between the living and the dead, as there is between one's different lives. The dead need to be permitted, even encouraged, to get on with their own lives (so to speak) and to shed the connections that

The dead need to get on with their own lives.

tie them to the earth. Otherwise they do not finish their business there because they feel consumed with “unfinished business.”

Similarly, the living have to get on with their lives and not feel overly preoccupied with the dead, and with anticipation of their own death and afterlife. It would be like being in first grade but thinking overly of the second, or vice-versa. Be where you are. Be here now.

perception.

¹²⁸ At the time I was reading *Hello from Heaven* by Bill Guggenheim and Judy Guggenheim, a book presenting some 353 ADC accounts culled from over 3000 first-hand accounts collected by the researchers.

However, as you can see, sometimes people are not able to get on with their lives (either the living or the dead, or often both) because of unfinished business, unresolved grief, hurt, confusion, etc. A brief ADC helps release that energy.

God in his infinite mercy permits that “violation” of the gulf, that temporary bridging, but it is best that it be short and sweet, and that the universe then reclaim its natural structure. Life is life and death is death, and the twain shall not meet. Otherwise think how confusing it would be!

New question...can I contact my family members? Would this be healing? How do I go about opening that door? Do I really want it in my heart?

Yes, yes, yes, and yes. You are being guided in this direction by your own heart, your contact with the medium,¹²⁹ the books she recommended, even me (as of now). You are being guided in this direction as a step of healing from the past.

As to how to go about it I have some rather specific directions to give which may surprise you. This is a task for you to work on in a rather focused manner. Not that you will make it happen by yourself, but your focused intention will greatly facilitate the process, just as in certain ways it has impeded the process in the past.

What might these directions be?

I will give you four:

¹²⁹ As mentioned in this book's introduction.

1. Each day remind yourself of an intention in this direction, and pray for some healing contact to help resolve unresolved wounds from the past. Offer up the work you have done in this regard, and ask for assistance from God and your family members.

2. As the day proceeds come back to this intention from time to time — re-collect it, not from a “doing” space but a “being” space — this longing is part of who you are.

3. Go over memories that you have of your family, and put out questions to the universe and specific family members: such as “Is there anything I could have done to prevent the suicides [of my father and brother]? Am I forgiven for my anger toward my mother? Did I let down my father in some way, or my brother? Have I kept my family alive in a positive way, through my way of life?”

4. Begin a diary of memories, answers that occur to you, experiences that seem mysterious or telling. Entitle this diary “Contacting my Family.” This makes it an affirmative prayer¹³⁰.

Our Living Conversation with the Dead

If the heart expresses our heart-level connection to God and the universe, why is there such sadness in the human heart, and not more joy? I think of people, places, activities, I love that

¹³⁰ In “petitionary” prayer, we ask for something to come about but — as I understand it — sometimes our uncertainty that it will, our sense of lack as embodied in the prayer itself, may undermine our attempt to achieve results. “Affirmative” prayer, by positively asserting that we are receiving the help we seek, can align the conscious and unconscious mind to be maximally receptive and creative.

now are gone, and my heart is filled with sadness. I think that's why I often prefer to stay in the world of thought.

Yes, it's true. On the human plane, in our ordinary modes of relation, there is a good deal of sadness because there is a good deal of loss. But you need to understand that this sadness is something to embrace. It has significance and value. In fact, it is a way-station on the way to joy — halfway, but not all the way there. We feel the joy of close and intense relation to loved ones, but mixed with the sadness of their passing. If we continue walking down the river of sadness instead of turning back, we will find that it flows into the sea of Divine communion.

When you miss your father or your brother you are not yet realizing them as a piece of God, and therefore eternal. Yet they were and are God incarnate. You are all avatars, yourself included¹³¹. Just as people pray to the Divine Mother, or Jesus, of Krishna, and feel living relation to the Master, when you realize that everyone is an avatar you can recapture that sense of living relation. Any love of a limited place or creature finds joyful (rather than sad-ful) fruition when we know them in and of God — as St. Augustine said¹³².

You are all avatars, yourself included.

¹³¹ An *avatar*, in the Hindu tradition is a divine “descent,” manifestation, Godly incarnation, on the earthly plane. Traditionally, this term is confined to certain divine beings like Krishna and Ram who have come to help save the world (or Jesus, the sole *avatar* of Christianity). However, Hari here expands the notion of the *avatar*, in a non-traditional way, to apply to every one of us.

¹³² In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine describes the total desolation he experiences when a close friend dies. He comes to realize this is the fate of all who devote themselves to the things and people of this passing world without realizing that they are gifts and expressions of the imperishable Divine. “Blessed are those who love you, O God, and love their friends in you and their enemies for your sake. They alone will never lose those who are dear to them, for they love them in one who is never lost, in God...” (*Confessions*, Book IV, Chapter 9)

I understand this in theory, but what does it mean to love someone in and of God? I knew them as persons in particular situations. We shared certain things. Knowing they are God, how can I share with them in a new way? How do I find them alive in my heart, not just as memories?

That's a good question. There are not many teachings about this particular path. It's a bit underdeveloped as a teaching — if not necessarily as a practice since many untutored people keep the conversation going with their loved one.

And this is the key, the sadhana (spiritual method): Keep the conversation going. Act as if the person is still there.

Ah, this makes you confront the question, do you really want them to be there? Do you really want the sense of living relation, or would you rather have them dead and buried, and feel a safe form of distance?

It may help to remember that you are not a little kid anymore. If they “come back” it doesn't mean that you have to relate to them as before (God forbid!) and regress to that dependent point in your life. You need to find new ways of relating to them. Accept that just as you are not frozen in time, neither are they, and that they might have modes of understanding that were unavailable to them at the time of their death. It's an exciting prospect, isn't it, to renew relationships, with an emphasis on the “new” more than the “re”?

I don't know what this would look like or feel like, and how it would co-exist with prayer, with trying to build a relationship to God.

Well, aren't we talking about relating to them as avatars, divine embodiments? It's a little, or more than a little, like the Chinese worship of ancestors. We find God-vehicles, expressions of God's love and wisdom, not simply in ideal and idealized figures (like Jesus, Krishna) but in those who, admittedly imperfect, yet touched our lives with their personal love, wisdom, inspiration.

They are like gods to us when we are little, and though we can and should outgrow that, we can rediscover them in later life as a vehicle of God's personal love. We speak of the Divine Father and the Divine Mother. Isn't this another way of saying that our earthly father and earthly mother may be one of the clearest, most powerful, and most valuable, ways of experiencing our relation to the Divine?

Do I literally pray to them, as a Chinese person might pray to an ancestor?

This is a matter of semantics: It depends what you choose to mean by "prayer." If you mean do you get down on your knees and turn your will and your life over to your brother? — nope. That wouldn't feel comfortable, or right, or needed. But if you think of prayer as conversation, partnership, with a Divine dimension — that which outruns the ego-self, the ordinary boundaries of space-time, and our conventional understandings of the "real" — then, yes, this is a form of prayer. Remember you are not praying to your brother per se, but to God-as-mediated-through-your-brother, and the particular energies he manifested and channeled.

Can you give an example?

Sure. You might say, “What should I do about this situation?” Of course, this might be a situation you’d have particularly wanted to discuss with him. You’d value his take on things, again from the position of higher wisdom, not necessarily right where he was at the time of death. You’ll be surprised at the information that comes through, and also that sense of renewed relation I spoke of earlier. Then sadness begins to be replaced by joy.

But first you have to suspend your disbelief and charge ahead. “Act as if,” they say in Alcoholics Anonymous. Act as if he is still with you and you’ll be surprised to discover that he still is, and maybe has been all along.

Reincarnation IS

Hari, I’m reading about Stevenson’s reincarnational research.¹³³ Can you tell me anything about reincarnation. Is it true? In what sense? Does it leave any trace in my own experience?

Why ask me? Why not ask yourself?

But obviously I don’t know. I have no memory of past lives, or incontrovertible evidence, though it makes a lot of sense to me and evidence seems supportive.

What if you did know?

¹³³ Dr. Ian Stevenson, for many years a professor of psychiatry at the University of Virginia, is the investigator who has done the most rigorous research on evidence relevant to reincarnation, particularly investigating past-life memories in young children, as recounted in his many books including *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*.

I would still wonder how to access that knowledge, and would not trust my feelings — I know I want it to be true. That's why I'm seeking an independent perspective.

Exactly, if you did know you would not trust your feelings. Just as you said. Why, then, would you trust my feelings and expressions? That seems even more farfetched, less based in socially-accepted evidential standards, so it seems hard to use that to shore up your case (with yourself that is).

I see your point. But putting that all aside, I still would think you would have a perspective on it that outruns mine. Why play so hard to get?

That's not exactly what's going on. It refers back more to those times when I have suggested you "trust your trust and doubt your doubt," rather than the reverse. Here's another area where that would be crucial if you are seeking reassurance about the reality of reincarnation.

But here's my "two cents worth" on the subject (though actually you can have it for free):

Reincarnation IS.

The reason I say reincarnation IS rather than, for example, reincarnation happens, or you have and will reincarnate, is because I'm trying to avoid time language. People usually try to conceive of it primarily in temporal terms — as a string of consecutive lives which unfold one

after another in time. After one ends this then allows another to begin, like a string of pearls where the string itself is time.

That's not exactly accurate. It's not exactly wrong either. This kind of "time-line" is a metaphor. You could also use the metaphor of the circle where life enters into death and then returns to life, round and round the circle. Or you could call it a spiral, because at rebirth one is at a slightly different point — only slightly in the cosmic scheme of things, even if all the specifics of the birth are different.

But where do all these two-dimensional shapes (line, circle, spiral) unfold? In a three-dimensional space that holds them all. Similarly where does reincarnational time unfold? In another dimension unaffected by time. How could it be affected by time, temporally changing, if it is that which holds time, the place within which time arises and manifests? The paper cannot be the drawing that is on the paper.

In that sense, reincarnation as a whole IS.

Can you explain more?

Okay, let me try again with a little more specificity. When "you" are reborn and reborn and reborn, all these existences are side-by-side, so to speak. True, there is an arrowed causality (called karma by the Hindus and Buddhists) that make the "later lives" causally affected by the "earlier ones" and not vice-versa, and yet one doesn't really disappear before the other appears. In a certain sense they are all simultaneous.

Therefore when God becomes “you” (the jiva,¹³⁴ to use the Hindu framework) this “you” is a complex, multifaceted phenomena with many consciousnesses, a bit like split personalities. You are in your Drew consciousness right now, but there are others as well.

Let me give an analogy. Imagine a school of fish that turn this way and that — as if one — when a predator approaches. In a sense, each fish is an individual with its own consciousness, clearly divided off from the other. The predator may catch and kill one fish while all the others escape. However, in another sense they are so closely intertwined that the school of fish act as one consciousness, turning this way and that in concert. They are as parts of one organism.

Similarly, all your reincarnational identities and experiences are as one consciousness [belonging to] the greater jiva. Whatever you learn in one life is the property of all your lives. Whatever experience and learning happens to one, happens to all. Thus you grow well beyond what is possible in a given life, just as the school of fish is far better equipped for survival than the single fish, just as the anthill is far smarter than the ant.

But you said there was a causal progression of karma that was unidirectional. That’s different than the fish analogy.

Yes it is. The difference is that the intelligence of the organism is growing, evolving, progressive over time. Notice I say “over time” where earlier I denied that reincarnation is primarily a temporal phenomenon. What do I mean by this distinction?

¹³⁴ The Hindu term for the individuated soul or consciousness which reincarnates in different bodies over the course of many lifetimes, learning karmic lessons and progressing toward a realization of its unity with the divine One.

Imagine a drawing (to go back to that) created over time, its lines unfolding gradually. If you happen to be present at the moments of creation you see many different drawings unfolding one after another. But the entity that is driving the process and in which the process culminates is the completed drawing. That is the truest “reality,” not the making of it. We love Rembrandt’s Mona Lisa, not the “Tuesday on which he worked on the lips.”

Similarly, though you experience it as ever incomplete and in process, your jiva is a completed drawing, a magnificent work of art done by, and for, and in, God.

Astral World: What You Want is What You Get

Dear spirit guide, I want to grow in my understanding and appreciation of the spirit world. Can you tell me more about it: who you are, what is there, how to access it, what to expect after death — these kind of metaphysical topics.

Sure, up to a point. You’re not supposed to know too much, or get too distracted from your earthly existence (the veil is there for a reason), but you can also peek behind the veil and get glimpses of the other world. That is permitted.

First, let me assure you that it is a beautiful world. What you have heard from near-death experiencers, or astral travelers like Muktananda¹³⁵, is true — that there are “sensory” delights unheard of on earth. I put “sensory” in quotes because what you experience them

¹³⁵ As per Swami Muktananda’s autobiographical account of his spiritual journey and experiences, *Play of Consciousness*.

with are not exactly your earthly senses (although they bear some relation to heightened versions of these).

Why? What would be the point of such delights?

That's not quite the right question. What is the point of listening to music? Reading a wonderful novel? Going for a walk in the forest? The point is that there is no point but the beauty and pleasure itself.

Okay, tell me more.

Sure. It is a place where one can grow in wisdom, but paradoxically the beauty and pleasure, relatively unhampered, restrict the possibilities of growth. It's a little like summer vacation from school, in one sense expansive and pleasurable, but in another sense restrictive if that were all there were. Hence the need to return, sooner or later, depending on how much "R and R" (rest and relaxation) is needed, to earth's schoolroom.

Tell me more.

As an astral realm, this after-death world is related to the world of dreams and of the imagination. That is, it is not weighed down with materiality, not gridded out with time and space like a football field with hash markers. What you see is what you want, is what you get — the imagination holds sway.

That's not to say that what unfolds there is not real (what happens in a dream is real, isn't it?) but it's a different kind of reality, more intrapsychic than events on the material plane. You're dwelling in a collective mind-field rather than a collective material field as on earth. Your psychic projects are intertwined with those of others.

Perhaps the best analogy I can offer is when you get really close with another person (don't we call that being "like-minded"?) your thoughts intertwine, here almost merging, there keeping a courtly distance, or swirling about one another, provoking interesting moves. So the dance of the astral realm is this dance of individual and collective energy swirling about in eddies.

In a sense that is operative in your world as well, but there is a heavier substance that slows everything down as if you were swirling, but in sand or wet mud rather than air or smoke.

Tell me more.

What do you want to know?

Can I access that realm now through mantra, meditation, whatever? These don't seem to help me "swirl" and "merge" that much.

Well, there are limits. (We see as through a glass darkly.)¹³⁶ But as with all else, desire and attention set the stage. So here are some things you can do:

¹³⁶ 1 Corinthians 13:12.

1. In the morning, upon awakening, set the stage for the day ahead by setting an intention to realize Spirit in all you think and feel and do. Don't worry if you are being sincere. Just allow yourself to have that thought.

2. As you go through the day take creative breaks. Imagine yourself rising above this world, detaching from it, viewing it all as a kind of computer game you are playing, a Matrix¹³⁷ (with other players) — don't take it too seriously.

3. Practice this same kind of over-sight in meditation: removing your mind from your mind.

4. Finally, have fun. Lila (the divine play of the world) is supposed to be fun — you can't experience one without the other.¹³⁸

Thanks.

You're welcome.

Realms of Reality: Amusement Parks and Planetariums

Can you tell me about the “subtle” or “astral” realm?

¹³⁷ I took this to be a reference to the Wachowski brothers' film, *The Matrix*, in which, as with the Hindu notion of *maya*, people inhabit a perceived world that is ultimately illusory, in this case a computer simulation.

¹³⁸ For someone like myself, used to associating spirituality with suffering and breakthrough, the notion that the spiritual realm is best accessed through joy and fun is a challenging concept (one I explored in another book, *Games for the Soul*).

Yes, but it's hard to convey in your language. I can, perhaps, paint a word picture, as is already beginning to form in your mind.

Imagine a network of stars that are connected to one another by subtle threads. The behavior of one is not independent of the others because the energy flows back and forth as if in tubes of light. If one cools down it affects the temperature of all — but there is also a certain homeostatic system that tends to boost the energy of any individual member rather than having that individual undermine the whole.

On that subtle level, the transmission between individuals is much more fluid, efficacious, because of those “tubes.” Hence, ESP phenomena become possible. ESP draws upon pre-existing connections that are not operative on the gross material plane where connection is only effected causally across a distance.

Tell me more?

Okay, here goes. There are beings who only exist on the subtle plane. You, and other living creatures — yes, all living creatures — exist on both planes.

There is sometimes, sporadically, communication across the planes. Hence, “communications with the dead” — dead is a very relative term — or with “angels” or “spirit guides.” Let's think of these as “vertical” rather than “horizontal” relationships.

This is permitted, even encouraged, up to a point — but each dimension is also accorded

Dead is a very relative term.

its own integrity, its own “completeness” which would be violated by too much communication back and forth.

How about when we dream? What plane is that in?

Well, your body, of course, is confined to the material realm and rendered somewhat comatose. But your “mind” is freed up to roam. It’s not exactly roaming the subtle plane that I describe above — which has its coherence, its regularities, its causalities — but it’s not exactly in the material realm either.

The best way to describe it is like a playground, or amusement park, which may have somewhat imaginary thrills and chills (the Matterhorn, the water slide) based on earthly formations, but without the hazard of the real corresponding item (an actual mountain or waterfall). This allows a kind of soul-play in a zone of protected safety.

And what of the “causal realm” the Hindu’s speak of, the “causal body”?¹³⁹

Ah, whole ’nother story. What to say about that? So hard to talk about that.

Imagine, if you will, the machine that projects the stars in the planetarium. How does it do that? It’s not exactly governed by the same laws that govern the movement of the stars, since it is the origin and cause of these laws.

¹³⁹ One form of Yogic metaphysics refers to the gross material body (*sthula-sarira*), the “subtle body” (*sukma-sarira*), a psychospiritual complex that continues on after death, and the “causal body” (*karana-sarira*) underlying all these expressions.

In that sense the causal realm is outside all the laws of nature, any structure of law operative in our world. So it's hard to describe. It is not a thing (unlike the planetarium projector) because, again, it is the producer of all things.

You can say there is only one of it, but not for the reason you think. It is not an item in the world that "could" have a numerical value like "one" or "two" or "three." Hence the "Oneness" of the Cause is not the same of the oneness of anything else (like an apple). It's a whole different "One." It's a "One" that is prior to mathematical differentiation because, again, it's the place from which "one", "two," and "three," and on and on, emerge. So it is pre-numerical.

Is this what I'm getting at when I do a meditative visualization of the sun? When I meditate on the mantra, "So ham"?¹⁴⁰ How best can I get at that which cannot exactly be described?

Naked intent. The techniques you mention above are importantly primarily as wrappers for naked intent, just as a chocolate bar has to be wrapped in something. But who cares about the wrapper, except insofar as it keeps the chocolate fresh? Finally, it is there to be discarded when you eat the chocolate.

Why is this intent so important and efficacious?

Because the only thing that separates us off from the "Cause" is our desire to be out exploring, separate. As with Dorothy [in the Wizard of Oz] we have the power to click our heels and say "There's no place like home" — and be home.

¹⁴⁰ In Sanskrit this is a mantra meaning "I am That" — Self and universe are One.

Is there a way, in my practices, I can penetrate further into other realms of being, and have something akin to an out-of-body experience, or near-death experience, or some other mystical vision? I know I'm asking the same question as above, but I'm seeking more specific hope and guidance. I guess I feel that it is somewhat hopeless, like the Kafka story where the door meant for me remains ever locked.¹⁴¹

Oh God, what a depressing image. This image will keep the door locked! How's about this as a different image, a little more healing and inviting (just a little):

There is an amusement park relatively near to where you live (yes, we're back to the amusement park image). You wouldn't honestly want to live there. Though stimulating, enjoyable, entertaining, after a while it would deplete you and pull you too far away from your loved ones and daily activities. You want to be able to go home at the end of the evening. However, to go there from time to time is lovely, exhilarating, renewing, and just to know it is there and available alleviates the dryness and tedium of daily life.

In a much more serious way (though not too serious), the realm of spiritual experience you seek is like that amusement park. Yes, you can go there — simply set your intent and buy a ticket — but don't think that's the be-all and end-all answer to the problems of life. That's a childish (child-like) way of thinking about the amusement park.

The true business of life remains here, where you live — in duality.

¹⁴¹ In Franz Kafka's *The Trial* is a parable, "Before the Law," in which a man seeks to gain entrance to the Law through a doorway. Over many long years he is never permitted in. Right before his death he is informed that the doorway in which he has stood was set aside for him alone — and now at his death will be closed.

But what about the notion that *samsara* is *nirvana*, that the two realms are one?¹⁴²

Yes, true, that's a later stage of realization. This world is the amusement park. But first you have to visit that amusement park that seems separated off from daily life.

And how to do that, you ask? Sorry to be so redundant but I stick with the above answer: Keep wanting it, longing for it with all your might, and hitching a ride on whatever vehicle you can think of (mantra, prayer, etc.), holding to a vision of the destination, and lo and behold, perhaps when you least expect it — poof, you're there.

Hand that man a Kewpie doll!

ESP: To Intuit by Getting Into-It

Dear Hari, can you tell me anything about ESP (extra-sensory perception) phenomena, what they are, are they real, can I have them, have I had them, what they mean about the universe?

Well, you could say we're having one right now. After all, you don't "sense" me in the usual perceptual ways — yet you do perceive me from within.

That's a good way to begin to understand ESP: that something outside of the person is experienced as if it were inside. The person then gains the possibility of perceiving it, knowing it, influencing it, in ways that are "para-normal" — beside or beyond the normal.

¹⁴² Mahayana Buddhism, instead of viewing *samsara* (this world of death, suffering, and rebirth) as a separate realm from *nirvana* (wherein self is blissfully extinguished) emphasizes that to the enlightened being, *nirvana* is found here and now in this *samsaric* world.

There's an expansion of self, on the way to being "Self" — on the way to experiencing the God-nature of the Self where all is known and controllable.

Why, how? And again, have I experienced this, or could I?

Have you experienced it? My God! (Pun intended.) So often, so continuously, have you had knowledge come into your mind, things you would not know within your own small body-mind, and these have arrived in extra-sensory ways. Again, look at these communications.

You just take it for granted: As the Big Book says, it "becomes a working part of the mind."¹⁴³ But when you stop to think about it, it's not "your mind" exactly anymore, is it? It's just Mind, Consciousness, and you are participating in it. The Big Book calls it the "intuitive" mind¹⁴⁴, and you should think about that word — very interesting.

I don't know the etymology.

True, you don't. Nothing is available through that source. But try to "intuit" the meaning of "intuitive," what it has to say to you, and what I am getting at.

Well, it begins with "into-it". You get into it, and it gets into you.

¹⁴³ Nicknamed the "Big Book," *Alcoholics Anonymous* says that in their program's Eleventh Step, wherein one habitually seeks guidance from God, "What used to be the hunch or the occasional inspiration gradually becomes a working part of the mind." (p. 87)

¹⁴⁴ *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 86.

Yes, isn't that interesting, and isn't that a good description of intuition? You get "into" a special space, and become part of something larger than the self, and therefore it gets into you, making information available that wouldn't normally be there — hence, "para-normal."

Highly specific, highly developed forms of ESP are simply an extension of that. It's like someone who gets very good at hitting a tennis ball. They turn their athletic skill (which everyone has to some degree) toward a highly focused end.

Just as it is not given for most people to remember their past lives, or to know the future, consciously developed and directed ESP-capacities of this nature are not generally given because it "screws up the game," so to speak. The game of life.

Imagine if a basketball player could just will any shot into the basket: So much for the game of basketball! Similarly, the game of life would somewhat come to a halt if we could transgress space and time too freely.

Out-of-Body (and In-the-Body) Experiences

What about NDEs (near-death experiences) and other forms of OBEs (out-of-body experiences)? I keep being drawn to read this material, and yet I can't totally resolve what I think of it. I guess that's why I want the experience, not just words and accounts about it which seem always disputable.

It's okay not to have had a near-death experience. After all, that means that you haven't been near death, which most people would take to be all to the good.

You can't have everything, you know. Your primary job in this life is to be in the body, not out of it. Your primary spiritual experience is to take place when you are in the body, not out of it. Never forget that, or you'll just have one more focus of desire, frustration, and deprivation.

Most of the experiences NDErs report are available in the body. Look at the correspondences between them and "mystical moments."¹⁴⁵ The key is not being out of the body, or near death — the key is being out of the self, beyond the self.¹⁴⁶

The key is not being out of the body, but being out of the self.

This is a problem with the traditional model [of spirituality]: It is rather dualistic and says (as Descartes might) that quieting the body allows you to free its hold. Escaping it allows for clearer perception. The body is a prison.¹⁴⁷

Not exactly true. The body is an exquisitely tuned instrument for picking up vibrations, both gross and subtle, both "normal" and "paranormal." Even in NDEs, the body still makes these possible, plays its role.

Let me give you an example since you don't seem to get this, or agree. Imagine someone lying on a hospital table. They rise out of their body and look down on it. But think of the reports of a silver cord connecting their subtle body with their material body¹⁴⁸. Via the cord they are still sharing energy. The continued life of the physical body is reported to be

¹⁴⁵ For example, see Philip L. Berman's *The Journey Home: What Near-Death Experiences and Mysticism Teach Us About the Gift of Life*, which explores similarities between mystical experiences and NDE reports, their agreement concerning the unified, benevolent, and purposeful nature of the universe.

¹⁴⁶ That is, the ego-self with its restrictive mind-models and perceptions.

¹⁴⁷ This notion that the body must be subdued, mastered, or escaped for the soul or intellect to fly free, is a long-standing one in Western philosophy and religion, most prominently found in Plato for the Ancients, Augustine in the Medieval period, and Rene Descartes for the Moderns.

¹⁴⁸ In the OBE literature there are many reports of, and much speculation concerning the nature of, a "silver cord" perceived as connecting the physical and subtle body. In the next section, the notion of a "subtle body" is discussed at greater length.

contingent upon the decisions made by he who dwells in the subtle body.¹⁴⁹ But does it not make sense that influence and energy goes the other way as well — that the material body is still supplying energy to the subtle body? Think of it as an umbilical cord that has not yet been severed.

But that body on the table seems so thoroughly put out of play.

Yes, yes, as in dreaming, OBEs only takes place when a certain level of sensorimotor activity is put out of play. But that (as you know) can't be equated with the body as a whole. The body is energy systems upon energy systems. To be "out of body" is still to be expressing a bodily capacity,¹⁵⁰ just as perception, motility, the apprehension of space, time, and others, is always to be "out of body," always miraculous, always inexplicable by materialism.

Think about it. The real miracle is bodily experience, which is "out of body" experience by its very nature.¹⁵¹

Eighty-Eight Keys and the Music of Karma

¹⁴⁹ For example, many NDE survivors report a moment when they decided to continue living, thereby returning to and reviving their material body.

¹⁵⁰ For example, in reports of NDEs and OBEs, the subjects still speak of "seeing" their body lying below, of moving rapidly through space, or perceiving a bright light — such descriptions have a "bodily" component, when "body" is understood broadly.

¹⁵¹ As explored in my book *The Absent Body*, a philosophical analysis of embodied experience, the body is always reaching outside itself in its acts of perceiving, moving, eating, breathing, whereby it interacts with a world beyond its limits. This is roughly what I take Hari to mean when he says that bodily experience is itself "out of body" experience, a leap of consciousness inexplicable in a world-view which views materiality as the only reality.

Dear Hari, are you an “incorporeal” being? Are there “souls” separate from bodies? Are there “astral bodies”? What happens to them? What are they made of? I believe (sort of) you can stretch the limits of my understanding and fill in some very substantial gaps.

Monism is too simple, materialistic monism. But so is dualism, mind-body dualism. So is trialism, mind-body dualism plus a connector, an astral body. So, too, the notion of the world being made out of four elements — and on and on and on.

Notice how it is like a child counting one...two...three...four...though in the case of Western philosophy it has often been a counting down, as if “one” were the most sophisticated response.¹⁵²

Then there is the Buddhist “zero” — form is emptiness and emptiness is form¹⁵³.

But notice how primitive these systems are, even if they congratulate themselves on their sophistication.

It is as if you tried to understand the power and range of an eighty-eight key piano by study of a small thumb-piano. The failure of available theories to account for observable phenomena (ESP, near-death experiences, etc.) indicates their fundamental inadequacy.

Tell me more.

Okay, let’s start with the analogy of the piano. Imagine the low notes (vibratory pitches) constitute physical matter — the densest level of matter. The middle-level pitches help to

¹⁵² In contemporary scientifically-based metaphysics, considering everything as a product of physicalistic matter/energy is usually seen as more sophisticated than having reference to “disembodied souls,” or “astral bodies,” and the like — hence, “materialistic monism,” the reliance on one substance and manner of explanation.

¹⁵³ A famous quote from a central text of Mahayana Buddhism, *The Heart Sutra*. All forms ultimately express at their heart an emptiness (*sunyata*) of any separate, fixed identity.

compose the astral and dream body — which still retain a certain physical form, but are freed up from some of the constraints of grosser forms of materiality. The highest notes are reflected in mental states that take us beyond the perspectival self into communion with others and the whole.

But what happens at death? This analogy doesn't seem to work too well there.

Yes and no. No, in that it sounds as if the piano is crudely chopped up and part of it thrown away. A yucky vision.

But look more deeply. What if the pianist simply stops playing some of the notes? The composition modulates into the higher realms. And what if this happens while one is still alive (see Chakra progression,¹⁵⁴ or Socratic notions of the philosopher¹⁵⁵). Then the continued “playing of the person” is less dependent on the “body.”

But how does death fit into this?

Well, it's an important compositional alteration. In certain ways the composition is less complete, less present, especially for those who only hear at the lowest register, and those who believe that it and it alone are real. In other ways the composition is more full, ethereal, liberated from the bass (base) tones. “Karma” is the pre-existing path of the notes which create certain harmonic and melodic needs.

¹⁵⁴ Here Hari refers to the tantric Hindu notion of Chakras, or energy centers in the body that represent different levels of consciousness, from the lower (governing survival, sexuality, etc.) to those higher ones associated with compassion and expanded consciousness.

¹⁵⁵ In Plato's *Phaedo*, Socrates says the true philosopher, preparing for death and afterlife, and seeking unhampered knowledge, detaches himself from physical preoccupations as much as possible while still alive.

The next birth is chosen as one composes a piece.

Huh? Can you explain more?

“Karma” is the pre-existing path of the notes which create certain harmonic and melodic needs.

Sure. Imagine karma not as something mechanical, cause and effect, but as artistic, a beautiful creative patterning that has its own logic but never quite repeats in the same way twice, just as a lovely piece of music may include many, if subtle, variations.

Every being’s karmic path of development is unique. There is no repetition. Crude descriptions of karma make it sound predictable, automatic: “Hit someone, and someone hits you back.” But that can cause doubt because the universe just isn’t that crude, even if there is a certain heuristic value to such examples.

But let’s say Bill hits Suzy. A feeling of guilt may begin to stir. He may buy flowers for Suzy but, nonetheless, she remains distrustful, and the purchase of flowers doesn’t really relieve the guilt because deep inside Bill knows it to be a manipulation, not a deep and searching act of contrition and penance.

So he begins to get angry with himself, and Suzy, and hits her once more. This time she is thoroughly fed up and frightened and determines to leave for good. She does so, but only for about three months, when she re-contacts Bill supposedly about an innocent matter that must be addressed in dissolving their relationship. But really it reopens their relationship...and on and on it goes.

Notice how we have a theme with variation, or two themes circling one another, creating harmonies, disharmonies, and melodic developments. Notice how each is reaping the

“karma” of his or her actions. What happens in the world, and to the individual, follows ineluctably from the way each has created and responded to the situation.

Notice how negative actions largely create negative results — in the long run. But notice, too, how there is the potential for musical surprises and turns. (For example, on the way to Bill’s house, Suzy unexpectedly meets an old boyfriend and begins to turn her focus on him, introducing a new theme.)

But if there are these unexpected, artistic breaks in mechanical logic, doesn’t that break with the Hindu-Buddhist notion that everything is karmically determined — for example, that Bill must lose his relationship at this point?

Yes, and no. Of course if he’d been fully loving with Suzy she would not have turned to that old boyfriend and Bill would not have lost the relationship. That was a karmic payback. But did it have to come in precisely this way, as in mechanical pool-ball causality? No. (Even in the physical world, that vision of causality is being abandoned.)¹⁵⁶

Again, think more of musical, artistic “causality” that combines possibility and necessity, creating something ever so much more interesting.

But how does what actually happens surface out of the range of all things possible? Does God choose, as the pianist chooses notes when improvising? Is it purely random, contingent?

¹⁵⁶ The contemporary physics of quantum mechanics replaces the deterministic causalities of classical mechanics with an understanding of the submicroscopic world as operating probabilistically and, hence, to a degree, unpredictably.

Ah, again, yes and no. (Sorry to keep doing that to you, but one must think beyond the dualities to really “get it.”) The pianist improvising will experience himself as inspired, guided by a muse. So he is not exactly “freely choosing”; nor is it pure contingency; nor is it a matter of mechanical necessity. Rather it is a guided flow. So too with the world. It is a guided flow, a dance.

But so much of it is so awful. The Holocaust. Sudden earthquakes that kill thousands. How is that a “guided flow,” guided by a loving God toward the beauty of a piece of music? Give me a break!

Now wait just a second. You’re adding on many elements to my account. All I can say at the moment is that music, if you think about it, isn’t always consonant, pretty, and at a point of resolution. In fact, music too much like that is boring. You want tension, drama, dissonance, the unexpected, contrast. So, too, we need it for our universe to come into its fuller beauty, and we need it in our lives.

Don’t make the mistake of thinking that dissonance necessarily indicates contingency or evil. It is what it is. You ever retain responsibility — the ability to respond. That is, you are ever reacting to, and creating, karma.

But how is it your karma to fall ill perhaps to some inherited or environmental illness? Where then is the moral dimension of karmic causality?

That's presuming that illness and death are ultimately real, and therefore destructive and bad.

What if they are not? What if they are just more notes in the music, not the end of the music?

You see the piece never ends.

The Way the World Works: Twelve Lessons

Like the earlier dialogue on the head and the heart, the one that follows should be regarded as a single conversation, taking place over several days, and broken up into chapters for ease of readability. I wouldn't call it "the be-all and end-all" of Hari's teachings, but it provides a brisk overview. It begins where we left off in previous discussions on the "subtle body," and karma, and as such involves certain repetitions and re-tracings. It leads on, like the rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland*, to which Hari refers, to some unexpected places. I travel along for the ride, sometimes probing or perplexed.

The tone of these particular lessons becomes increasingly playful. We might call them "tongue-in-cheek" (if Hari can be said to have a tongue and cheek). He cautions us against taking them, or the spiritual life in general, too seriously. That which is "serious" can weigh us down, burdening the spirit. The goal here is the opposite — en-lighten-ment, as we lightly soar and see.

Lesson #1: The Room in which All is Related

Having read a number of books about ESP, survival after death, etc., what sticks with me?

1. The relationship of “soul” to body may be like that of someone sitting at a computer, receiving and sending out e-mails. When the computer breaks (the body dies), it may be indistinguishable to the e-mail partner from an annihilation of the sender (the soul). If, however, the sender can then make a “phone call” (after-death communication), the partner’s concern is alleviated.

2. We may well be receiving and sending “subtle body” signals all the time — they just don’t surface to consciousness and are often drowned out. When communicating with spiritual entities, and sometimes with each other (as with ESP), this is the mode of transmission used.

3. At this vibratory level the energies are not apprehensible and measurable (for the most part) by instruments, both sensory and technical, in our material world. Just as our eyes only see a range of visible light, and our ears only hear a certain auditory range, so too with all our perceptual/technical tools: They work only within a certain range.

4. There is a seed of conscious apprehension in everything, atoms on up, but only when it reaches life-forms that need to be self-conscious to preserve their form do we get that kind of perceptual/thinking/intending awareness that we usually call “consciousness.”

Can you tell me more? Give me clarifying thoughts or concepts?

Sure, that’s what I’m here for. Where would you like to start?

What survives death? Is there a “subtle body”?¹⁵⁷ What is it like, how to apprehend it now while I’m still alive?

What you call “the subtle body” is something like what I am in now, and the way in which I am communicating with you. But being “subtle,” it’s hard to communicate exactly what it is. We use words drawn from your world to describe entities in your world, so by nature they will not be well-fitted to describe “other-worldly” things. I put that in quotes because, as we shall see, subtle bodies are not exactly other-worldly. They also are a part of your world, sort of, kind of, but mostly hidden.

Imagine you are making a subtle point in conversation. It would make it past most people. Only a rare person here and there would “catch your drift.” This is a bit like communications from the subtle body. You need a “subtle” apprehension to catch them.

Let me give you an example that is transpiring right now. As you gaze out the window your eyes are receiving photons and synthesizing them into impressions of the outer world — trees, houses, etc. Without that synthetic capacity none of it would make any sense to you. It would just be a bunch of vague, inchoate impressions. So, too, with the subtle body. It registers in your world in that vague, inchoate way unless you develop the capacities to synthesize it, and thus see through and with it.

Let me give you another example. Ever just have a feeling that something is going to happen... and then it does? Ever experience a weird synchronicity like you did with N. the other day? Ever feel like you know what is going on in another’s mind — and you’re right?

¹⁵⁷ A variety of religious and esoteric spiritual traditions refer to the existence of one or more “subtle bodies,” (also known as “astral” or “light” bodies, or simply as the “soul”) that anchor the psychospiritual identity of the self in a way that transcends the confines of the physical body.

Ever feel a sense of self expand and change, like a butterfly released from its cocoon? Ever open a book to just the right page and hear just the message you need to? Ever look over your life and see how the strange turnings brought you to a special place you needed to be? All of these represent the “subtle body” in action, but it’s hard to see the whole pattern.

I don’t quite understand. These seem very disparate phenomena. Some may have to do with karma, or destiny, or God’s will, but how with the subtle body?

Well, you know the answer even as you ask the question. What you call “karma” or “destiny” operates through the subtle body (again, I am using your preferred terminology). The causal laws that are operative are not exactly like physical laws. They don’t manifest primarily on the physical plane, though their effects do. So where else? The subtle body has its own causal laws as it goes through life.

Can you explain?

Sure. As always (or often) let me give you a metaphor. Say you are shining a flashlight on a distant object. You light it up in a spotlight while the surrounding area stays dark. Similarly, the [paranormal] phenomena I mention above are suddenly spotlighted in your awareness — hmmm, that’s curious — but the “room” in which it all unfolds lawfully, and in which all objects take their place, remains largely shrouded in darkness.

Can you illuminate that room more for me?

Well, let me put it like this. Everything stands in relation to everything else.

Not very helpful? Well, think more deeply about what I am saying.

All events stand in relation to all others. All “souls” stand in relation to all others. All lifetimes you live stand in relation to other lifetimes. All minds. All world-events. God, you might say, is the interrelationship between all this, the glue that holds it all together, the source from which it all rises, the place to which it all returns, and for which it all longs.

If you think about the phenomena mentioned above, they are all sudden apprehensions of relationality where modern-day physics would say there should be none. And yet there are.¹⁵⁸ The room is suddenly, albeit with limits, illuminated.

I must admit, though in a loose sense I “understand” the images you are presenting, it still hasn’t come together for me. I don’t really understand the phenomena you mention above, nor how they relate to each other, nor what it all says of the world. Can you “turn on the lights” in that room and help me to see the big picture in a bit more detail?

Sure. Your wish is my command (sort of). I’m a little like the genie who says that, but you don’t exactly have power over me — except my powerful wish to help.

Let’s start here, and have a series of lessons. So hunker down for the long (or at least longer) haul...

¹⁵⁸ Hari had earlier given examples of experienced relationships between minds, and events, across time and space, in ways that our standard view of reality would have difficulty explaining.

LESSON #1: WHAT SEEMS ACCIDENTAL AND CHAOTIC IS IN FACT NOTHING OF THE SORT.

That's a hard one to believe. Look around you at the world and it seems like the accidental and chaotic all but rule, with events that — at least from a moral/rational/spiritual point of view — have coherence, meaning and progressivity being more the exception than the rule.

But look deeper.

Nothing happens by accident, nothing. Just as there are physical laws that knit together, rationally and predictably, events in the physical world (as chaotic-seeming as the weather, tornados, earthquakes, and the like) so too in the moral-spiritual world. Let me give you an example:

A little girl is walking down the street and suddenly begins to feel ill. She comes down with scarlet fever, or some contemporary version thereof, from which she recovers — but it leaves devastating scars which redirect the course of her life, often in painful but productive ways.

Accident? No way. It is all “pre-planned.” It is just right. It is what she needs to work with. It is what she is choosing.

If you go to see a movie, and it is scary and you spend half the film screaming bloody murder with other scared patrons, it still doesn't mean you were dragged into the theater against your will. You came in of your own accord, though halfway through the film you may wonder why. Well, life is like that, except your memory of choosing to come to the movie is even fuzzier or blanked out.

What do you mean? When did I choose that? Why don't I remember? How can I?

You are operating a bit too much under the paradigm of linear time. It's not exactly that you chose this at one point in time (say before your birth) and now it's later — as in the movie theater example. It's more like the choice takes place in a different dimension that is neither of time nor of space. So in a sense the choice is happening concurrently, right here, right now, only it isn't.

Isn't that clear?(joke).

Imagine you dwelled on the face of a cube and something was happening on the opposite face that operated as a magnet pulling on you. Since you are two-dimensional you can't directly apprehend it — and yet you feel the pulls. It works something like that.

Can you explain more?

Sure. Imagine that other dimension (cube face) is ordered, organized by a master craftsman, and that everything fits into place and relates coherently. Nonetheless, the way it pulls on you and your life may yet seem mysterious, unpredictable. It has to: That's part of the order.

Otherwise, the game would be boring.

In a worldly game this kind of unpredictability is introduced by dice. In a computer game, or indeed the kind of game I'm talking about, the unpredictability is built in by design, introducing new situations and challenges that nonetheless are appropriate to the level of difficulty of the player, and designed as a teaching instrument.

At times, when you talk about karma it makes it sound predictable, at times,

The unpredictability is built in by design.

not; at times, causal, at times more random or freely chosen. Somehow I'm still having trouble understanding and believing. I'm afraid the lessons will do little good if I don't really buy into them.

True, very good point. Let's go over this territory again, but listen a little more with your heart than with your mind.

How to do that?

Breathe into your heart center. Project your consciousness there. Then we'll begin...

"Karma" is a very tricky term. A very wise and complex concept, but the simplicity of the term (two short syllabi) is deceptive. "Karma" speaks of an ordering principle at play throughout the universe, something like:

What you think, say, and do will not be without its consequences. The consequences will follow out of the character of the act, expressing the level of consciousness from which the act was done, and its effects upon others. These effects will rebound about you — you reap what you sow — in ways that are both potentially punishing and/or rewarding — and educational. There is always a renewed opportunity to learn from the effects you have created.

Up until now my “definition” is traditional, harmonious with what you have learned and understood. But here I depart slightly, but significantly:

Karma is not mechanical. It is not, as it were, computer-generated. After all, the logic used by a computer is predictable, based on pre-programming, where the input fully determines the output. Karma is a bit more like an artistic creation which has its logic, its beauty, its harmonies and relationships — among instruments, keys, moods, and melodies — yet is never repeated twice.

Everyone’s life unfolds like that, as a piece of music — and takes its place as one instrument or melody within the larger piece of music that is the world — so that there are layers upon layers of compositions.

To call it “lila” or play, is accurate. It is music playing, and we are both the players and the instruments, audience, and conductor. (It depends upon your perspective and what you identify with since, ultimately, God is the whole thing.)

Play with this conception for a little while.

Lessons #2-3: Bursting the Bubble-World

Can I now turn to further lessons?

Sure. No problem with that. Let’s go — I’m raring to go:

**LESSON #2: WHAT YOU THINK YOU ARE SEEING AND DOING IS NOT
NECESSARILY WHAT YOU ARE ACTUALLY SEEING AND DOING.**

Let me explain. On your plane you function in a pretty unproblematic way, using your habitual responses to cope with the intrusions and solicitations of the environment.

With me so far?

But every now and then things seem to go haywire, right? Your habitual responses won't cope. Things get scary, or exciting, but one's instinctive habit as a creature seeking preservation is to try to "get things back to normal," right?

Right.

You've done that all your life, over and over. The result is to damp down reality and to convince yourself it's less interesting, more repetitive, more "safe" than it actually is.

You're living in a kind of perceptual "bubble" — like a boy in a bubble sheltered from any kind of environmental intrusion because of the fear that it will prove lethal. Soon the bubble-world is all you know. Your reality has become very limited.

Can you explain further? And I don't see how your metaphor really relates to your lesson #2.

Let's take what's going on this very minute. You are writing to me and vice-versa. You're putting in your committed time at the keyboard, playing with a fun technique, which is also a kind of sadhana [spiritual discipline].

If you really realized what was happening it would blow your mind — or blow your picture of reality. Blow your bubble, so to speak. So your mind puts a lid on it, tries to bring it all within the bubble.

That's also how you cope with thoughts of death — which you are moving toward at every moment. That surely blows the bubble, doesn't it? And even with thoughts of love and service, and with spiritual reading and techniques — bubble-blowers all.

It all becomes a bit like watching TV, where no matter how significant the show (a documentary about World War II, an episode of Sesame Street) it all becomes just bubble-material, and thereby robbed of deep significance.

You are watching your own life on TV — that's another way of putting it — because it feels so much safer, so in control.

But what if you were to let go of this paradigm? Step out of the bubble TV and experience the full reality and meaning of your thoughts and actions?

How can I do so? Help me to break free of the bubble.

***What if you were
to step out of the
bubble TV?***

Okay, here goes....

Take a deep breath.

That's all. Take a deep breath, and then another, and then another. Allow yourself to breathe it all in, everything going on within you and without at this moment.

The only lifeline to the outside world is this moment, the present, here and now. Experience it as fully as you can and — voila — you are outside the bubble, at least for a moment. The more you do this, the more you get used to living outside the bubble and realizing you can survive.

I [just now] tried to do this a bit, but nothing very special seemed to happen. It didn't seem to get me out of the bubble. There's no special breakthrough. "This moment" can be a bit boring, or unpleasant, or blah.

True...but false. What do I mean? Oh no, not another paradox! Yes...and no. (Sorry, just kidding around).

What I mean is that you have to sink into the moment kind of like a hot bath. Not just put a toe in it, but bit by bit immerse your whole body. Whatever you find there — including that which is unpleasant or blah, just stay with it, accept it, witness it. That will not to change it is what begins to change it all into something more magical.

Try it again — with this in mind. But believe it will work. As you believe so it shall be.

(Next day) Can we go on to lesson #3 now?

LESSON #3: DON'T TAKE IT ALL SO SERIOUSLY.

Most people think of the spiritual realm, and the yogic practices that advance us spiritually, as dead-serious business. It's not. It is. It's not. It is. Another one of those paradoxes. But let me highlight the "it's not" part since this is so often missed.

The more you take it all seriously, even the spiritual part, the more you get trapped in the melodrama. That which is "serious" is constricting. Feel how that notion makes your body feel, and your mind.

True, it is good for a certain kind of focus. When things "get serious" people often laser in. Their attention sharpens, and their reflexes. They act in concerted and effective ways. That's why many spiritual teachers emphasize the seriousness of the game — all that's at stake (your eternal soul) and the limitations of time and circumstances that demand that you do it now. (Think of the Zen exhortations to break through now!)¹⁵⁹

The problem with all this seriousness is it creates fear, tension, struggle, and disappointment; contempt toward self, and toward those who are not being "as serious"; envy of their comparative freedom...and on and on.

It's like telling a child, "Get serious!" Yes, he/she will (or may) if you demand it, but not without some reluctance, resistance, and loss of playful freedom. So too in the spiritual realm (be ye therefore like a child if you wish to enter the kingdom of heaven)¹⁶⁰.

I am not that serious, am I? God is not that serious is He/She? When Krishna talks to Arjuna at the beginning of the Bhagavad Gita, isn't it to say "Don't take everything so seriously. Lighten up!"¹⁶¹ When Jesus tells his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount to be like

¹⁵⁹ It is common for a Zen Buddhist teacher to push his or her students to attain immediate breakthrough by putting forth intense effort in meditation.

¹⁶⁰ New Testament, Matthew 18:3.

¹⁶¹ In the *Bhagavad Gita*, when Arjuna is unable to lead his troops into a brutal family civil war, God, in the form of Krishna, reminds him that what unfolds on this material plane is illusion, not ultimate reality.

the lilies of the valley which neither spin nor toil,¹⁶² most people experience this as a spiritual discipline, a vow of poverty, but really it's a way of saying "Lighten up. Relax. Trust. All will be okay." Lilies are not a very serious lot.

What is the opposite of all this seriousness? Play and playfulness. Have fun. Enjoy. Explore. Learn. Be ye like a child. Then you are growing closer to God, and to the spirit of a universe that was created in play.

Have fun. Enjoy. Explore. Learn.

"And then God said.... 'Let's party!' and the world came into being." That would be a suitable way of explaining creation.

(Two days later) Are there more lessons? Can we go onto lesson #4? How many are there in total, or should I just wait and see?

Why don't you wait and see. It's more fun that way...

Lessons # 4-6: The Game Unfolds

LESSON #4: THE SOURCE-POINT IS ONE, BUT IT IS IN AND THROUGH EVERYTHING.

A wonderful image of that is the big bang. It took place at one point in space-time, we might say (13.7 billion years ago), but that wouldn't quite be right because it is there at every point of

¹⁶² New Testament, Luke 12:27.

space and time. After all, it produced the space, the matter, the energy.¹⁶³ Nothing stands outside it, everything is a partial expression of it, all the diversity of the universe. To understand the big bang is to look around you, excluding nothing, including the thoughts you are having in your head right now and the computer at which you are writing them down.

So how to pray to God? God is the Source-point, or at least a name for that, a finger pointing at the moon¹⁶⁴. But God is not invisible and intangible because of being so separate from us, so far away, like the moon in a distant heaven, but rather by being everywhere and nowhere — in everything, including ourselves.

The way contemplative practices bring you in contact with the Source-point is by going deeper and deeper in — de-creating, so to speak — undoing the effects of the big bang — to experience the bringing back of all things together, the return to the Source it all emanated from.

After doing this “rewind,” one can then more easily press “play” and see how all the whole world emanates from this beginning. But first you have to go back to the Oneness from which it all came.

Shall we go on?

Please.

¹⁶³ According to the currently accepted cosmological model, although we are tempted to think of the explosive beginning of the universe as happening in a certain space and time, actually the expanding space and time of our universe was itself a product of the big bang.

¹⁶⁴ In Zen Buddhism, verbal teachings are said to be like “fingers pointing at the moon.” They can be valuable in helping direct the student’s attention toward enlightenment. However, if the student mistakenly keeps staring at the finger (dwelling in words and concepts) he/she will never actually see the moon (experience enlightenment).

LESSON #5: IT'S ALL MEANINGLESS ANYWAY (IN A SENSE).

People struggle to find that Source, and to live happy lives by an ever-increasing variety of means as new books are written, new cultures evolve, new technologies are invented, etc. This search, search, search, drives creation and evolution (biological, cultural, even spiritual) onward.

Yet, in a funny way, it's all meaningless, laughable and misguided. It's a little like "pin the tail on the donkey." It's a game of trying to get better and better at reaching the goal, but to work it depends on the player agreeing to be artificially blindfolded. (You see why earlier I called it all a "game.")

With the big bang (in a spiritual and physical sense) God agreed to be blindfolded, to lose himself, to not know where the donkey is, and to head off on a creative search.

It's not exactly done for a fixed purpose. If the game were purposeful then it would be a part of a larger game, but ultimately you reach that level where something is not done for something else. Its meaning is fully intrinsic, which is another way of saying it is meaning-less in the conventional sense.¹⁶⁵

So play the game. Enjoy it. Win or lose with panache. Don't take it too deadly seriously. It has no meaning, but it bears within it the seeds of growth, joy, and freedom.

In such a way does a child wander through a world (as at camp, or in a meadow, or a game with friends, or arriving at a playground, or eating ice cream) that has no meaning, no use, exactly — it just is. In such a way, God is.

¹⁶⁵ For example, I sometimes ask a student, "Why are you here in class?" We progress through their desire to get a degree (why?), to get a good job (why?), to make money (why?), to be able to travel (why?), until we finally reach a point where what is sought (e.g. "happiness") is something he/she wants for itself, not for any further reason. The chain of "purposes" has come to an end.

“I am that I am”¹⁶⁶ — meaningless.

Any more lessons?

Oh yes, we’re just beginning.

You’re kidding. I thought there wouldn’t be that many.

There will be twelve in all. So we’re exactly halfway through.¹⁶⁷ Here goes #6:

LESSON #6: NEVER GIVE A SUCKER AN EVEN BREAK.

Surprised you with that one, didn’t I? But wait (postpone judgment) until we explore an esoteric, rather than exoteric, meaning for that one.

Who, after all, is a “sucker”? A sucker is someone who is easily drawn in, doesn’t question reality as it is presented. In a way, most of us are suckers through most of our life. We take it for granted that reality is just as we find it, just as we seem to be. Instead of saying “There’s a sucker born every minute,” suckers are more made than born as we get acculturated into our belief systems.

How to treat a sucker? Don’t give him an even break. Why? Because then it wakes him up to his suckerhood. There are so many dis-illusioning experiences that a sucker must go

¹⁶⁶ When asked by Moses what He is called, this is God’s reply (Exodus 3:14).

¹⁶⁷ I leave this in as a (rare) example of a mistake (by Hari, by me?) since five lessons completed out of twelve seems not “halfway through.” Maybe (not being quite as located in time-sequential thought) he’s counting as well the lesson that immediately follows, completing our discussion for that day and taking us “halfway through.”

through before he stops being a sucker. Gradually he becomes world-wise — that is, wiser about the nature of his world. He enters into a greater wisdom state — jnana, if not vijnana.¹⁶⁸

This is what karma does. Every time we are suckers — approach life from a place of avidya (ignorance), life bites us on the nipple — ouch! We suffer. We often cause others to suffer. We feel victimy — why is this happening to me? But it invites us, provokes us, ultimately causes us to wake up from our suckerhood and get real. Get with it. Perceive reality as it is, not as we would wish it (or often as we don't wish it...but we are afraid of our wishes...)¹⁶⁹

So the credo of the universe is never give a sucker an even break — torture that sucker awake!

Lessons #7-8: Remembering What You Already Know

(Some days later) Can we go on to lesson #7 now? I think I'm ready for another one. I'm still trying, though, to understand the layout of the universe and I'm not sure that the previous lessons, clever as they are, are really doing it. Is there any way to hone in? I apologize for my arrogance but I'm trying to be honest in this conversation.

¹⁶⁸ Both Sanskrit words can be translated as “wisdom” or “knowledge,” though they have somewhat different meanings in different Hindu traditions.

¹⁶⁹ In other words, sometimes our wishes — that there be a God, and a benevolent reality — are actually signposts leading us onto the truth, but we are afraid of taking these wishes seriously for fear of disappointment.

Yes, I understand. I can handle you being you, taking the gloves off, being real. In fact, I appreciate that, I'm flattered. Go ahead, be yourself. And, yes, on to Lesson #7. If the others have seemed weird, this one will be even weirder:

LESSON #7: ONE PILL MAKES YOU LARGER, AND ONE PILL MAKES YOU SMALL, BUT ONE PILL DOESN'T DO ANYTHING AT ALL.¹⁷⁰

Think of the “pills” as forms of yoga [spiritual paths of liberation]. Some are designed to reduce the ego-self to naught, some to enlarge the self progressively until it identifies with everything in the universe. In essence, this comes to the same thing. To be very, very small (infinitely) and to be very, very large (infinitely) are both ways of encompassing the All, uniting with the All.¹⁷¹

But what do I mean that “one pill doesn't do anything at all”?

Well, truly none of them do. They are not really changing anything, bringing a new state into being that wasn't there to begin with. They're just changes in the form of consciousness with which we receive the world so that we become aware of what already is.¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ This is a paraphrase of lyrics from the song “White Rabbit” by the band Jefferson Airplane, on the 1967 album *Surrealistic Pillow*. Based on Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the iconic late '60's song was widely understood as referring to drugs and their hallucinatory powers. Here, Hari gives it a very different spin. The original lyrics were: *One pill makes you larger/ And one pill makes you small/ And the ones that mother gives you/ Don't do anything at all.*

¹⁷¹ For example, some yogic practices emphasize dis-identifying with one's ego, body, and cravings — becoming very “small,” so to speak, disappearing. Other practices focus on developing compassionate connection with the whole world, or identifying with a Deity who symbolizes the All — thereby becoming very “large.” In a sense, they both lead to the same transcendence of the ego-self.

¹⁷² I understand Hari to be saying that when we transcend the small self we realize it wasn't real to begin with — our connection to the One was always at our core but concealed.

See the three pills together to understand yogic methods more fully — they make you very, very small; very, very big; and leave you absolutely unchanged — all at the same time. That’s mind-blowing, isn’t it?

LESSON #8 (time to get a little more serious here): THE ONLY THING YOU NEED TO LEARN IS WHAT YOU ALREADY KNOW.

You have the answers. You’ve read them. You’ve even experienced them to some degree. There’s nothing new to learn. You just need to absorb at a deeper level, be able to apply and to experience more fully, what you already know. You can’t really learn anything unless you already know it — here Plato was right¹⁷³.

This may not seem like a very significant lesson, but it is. So often in the search for wisdom human beings seek new information — insights, methods, revelations, recounted experiences, evidence, etc. etc. etc. As if something new might come along that will reformulate everything and put you over the top! Surprise, surprise, it doesn’t happen.

Ninety-nine times out of a hundred the key is deepening, working more deeply with, what you are already know. You know it — you just don’t know it.

Think of “to know” as an active verb with a direct object, as in “I kicked the ball” or “I closed the door.”

¹⁷³ In dialogues such as the *Meno* and the *Phaedo*, Plato advanced, through the mouth of Socrates, his doctrine of “recollection” (*anamnesis*). According to this doctrine, our knowledge of abstract forms, such as the mathematical notion of equality, or ethical notions of goodness, beauty, and truth, are not first gained through the bodily senses. Rather, the soul acquired this knowledge prior to birth, but then lost access to it in embodied life. Contact with objects reminiscent of the ideal (e.g. a person exhibiting goodness) causes the soul to “recollect” the pure form. Though it might feel like new learning, we are remembering what is already within us.

This resonates with the mystical notion found in many religious traditions, that the soul, when it entered into the world, fell into a state of ignorance, illusion, forgetfulness, but can recover knowledge of its true nature through spiritual practices.

“I know it.”

There’s nothing passive ultimately about true knowledge. Knowledge is a thing we do, or we don’t really have.

Of course, sometimes to “do knowledge” — to know things actively — we have to be re-minded of them — or given slightly new ways of proceeding which address new aspects of our life and psyche — or be inspired by like-minded others and guides. Here, reading, speaking with others, is very valuable, not so much for new information, but for re-minding ourselves to use it.

Knowledge is a thing we do, or we don’t really have.

Lessons 9-10: The Benevolent Universe

LESSON #9: THE UNIVERSE IS A TOTALLY BENIGN PLACE. TOTALLY.

I know this seems so contrary to your experience. Yet you already know it (as per Lesson #8).

Let me give you an example.

As you gaze up at the stars you seem to see the stars gazing down at you — at least sending their light across millions of trillions of miles to meet your eye. To meet your eye! To interact with you! What a wonderful reciprocation, what a love story.

The thing that seems to ruin the love story is the notion of death, and various forms of impairment, that seem to threaten to break your connection with the universe and take this away from you. It’s as if you were extraneous, contingent, and the stars can and will go on happily without you. You feel like a son who, though ostensibly and occasionally beloved, is

really an orphan, not part of the family, and about to be snuffed or cast out on the street. The scientific world-view has left you all orphans.

Dare you trust this not to be the case? That you are safe, embraced, loved, intrinsic, part of a “forever family” designed for your welfare?¹⁷⁴ It is true.

The scientific world-view has left you all orphans.

Prove it.

This I cannot do. But you can prove it (in a sense) to yourself. Listen to the voice (“Listen, listen, listen to my heart’s song, listen, listen, listen to my heart’s song — I will never forget you, I will never forsake you...”¹⁷⁵) Listen to it in your heart and know that your heart doesn’t lie. Yes, your heart is an organ of knowledge.

(Some days later) Can we go on to another lesson? I know it’s been a while.

That’s okay. I will never forget you, I will never forsake you. Ha ha!

I won’t forget, don’t worry. I await your pleasure and edification on your schedule, as does God. That’s what is so benign about the universe...

LESSON #10: THE UNIVERSE IS A DEVICE FOR LEARNING, NOT FOR REWARD AND PUNISHMENT.

¹⁷⁴ After adopting our children we would reassure them that they were now part of a “forever family.”

¹⁷⁵ This is from a chant written down by Paramahansa Yogananda (author of *Autobiography of a Yogi*), a chant which I heard once decades ago, but which has stayed with me over the years as an ongoing prayer message.

How to explain this? Imagine a kid wandering into a school class for the first time. He sees the other children behaving in an unruly fashion, and the teacher becoming mad and frustrated. Why? The teacher wants to teach. Ideally he cares passionately about the welfare of his charges, and is frustrated he can't cover the material he wanted, for their sake, not his own. He knows it would be so helpful to their future, even their present.

So he sends the worst of the miscreants out of the room. He "condemns" the other kids to sit in silence until they have calmed down. He assigns them extra homework (so little was covered in class that day) and a collective groan goes forth.

Now the new kid who has witnessed all of this focuses on nothing but the "punishments" and sees that as the core of what is going on. "I want to get out of here as soon as possible." (The equivalent is "I want to escape from samsara [the wheel of life, death, rebirth] as quickly as I can; end the cycle of reincarnations; life is just about a bunch of dukkha [suffering]; and the teacher a harsh taskmaster.")

What's missed in this picture? I'll tell you what is missed: the point of the school in its entirety. It is designed to help not hinder, to teach and not to punish. It's just that a certain kind of discipline, a certain set of consequences, some aversive, are needed to keep the school going with such unruly pupils.

As the kids settle down, so does the discipline. It is not used nearly as much in the later grades for it is not needed. The pupils come willing to learn, even eager to learn, and don't need to be reprimanded and kept in line.

But you are seeing a lot of the earlier grades in your life and your culture. Boy, you humans, or most of you, are unruly pupils indeed!

(Next day) Another lesson?

Okay, here goes...

Lessons 11-12: You Cannot Be Alone

LESSON #11: YOU ARE NOT ALONE

I know that sounds like a kind of boring one, rather elementary for an “advanced student” like yourself, but actually it’s a pretty advanced lesson for an elementary student like yourself.

You persist in the belief and experience that you are on your own in the universe. Frankly most people do. This is the source of a good deal of friction, fear, frustration, rage, greed, sexual deviancy, and on and on and on as people reach out desperately and often counter-productively for connection and reassurance.

Yet you are not alone. Not ever. You and each person on earth has helpers galore, spirit-guides, guardian angels (sappy as that sounds). And the existence of God (or whatever you choose to call the oneness of the All) proves that we are so far from being alone that we couldn’t be alone even if we wanted.

In fact, it would all seem a pretty crowded place, except its all One. All-one...Alone. We culminate in the paradox that though you are not alone, You are alone, or all-one.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁶ That is, since we are all part of the One, on the highest You (as the divine One) are alone — there is no other, nothing separate from the Self.

But how can I make this an experiential reality?

Pray more. You will receive answers, not just a dial tone at the other end of the line. Talk with me and take our dialogue seriously — as a dialogue. You keep trying to dismiss it and invalidate it, contending internally that it's all a monologue, and hence you are alone, contrary to what seems. Why such a drive to experience that?

Yes, why?

Well, first it's a cultural prerogative and attitude. Remember, I said you were all orphaned.

Secondly, there's a personal dimension that exaggerates the trajectory (a nice turn of phrase, eh?) Having been left alone when your family died, having felt alone even while they were living, you have learned to be alone and try to shelter yourself from the pain of torn connection and disappointed expectations by holding to that identity of the one who is off by himself.

Only one problem: That can get mighty lonely.

The spiritual perspective on being alone — All One — tends to bring you together with others. Again, you can't be alone — even if you want to, even if you try (and you did a lot when growing up). But notice how your family is still with you. You can't be alone because you're all One.

(Many days later) Can I now ask you for the last of the twelve guides to the universe — or whatever we should call them?

Sure. Again, that's what I'm here for:

LESSON #12 — IN HELPING OTHERS LIES THE KEY TO HELPING YOURSELF.

Again, I know this is a bit of a cliché' but it is often misunderstood, or only dimly and partially understood.

People often take it to mean that helping others will leave you with a good feeling; cement your relationships, and lead others to treat you more kindly; strengthen your self-esteem, etc. True, but that is all psychological and sociological. I'm speaking from a cosmological perspective.

What I'm trying to say is, given that you are all one...intertwined...if you seek your private good you break your connection with the whole, you dis-affirm it, and therefore dis-experience it, and create suffering for the self (and others).

On the other hand, to the extent you affirm it in action you build the grounds for experiencing it in depth. This is the true meaning of karma yoga (the yoga of selfless service) — act as if.¹⁷⁷ Act as if you were the All, thoroughly interconnected with everyone, and increasingly you will experience that. Catch yourself when you wander away from that perspective into fear and loathing. Catch yourself again, and again, and again. This is something you are fairly good at doing, but clearly could do more.

Act as if. It's that simple.

¹⁷⁷ This is a popular slogan in Alcoholics Anonymous and other such fellowships. Even if you are not fully recovered, God-centered, unselfish etc., "act as if" you were such a person and what you pretend (pre-tend, as Hari says elsewhere) will gradually become more real.

And now my story has come to an end. You might pause and ponder it, let it sink in. I have chosen twelve truths as if equivalent to the Twelve Steps¹⁷⁸ — it does have a harmony and finality, doesn't it? Of course, there could equally have been eleven or thirteen — there's nothing magical about the number of principles you use to unfold the whole. It's all just a bunch of angles on the One, viewing one truth in many ways, like a diamond with cut facets that bring out better the light.

Enjoy “seeing the light.”

We are Part of the Mind of God

Taking off from Hari's last image of the cut diamond, the conversations in this section address what in the history of philosophy is called the problem of “the one and the many.” If there a single source of all that is, from whence comes the diversity of the world? What is the relationship between Creator and created, God and human?

Moving from a spiritual to a scientific framework, this relates to our philosophic perplexity concerning the place of mind in a material world. Is sentient consciousness just an accident of evolving matter-energy? Or is the material universe somehow embedded in, or saturated with mind?

In short, who the heck are we and what are we doing here?

¹⁷⁸ As used in Alcoholics Anonymous and other Twelve-Step fellowships.

Physicists have long been searching for a “grand unified theory” which would explain the cascade of particles and forces that have been discovered. In a sense, Hari’s answers in this and the following section are like hints of a *grander* unified theory — presented here not so much in scientific terms, but metaphors that speak of the interpenetration of God and person, science and religion, matter and spirit. Hari images people as players in a game created and refereed by God; as exploratory probes sending data to the mothership; as DVDs, played in sequence but ever-abiding; avatars of the Divine; particles in a field; Adams and Eves wandered off from the garden.

These seem to be many ways of portraying a single truth: amidst all the diversity this is a *uni-verse*, the One Face shining through all its masks.

The Creation Beyond Destruction

Please help me to see and know better my true self, the true nature of the universe [and my place within it].

Imagine someone walking in his or her sleep, stumbling out of bed and wandering toward the window, but unable to struggle awake until the first rays of the morning sun hit their eyes. You are like that person who has stumbled out of bed but still is largely oblivious. Imagine that sleep-walker had a friend trying to whisper things in their ear, guide them by the arm, assist them to gently rouse. Not to startle them awake because that would be upsetting, even potentially dangerous, but to help them gradually and gently wake up. That’s what I’m doing.

And what is the “sun” in this metaphor? The Source of all energy and form, the Creative principle of the universe.

There are two kinds of creativity, one of which is opposed to, and in balance, with destruction, like yin and yang¹⁷⁹, Shiva and Brahma,¹⁸⁰ the new buds of spring and the withered leaves of fall.

However, there is a creative principle that lies behind and incorporates both of these polarities — The Tao, so to speak, that holds within it the harmony and cycling of all the seasons, all the dynamics of relative creation and destruction.

We hold within our body-minds from the time we are born the seeds of relative creation and destruction. What is the growth and development of the child (and adult, for that matter) but a creative unfolding wherein each construction of muscles, ideas, skills, itself lays the groundwork for new possibilities of creation? Mastering the third grade allows you to go on to the creative work of the fourth, and so on without end.

But at the same time there is a principle of relative destruction, seeds of decay and death in our body since birth, or before birth, that gradually bloom and manifest. Cells get old and tired, mechanical parts get worn down from use and, as we get older, more and more the principle of destruction takes on primacy within the body until finally life ends in death.

Then a question arises: Are not relative creation and destruction subsumed within a general principle of Destruction, for the individual, and even for the universe as a whole given the predictions of increasing entropy and heat death?¹⁸¹ Is creation anything more than an accidental and temporary phenomenon?

¹⁷⁹ The two complementary principles of Chinese cosmology, from which all things are said to arise.

¹⁸⁰ The Hindu gods associated with, respectively, destruction and creation.

¹⁸¹ According to the second law of thermodynamics, entropy of an isolated system will increase over time, leading to the loss of organization and useable energy as the system drifts toward equilibrium. This principle leads to a theory

But to see the “sun” [the Source] is to see the opposite — that destruction is just one moment in the game, the dance of Creation: to see that one’s flowering and decaying are a part of the Whole, and we are not forgotten about when our participation in that particular moment is finished.

We’re not “cut” by the team in its endless pursuit of the Super Bowl through younger players. We’re not discarded in the trash heap like some breakfast consumed by Absolute Spirit¹⁸², which discards the remains before going on to Its next meal. Like in those movies where a company commander says “No one is left behind!”

(no individual is sacrificed for the good of the group),

similarly no individual is sacrificed for the good of Universal Creation, or has a merely instrumental and external role.

No one is left behind!

Why, you ask? Well, one way to see it is through the lens of God’s eternal love. Would a mother sacrifice one of her eleven children even if that would provide a little more food for the other ten mouths? And would a mother lose interest in her children and be willing to sacrifice them once they had become adults and moved out of the house? No, assuredly not. Similarly, we can say “God’s love” is eternal and individual. This is the truth in applying personalism to our image of the Divine, rather than just impersonal images like the “sun.”

Another way to see it is that the whole is the sum of its parts, across space and time, all echoing and interwoven. To speak of the whole developing without a part, abandoning a part,

that in the long run the universe is doomed to a “heat death,” to gradually run down until it reaches a state of uniform homogenized stasis.

¹⁸² In Hegel’s *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, “Absolute Spirit” expresses and comes to know itself through the unfolding of nature and history.

is logically self-contradictory. The whole is its parts, and though they seem to bloom and decay in time, who said time was real?

The notion that someone has really died (or been born) is predicated on the idea that time is real, right? — that something can be present one moment, then really gone the next.

But is that true of a DVD? You can watch it in sequence, experience it so, but it isn't gone when the movie is over. Its form is “eternally” there on the DVD, watchable again, or in chapters.

So, too, in a human life. Imagine a human life as a DVD. You watch it in sequence, but at the end it's not destroyed.

The Mother Ship and its Probes (God and Us)

How can humans be separated off in our tiny little finite bodies, and yet also be a part of the One? (What follows is roughly what I heard, written down after the fact in a compressed form. Because it so condensed I have gone farther than usual in supplying explanatory footnotes.)

Imagine yourself as a probe sent down to explore Mars.

Though one could see certain things from a distant photo of Mars, to get to know the planet in depth and detail one would send hundreds or thousands of individual probes to explore particular regions. All information would be transmitted back to the Mother Ship, of which they are an extension, and processed and combined through a Supercomputer, of which they are an extension.

To have an experience of an object it has to exist apart from you, and you from it. In this analogy, imagine that Mars was itself created by the Mother Ship and then explored by probes from the Mother Ship, as a way of creating, expressing and knowing itself.¹⁸³

If a probe lost contact with the Mother Ship it might go its own way, be confused, hyperactive, depressed. (“Why am I here? Who made me? What is my life about? It’s all so meaningless....”) But then when it reconnects to the Mother Ship it receives guidance and rediscovers its meaning and purpose as a part of the Whole, not just apart.¹⁸⁴

In this probe analogy, does the individual *jiva*¹⁸⁵ live on after death?

Yes. Imagine that in the probe is software that is constantly developing and improving itself in response to experience and choice. And imagine it keeps “backing up” that software so there are multiple copies in case the first is destroyed. When the hardware — the probe — is destroyed by a meteor, or simply gets old and falls apart, the software is able to build itself a new vehicle, just as a developing sea-creature must keep secreting new, larger shells while discarding the old.

This new entity doesn’t have access to, doesn’t open, all the old memory files which would clutter up the new computer. It needs memory space for new experience.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸³ In other words, the universe that God is exploring through probes (individuals with their particular consciousness), is not itself ultimately separate from God — yet needs to be experienced as if “apart” in order to be apprehended. Ultimately God (the Mother Ship), individuals (the probes), and the world perceived, are all a part of the One exploring itself.

¹⁸⁴ Hence, our sense of confusion, even despair, when we lose our sense of connection to the Divine— and then the joy of spiritual reconnection.

¹⁸⁵ The Hindu name for that individualized soul that reincarnates through multiple lives.

¹⁸⁶ I understood this to be a metaphorical explanation of how the soul can reincarnate (software transfer) and yet not retain access to conscious memory of its former lives.

However, none of this is lost. It is all transmitted up and stored in the hard drive of the Mother Ship. In these days when photography, recording, data storage, preserves so much independent of space and time (you can listen to Billie Holiday singing a song in 1931 in Memphis¹⁸⁷) is it that hard to understand that all is preserved, all used, in the Supercomputer?¹⁸⁸

God Doesn't Care (The Impartial Referee)

How to put together the idea of the vast impersonality of God — that substratum of all things and the creative/destructive energy from which the universe unfolds — along with God as a loving power personal to me, who helps, and communicates inspiration?

Here's the tiny insight that you don't have, the tiny missing piece of the puzzle which puts it all together:

God doesn't care.

What in the world do you mean? That seems like the opposite of what I was seeking!

Yes, but you are taking it the wrong way, which is what I expected. God doesn't care in the following sense: You care about the New York Yankees, therefore you want them to win, and

¹⁸⁷ This is not literally true (I checked) — in 1931 she was making her singing debut in New York — but an example of the principle at play.

¹⁸⁸ That is, our individual life-experience, though obliterated on the personal level, is eternally retained in the Divine Awareness.

try to intercede magically to make what you want happen. God doesn't. He doesn't root for one side versus the other, or intercede to make his will happen. He creates a level playing field with rules, and lets the game proceed. God is like the field and the refs. He facilitates the game but doesn't have a stake in the outcome of the game.

None?

None.

Jews do die, or don't die in the Holocaust? God has no stake? (Isn't that evident, since the Jews did die?!)

If you have a stake in the outcome of the game you can't have a level playing field and an impartial referee, and therefore the game is rigged.

It's a terrible game then.

Valid point. But see how the discussion has shifted, not to God behaving like a bad guy but whether or not it is a bad game that he has supported.

Why is it a bad game?

The extent of the suffering.

Was the Super Bowl a bad game, though many suffered excruciating disappointment? No, it was a good game, and even the losers got up and went home and learned something. Thus it is in human history. You can't not learn — that's part of the game.

Okay, well, if God doesn't care, then why do I feel he cares for me?

He doesn't — or let me put it this way, he doesn't care if you avail yourself of that care. But it is one of the rules of the game to have that care available.

Look at parenting. If your daughter is having a fit you can help her to calm down, but you have to be impartial as to whether she accepts that help, or else it becomes controlling.

God cares, but doesn't care. That allows his parts free autonomy, free play. How many times do you tell your kids, "It's up to you"?

But why is this game beneficent? And how does this all reconcile with the vastness of God's universe?

It is all glorious, playful, creative — consciousness creating itself. Look at human history.

How wonderful, how endlessly fascinating. Don't you find it so? Admit it.

1. A creative principle underlies the universe.

2. That which makes it creative is the ability of the One to surface in myriad manifestations.

3. The manifestations must be meaningfully different from, apparently separate from, the One to best manifest creativity. (The issue arises of freedom, as a metaphysical, more than a moral, construct.)

4. Hence, the arising of seemingly independent centers of form and consciousness.

5. Nothing arises from the creative principle except that which was implicitly present within. Hence, consciousness and form are implicitly present in the One (though It has no fixed form and fixed consciousness).

6. The creative manifestations will take joy in their unfolding, but also have a component of suffering due to the loss of apparent connection with the One.

7. The attempt to bridge that gap, to rediscover primordial connection, can surface as love, spiritual practices, and other less healthy forms of bonding, controlling, identifying with Godlike powers.

8. The unfolding nature of creation establishes a universe, a playing field of matter, energy, and experience, a level playing field with rules and organizing principles.

9. To allow that field to manifest and the games to be played, God doesn't care who wins or what the outcome is. God is the groundskeeper, and referee, but is not rooting for one player

or tampering with the game. God allows the separate manifestations to manifest without such interference which would be destructive to the integrity of the game.

10. This is called “free will” (and the respect for that), and is responsible for the many horrors that unfold on the playing field — and yet the game is good.

The Bottomless Mind of God

I had an image that struck me powerfully... That the one moon is reflected in many bodies of water [lakes, puddles by the side of the road, etc.] yet stays one. It seems like a metaphor for the source of our consciousness and being.

Look deeper and deeper and deeper into the lake. You will find there’s no bottom. And that will blow “your mind.” How can this mind be “yours” if there’s no bottom, no container, and therefore no separation, no individuality?

That’s why death cannot be real. There’s nobody there to die.

Yes, the particular container falls away.

Ultimately, consciousness is not containable. It comes from a much greater source, like a river fed from the skies and ground waters.

<p><i>Death cannot be real. There’s nobody there to die.</i></p>

What do you mean, “there’s no bottom”?

*Consciousness is a bottomless pit. It is an openness, a space of receptivity. As the Tao te Ching says, it is from the openness that everything arises.*¹⁸⁹

This is very different than the modern scientific world-view that reverses the relation, saying first there is matter, and secondarily, contingently, consciousness arises.

Where did that matter come from? According to contemporary physics there was no space or time [before the big bang] — so where was the “space” from which it all came? Almost by process of elimination it would have to be consciousness. There was nothing else around!

So consciousness is emptiness... but from whence comes its creativity, the “ideas” in the mind of God? How does form come from the formless, to put it in a Buddhist sense?

It doesn't. That's not quite the right way of putting it. The formless creates the possibility for form to arise, as a space creates the possibility of it being filled. But that is not the source of the actuality.

Then what is?

You said it before — the mind of God. At least that's one way of putting it.

Now I'm confused. Or you're confused. One of us is.

¹⁸⁹ *Tao te Ching*, #11.

That's just it — “One of us” is never confused — if there is just one of us. If there are two of us, and more, the possibility of confusion remains. But let me explain my terminology more clearly.

An aspect of consciousness, the key element that makes it consciousness, is an openness, a bottomless receptivity. Open your eyes and become conscious of the world around you. Almost any content, or a vast range of content, can appear within that field. Consciousness is the open field itself that then can become consciousness-of [something].

However, as psychologists and phenomenologists are discovering, the subject and its objects are not finally independent. Within consciousness are forces and categories which shape what you are capable of apprehending — “what is” from your point of view.

The “mind of God” is like that, but even more so. It shapes “what is,” but in a more universal sense. Everything pops up as an idea in the mind of God — galaxies, black holes, the universe.

Can meditation, mantra, chanting, help me to experience this pure consciousness, this transpersonal consciousness that yet is within me?

Yes, oh most definitely yes, or else “yoga” would be a hoax¹⁹⁰. You have defined quite precisely the goal and outcome of most yogic methods. But:

1) It helps to have clear intent in this direction.

¹⁹⁰ Here “yoga” is being used in the broad (Hindu) sense of referring to any spiritual discipline designed to enable experience of union with the One.

2) It also helps to have a teacher or teachers directing you. In your case that would involve me, and the authors you are reading, and your own inner sense for how to proceed. You are not as devoid of teachers as you think, but you could have more of a spirit of reverence and humility before your teachers — that is, take them more seriously. This is a helpful attitude.

3) A third help is an expectation of positive results.

4) A fourth help is a seriousness of purpose and perseverance — let nothing enter your life to block you.

5) A fifth and last help is a lightness, a joy, an acceptance of imperfection, that allows you to lighten up and appreciate the journey — not just be goal-oriented. Flying home is half the fun.

Practice these and your yoga will bear fruit.

Avatar World: Befriending and Expressing the Divine

Hari, it's been so long since we talked. I've been absorbed with my work and seemed to lose interest in and time for spiritual matters. How to get back on track? How to fan that glowing ember back into flame? Is there a particular place I might pour my spiritual energies, a particular *sadhana* (spiritual method) to get me going again?

Your image is a good one. The ember is always there and glowing no matter how faintly. But fanning it takes work, work that might at times seem silly or pointless (imagine a grown man waving his arms like that!).

In a funny way what sadhana you choose — mantra, breathing, speaking with me, prayer, reading, etc. — matters much less than the intent behind it, the whole-hearted (or at least half-hearted, but half a heart is better than none) attempt to reach out to God. When you reach out to an old friend the key issue is not the words you use or the means of transmission (note, phone call, suggested lunch) but the expressed desire to be together and the sincerity of that effort.

Look at it as getting back together with an old friend who you've been regrettably out of touch with — not out of guilt and a sense of the “shoulds,” but as a “want,” as a “miss you and want to be back in touch, share my life with you, laugh together, have good counsel, warmth and understanding.”

Yes, God as a friend is a good way to supplement, personalize, the images you are working with now. And having me as a friend, knowing that I am an aspect of God, an “avatar” in a sense, may make that easier.

Avatar? That's a new and different way of thinking of you.

Well, notice that I qualified it with “in a sense.” The name Hari can be the name of an avatar, so it's not entirely a foreign concept.¹⁹¹ What is an avatar, after all, but an emissary from God,

¹⁹¹ An *avatar*, in the Hindu tradition is a divine incarnation, the descent of God into the world in embodied form. Unlike the Christian tradition which refers to only one divine *avatar*, Jesus Christ, the Hindu God Vishnu is

an aspect of God, God expressing Him/Herself in a human form, just as God can express self in a flower-form or a sun-form, or any form. In an avatar the spark shines through incredibly keenly, more keenly perhaps than in an ordinary human being. But finally it is a matter of degree (of purity, transparency), not one of ontology.

You are an avatar too, we all are, yet some know it more than others and hence express it more clearly than others. But this is a world, a planet, of avatars. Avatar-World could be a name for Earth.

Try seeing everyone who approaches you as an avatar — your children like the child Krishna for example¹⁹², or your wife as Divine Mother. Wow, it really enlivens things to walk among the Gods!

In your Sparks of the Divine¹⁹³ you were intent on discovering the divine in the

Try seeing everyone who approaches you as an avatar.

things of the natural world, but God is there in the human world as well. In yourself — your intelligence, humor, spirit of service, love, creativity — it's all sparks of the divine in your (imperfect) avatar-self.

When you say “Not my will but Thine be done, Oh Lord” what you are really saying is “Let my Avatar-nature shine forth without impediment. Clean the glass of the ego that maximal light may shine through.”

Physics and the Garden of Eden

associated with 10 *avatars* (including Krishna and Rama) or 26 in another version. Hari is an epithet given to Vishnu, and, in particular, his *avatar*, Krishna.

¹⁹² There are many tales of Krishna as a playful and mischievous child.

¹⁹³ My previous book.

Can you tell me anything about modern physics and soul-consciousness?

Yes, I could tell you quite a lot depending on how long you want to listen, and how large you want to make your mind. Here goes:

The secret is not the individual atom, but the field. Understand the atom as an expression of field and you understand all.

Begin with the field. Ask yourself how does the single unified field create a universe? First it has to differentiate within itself — create regions of greater and lesser density.¹⁹⁴ Then those regions can coalesce into an identity that is distinctive enough, bounded enough in its form and content, that it can be experienced as “individual.” Finally (and it is only at this point), illusion enters through the notion that the individual truly is disconnected [from the whole] — that the fundamental unity, “oneness,” is that of the individual, and the field-relations are secondary in origin and importance.

This would be a mistake in physics, as we are progressively realizing through the theory of relativity, quantum mechanics, and other developments.¹⁹⁵ It is equally a mistake in human consciousness, as Einstein says.¹⁹⁶ We identify ourselves so wholly with the individual that we fight one another, fear one another, and are incredibly fearful of death and anything

¹⁹⁴ According to modern big-bang cosmology, minute regional differences in the initial exploding fireball, combined with subsequent gravitational pulls, lead over time into the coalescence of high-density regions such as galaxies, galaxy clusters, and superclusters.

¹⁹⁵ Einsteinian general relativity is a field theory, relating a unitary space-time field to one of mass-energy distributed throughout the universe. Quantum mechanics, particularly used to understand subatomic processes, is very different from relativity theory, but includes notions of distributed wave functions and non-local effects that make it impossible to see the universe as constituted out of simple individual entities.

¹⁹⁶ As referred to elsewhere in this book, Einstein wrote “A human being is a part of the whole, called by us “Universe,” a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest — a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole nature in its beauty.” (From a 1950 letter, as quoted in the New York Times, March 29, 1972)

else that threatens to obliterate our individual consciousness and its parochial interests. Oh, what a mistake, what a “sin,” a mark of ignorance!

You can think of that as the fall from the garden of Eden. Human beings are a “naked” part of a unified field. Then there is a fall into separation — the putting on of clothing, the hiding from God (and therefore from Self).¹⁹⁷ This, more than the original act, creates the separation. But it is linked to eating from the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” — an act of moral separation.¹⁹⁸

However, this “sin” is freely chosen. God self-differentiates into regions, and then individuals. God individualizes to make something happen. God wants it to be.¹⁹⁹ But with this, a whole series of causal necessities now come into play and structure the field (the game).

It’s like playing Monopoly — once the game is entered into it seems to unfold with much causal necessity. But there was a “wanting to play” that triggered it all, and the residue of freedom remains in the choices of the players.

Matter and Spirit: Pushing Off and Interpenetrating

Why is there a world of matter? What is it?

Think about a bicycle. It needs something to push off of — not to be attached to, but to push off of. That scene [of a flying bike] in ET is a fantasy, impossible, because a bike moves by pushing off.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁷ In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve are portrayed as hiding from God in fear.

¹⁹⁸ Separation between moral categories of “good” and “evil,” and separation from the original innocence of being.

¹⁹⁹ That is, the “fall from grace” portrayed in the Bible is not simply a flaw in the cosmic plan, but part of that plan as God differentiates, individualizes, makes a “world.”

Spirit pushes off of the solidity, the resistance, embodied in matter.

But then what is spirit? Have you not stressed that spirit and matter are ultimately from the same source? Your formulation now sounds kind of dualistic.

Yes, it does, doesn't it? But it isn't. (When you first walk through a door [into a new room] what you see isn't very clear — not exactly put together by a synthetic consciousness. You're apt to have disconnected impressions before you understand everything in its proper scope and depth and dimension. So too in our conversation. Things take on partial identity depending on the "truth" I am unveiling at that moment.)

I say that spirit "pushes off" of matter in the following sense: They are not identical, but they are fundamentally of the same stuff. Isn't that true of a bicycle and the pavement, of any two things that interact, but maintain their independence as well? That's what the universe is about — unity and diversity doing their dance.

Is consciousness a thing in the universe like matter, but different — or the place prior to and within which the universe unfolds? These seem like two conflicting paradigms.

Yes. "Seem" is the operative word.²⁰¹ Let me explain, as usual, with a metaphor:

²⁰⁰ Hari refers to an iconic scene from the Steven Spielberg movie, *ET*, of boys flying a bicycle through the sky.

²⁰¹ That is, though these two modes of understanding *seem* to conflict, they reveal different sides of a multidimensional truth.

Say you are looking at something while wearing glasses. Are not the glasses at one and the same time a thing within the material world, and also that through which you regard the material world?

Say you are a forgetful person and forget you are wearing your glasses. You look around for them and suddenly glimpse them on your face in the mirror. If you are sufficiently near-sighted you will only see them because you are wearing your glasses! But you still have to find them as if they were a thing like any other in the material world.

Similarly, there is a certain sense in which mind, consciousness in human form, can be found within the world, and analyzed as to its objective properties. At the same time, the source of consciousness is non-material.

The source of consciousness is even (and this is hard to understand, since it's the mind trying to understand) — non-mental.

I don't know what that means. How can consciousness be non-mental? What is the mind if not a permutation of consciousness? And earlier you were using the language of "spirit" — how does that fit in?

All good questions, and I will answer them all. Let's go back to the glasses metaphor. The glasses modulate a power of consciousness — sight — but is not the source of it. Take the glasses off a living human being and they just sit on the countertop devoid of the power of sight. Right? Similarly, the bodily eye is not the ultimate source of sight, but the modulation through which consciousness sees.

Much the same can be said of “mind.” Think of it as something you can take off and put on like a pair of glasses. Don’t we sometimes say that people see the world “through rose-colored glasses”? We’re referring to a particular mental perspective that colors the “look,” the experience, of the world. That might be said of the human mind as a whole. It is something that Spirit puts on in order to “see” the world in certain ways — particularly in its modes of division and alienation (in the Hegelian sense).²⁰²

The human mind is something that Spirit puts on in order to “see” the world in certain ways.

When I here use the word “mind,” I am referring to the kind of thing that psychologists study, with definite properties (e.g. how many items can be caught within one’s short-term memory?). When I use the term “Spirit” I mean something much more originary, more expansive than that. As such it is harder to capture and characterize in the language used to describe the material world.

At the same time it would be deceptive to think of Spirit as something entirely outside of, other than, the material world. Its presence saturates the material world — all of it.

Nothing in the material world can be characterized except insofar as it has presence to Spirit and within Spirit — just like a fish cannot be characterized except insofar as it is made of water and swims through water. The water is something that the fish pushes off of (and vice-versa), something like the fish with which it interacts — and also a medium that transcends the fish, and the very possibility of fishiness.²⁰³

²⁰² In his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, philosopher G.W.F. Hegel refers to an “alienation” between consciousness and its objects, making aspects of world seem “other” and separate from self. Hari is suggesting that the “mind” is an instrument (like a pair of glasses) which enables Spirit to see the world in that way, as constituted largely out of matter, divided up into separate entities, and separated off from Itself.

²⁰³ In this metaphor, as I understand it, the “fish” are material beings, which swim in and are constituted from the greater “waters” of Spirit.

Let me give one more analogy, bizarre as it may seem. Imagine a child licking an ice cream cone. As it gets to the bottom it not only licks the cone but bites out the very bottom and sucks the ice cream through. So does Spirit do with matter. It buys it (creates it), eats it (enjoys it), plays with it (licking, biting). It delights in it. Such is lila (the divine play of the world).

Would the child be happier without his or her ice cream? No. Would Spirit be happier without matter? No.

There is this pushing off dimension — the child’s tongue pushes off of, and dissolves, matter. And there also is this interpenetration. The ice cream ends up composing the child (and in my metaphor the ice cream was created by, and out of, the child). So the child and the ice cream are not one, but also not two. Or another way to put this is that they are both one and two. Both and neither, the mystical paradox.²⁰⁴

Rather than just using metaphors, can you give me a concrete example from life?

Sure, gaze around you at this very moment. You see in front of you the computer and keyboard with which you are writing. That has to be apart from you for you to be able to use it. The words you produce on the computer screen have to have an independent reality from your mind. That way you and others can read it — it’s “out there.”

In this way Spirit both penetrates into the material world — your thoughts stream onto the computer-screen — and pushes off the material world — literally your fingers are pushing off the keys to push the thoughts out of you.

²⁰⁴ In this metaphor, as I understand it, Spirit creates and enjoys matter, but in doing so both “pushes off” of matter, and enfolds it within as experience and Self-expression, just as a child pushes off an ice cream with her tongue, but does so as a way to eat the ice cream.

Take away the material world (the computer, keyboard, printer, book, and the eyes of other readers) and Spirit loses its ability to play, to express, to have and shape a world.

It matters to have matter.

Time and Eternity: The Evolving Universe

In this final section of the book we see an increasing change of tone. I address some very philosophical questions to Hari: What is time, and is it real? Who am I within the big picture? Is consciousness, in the individual, and universe, really progressing and expanding? Is the theory of evolution compatible with spiritual truths? More generally, are the scientific and religious world-views opposed, or ultimately reconcilable? This last may be the single most important question defining our age, caught as it is between scientific materialism, religious dogmatism, secular humanism, and mystical yearnings for wholeness.

Hari matches my change of tone, replying with more lengthy and detailed answers than in earlier pieces focused on the personal. The hesitant reader may choose to skip these final conversations. I hope not. As a professional *philosopher* (the word originally meant “lover of wisdom”) I find these some of the richest dialogues of the book. They clarify the world-view in which all that Hari has presented is embedded.

We learn that time is not ultimately real; that the individual’s progress is the universal mind unfolding, but also our own way of encountering the eternal; that our individual journeys are progressive; that this progress is crucial to the evolution of the universe; that science and

religion tell that story from complementary perspectives; that ultimately it is all “God godding,” a process of delightful unfolding...which ultimately leaves all unchanged.

The Big Birth

Who am I? What is all this around me?

(What I heard, written down after the fact in a compressed form.)

1. You have forgotten your true identity, like Superman who has become identified with Clark Kent and forgets his amazing powers. You are all in a state of amnesia (or most). You come from something like the planet Krypton, and you are on earth to learn, discover, find yourself anew.

2. The body is like a space suit you put on to be able to exist, proceed, survive, and function well in this material world. You have to put on material form, but you also will take it off at a certain point.

3. Each person is a universe. You are the big bang, with a universe surrounding you, exploding forth, until your time of death.

How do all these “personal universes” relate to “the universe”?

It's as if the eye of God is looking through all these tiny peepholes. The vision [of each being by itself is limited and distorted. But the eye of God uses all the I's. Or you could see it as the I [that is God] uses all the eyes. Aye aye?

So when you ask "Who am I?" much depends on what you refer to. The little pinhole (the personal body-mind) through which God is looking, or the Eye (I) behind the pinhole?

The eye of God is looking through all these tiny peepholes — all the "I's."

But what of all the billions of years when there was no life or consciousness in the universe?

That depends on seeing time sequentially, as moving forward from a point in the past. But if all time is there in the Timeless then you can easily imagine moving in the reverse direction — e.g. instead of a carpenter building a table from scrap, un-building it.

In this case the successive phases of the universe unfold in a different direction. We go from ultimate consciousness, back to elements, molecules, atoms, the quark-sea. It's a little like someone flipping through a photo album all the way back to the time they were a gleam in their mother's eye — but with the added ingredient that this flipping back actually creates, realizes, the past. They make their own preconditions!

I don't understand how that can happen.

I know.

Let me give you another analogy. A bird is hopping around looking for a worm it wants to bring back for its baby chick. The baby chick may never know, understand, all the struggle to which that mother is going to bring it more fully into existence. Of course this also involves destroying other life.

We have already determined that God can split up — right? — as into different people, different “I’s” (eyes). Well, in this example God has split up into mother and child and worm. God destroys part of himself, to feed part of himself, to bring himself into fruition as the mature God.

Imagine, again, this is all happening at once, though in your human world God couldn’t be there feeding himself.

Similarly, just to make things more explicit, after, with, and through the big bang, God feeds himself — quarks, neutrons, electrons, protons, etc., and helps himself grow from a primitive baby eating primitive food, to a more and more sophisticated and complex being.

What happens when God grows up to become God?

Time to have another baby.

Why?

Because it’s fun — lila [divine play]. Why does anyone do anything? Why does anyone, in particular, have a child? It’s an imperative to create. Creation is divine bliss (though of course

many choose to create in other ways than having babies). God is the mother and the child. God births him/herself.

Perhaps the big bang should be renamed the Big Birth.

Ocean Waves: Time and Eternity

Can you explain to me something about eternity? Does it exist? Can we apprehend it? Do we dwell in it? Go ahead, blow my mind because I don't think the mind can grasp it.

You are right that the mind can't grasp it, but at least the mind can grasp that it cannot grasp it. The mind does sometimes know enough to shut itself off and give the rest of you a chance to express and understand.

Now, let me explain.

Imagine that you were walking into a pool hall. You take off your hat, light a cigarette, whatever. You get used to the ambience — in fact you enter into it, become part of it.

That pool hall is a little like time. It's a certain kind of place, locale, so to speak, with its own ambience. To enter into it is like playing a game with its own rules, boundaries, clock, way of playing — like pool. So to enter that pool room is also a little like being a pool ball, constrained on its table top.

Do you have any existence outside the pool table, the pool hall? Can you enter and leave? Yes, definitely yes, or the whole rest of the conversation we've been having would be nonsense.

What does it mean to have existence outside of the pool hall — outside of time?

Again, I am constrained to use metaphors to stretch the mind, since the mind and its language exist within time, and have a hard time (somewhat impossible) conceiving that which is not. But here goes.

Imagine you are a wave in the ocean. You're traveling along at a good clip. You have a temporal as well as a spatial nature — in fact that defines who you are and your experience. But finally you crest, and fall, and rejoin the ocean.

The ocean is not going anywhere. It's not rising and falling, decaying, like the wave. It's not traveling from shore to shore — it simply is from shore to shore. Waves arise in it, but it is not like a wave.

Similarly, time arises in eternity, like a wave does in the ocean. But time is not the same as the [entirety of the] ocean.

*Time arises in
eternity like a wave
does in the ocean*

Can I experience that?

Sure, but not when identified with the finite self. Your mantras — “Tat tvam asi,”

“hamsa”²⁰⁵ — it’s all the transition from self to All, and hence from time to Eternity.

Try to catch a whiff of it in your meditation, like the scent of a fine wine or a distant garden. With time, you will come to better know eternity (joke!).

Perceiving Perfection: The Is-ness behind the Business

Dear Hari, I’ve been reading about physics, about how all of time is present throughout the universe since everything that has happened or will happen is part of the “now” from some moving reference point at some distant place.²⁰⁶

Does this tell me something about God...that God has all of time in “his/her” mind? How, then is the subjective experience of flowing time, and the structure of “becoming,” also created in the mind of God?

And how to understand the spiritual contention that “all is perfect”? — a counterintuitive assertion when measured against our experience, so individual, limited, and often painful and fractured.

Wow, you are stretching your mind — and mine in a way. You are not asking easy questions, even when answering from the spiritual realm (yes, there are easier and harder questions in this dimension too). But let me try to explain using the language and frameworks you have offered me.

²⁰⁵ These are two Sanskrit mantras I use, both roughly sharing the meaning that “I am That” — the self and the Divine are, in truth, one.

²⁰⁶ This refers to Einstein’s well-supported theory of special relativity that shows that time, and what is considered “now,” is a relative concept dependent upon one’s frame of reference.

Consider the universe as if it were a giant block of ice, everything frozen in place. Gaze into it and you see everything captured like bugs in amber.

There is a way in which this is like God's view of all things, or even God's "Being" — seeing and being All at once, the Totality, the One.

However, it's a bit boring isn't it, if that was all there was to the universe? How often can a child look at a bug trapped in amber before it wants a more active, stimulating toy? Hence it's time for time.

And what is time? Well, obviously it is the principle of movement and change. It unfreezes the ice of the universe to become as water, flowing, changing. When physicists say this is not to be found within their equations (which are time-invariant),²⁰⁷ they have risen in certain ways to the Mind of God, and can see things as one unbroken whole. They can gaze at time from without time — they have glimpsed the Mind Eternal.

So too the mystic who through meditation proclaims that all is One, Unchanging Brahman²⁰⁸ — he or she too has glimpsed the Mind Eternal, the Unchanging One, the whole block of ice in which everything is encased and interconnected.

From this perspective the world of change and becoming is "maya" (illusion) — unreal. So, too, says the physicist who cannot find "becoming" in his or her equations any more than can the mystic. Nonetheless, maya is of our experience, the very texture and fabric of our world and so must be accounted for.

²⁰⁷ Many, though not all equations, in physics describing changes in events have the curious property of "time-reversal invariance": that is, they work equally well in both directions, rendering unresolved which should be considered past or future, cause or effect, in the sequence described.

²⁰⁸ Sanskrit/Hindu word for the divine One from which all diversity emerges.

Here's where you begin to get your answer about "perfection" — the perfection of the universe and of all things in it. To say that something is "perfect" is, in a sense, to say that it could not be other than as it is.

At first blush that seems clearly wrong. The word "perfect," like any other word in the English language, takes on meaning by contrast, in this case with the "imperfect." "Be ye therefore perfect as thy Father in Heaven is perfect,"²⁰⁹ seems to imply that there is a choice that one can be otherwise, and in fact, in most cases one is otherwise — human beings are devastatingly imperfect.

But from the mystic point of view "perfection" is not an ordinary word any more than is "Tao" or "Brahman." It is a word/not-word, that is, a word that has to function as a designator independent of the texture of contrast and disunity that usually makes up language.

To say the universe, and anything within it, is "perfect," is to say that it could not be otherwise than it is. It is radiating "isness," dharma, its place within the whole, within the divine plan.

Is it "perfect" when the leaves are so pretty in the fall, and then "imperfect" when they fall off and rot in the winter? Hardly. Without that shedding and rotting, no tree, no fall. So to see the "perfection" of anything you have to see it not by itself but in its connection to the totality, just as to see the

"isness" of the universe you have to look not at a

To see the "perfection" of any thing you have to see it not by itself, but in its connection to the totality.

single slice of space-time but at the whole loaf.

²⁰⁹ *New Testament, Matthew 5:48*

Now, I've wheedled out, you might say, because clearly there is something about the term "perfection" that goes beyond asserting "isness," and tells us that there is something wonderful, beautiful, to be affirmed about it all.

Yes, exactly, I'm in agreement, but that aspect of it must be experienced, not logically arrived at. You can scientifically explain the existence and parameters of the flowering plant but not its beauty, not the wonder it evokes. This aspect of "perfection" has to be felt, and part of using that term (with its relations to ordinary usage — like that was the "perfect" take of a song at the recording studio after ten imperfect tries) is to evoke and represent that feeling-state. It works better, for example, than to say that everything is "blecch."

However, to get back to becoming, maya, insofar as we dwell in this manner of experiencing, everything seems imperfect — incomplete, transitory, fragmentary, at war with elements of its environment and itself. You cannot apprehend things as "perfect" within maya. To apprehend perfection demands a shift of consciousness to that which is Godlike.

There. Did that help, or make things worse?

Good question. I don't know. But let me pose a follow-up question. You still haven't said how and why "maya" emerges — neither the scientist nor the mystic seems to have a fully successful answer.

No "perfect" answer, huh? That's because the answers tend to be derived from, or at least expressed in, a "mayan" language, and therefore seem not to "work" or "make sense" according to our ordinary logic. But again let me try to make some sense of it.

Let's go back to that child. Say his room is arrayed with toys just sitting there. After he's finished cleaning up the toys will go back to being in the same position. However, in the interim he will play, swoop them about, imagine them as coming fully to life, although of course their "life" and "actions" are purely his own. He creates the characters, imagines their imaginings, speaks forth their words in various chosen accents, creates heroes and villains, story-lines and the like, and enjoys himself thoroughly "passing the time."

Now imagine that this game does not merely take place in time but actually creates time!

Imagine if that child were not playing. All the toys not playing. The child just sitting there unmoving. The universe, so to speak, would come to a stop. BORING!

It is more "perfect" to have the game, even though it introduces "imperfections" (heroes and villains, imaginary plane crashes, etc.) So to really see the perfection of it all is to see the way all the imperfection perfects the cosmic plan and is wonder-ful (not necessarily to see that in every possible way and detail, but generally, in a way that could encompass all details, just as a physicist is never fully applying her equations, but knows that in theory she could bring all things within them).

But to go back to your ice and water explanation, how is it that once the child starts to play, there still remains one unchanging reality behind the change — Is-ness behind all the business?

Well, here the metaphor begins to break down, or else we have to supplement it in a crucial way.

Take the mother's perspective. She walks into the room and declares, "This is all a mess! I want you to clean up at once — we have guests coming over." She comes back in five minutes later and thanks to her cooperative child (of course, Mother and Child are one, so the will of the one is faultlessly enacted by the "other") the room is just as it was. It is as if none of it has ever changed. No holes have been punched in the walls, no toys destroyed, or actually changed in character — all the play was, after all, play, not ultimately real, and so has changed nothing.

So, too, with time relative to Being. All this change has fundamentally changed nothing.

Ah so, thank you.

You're welcome.

Buddhas and Bicycles: The Universe Awakens

I read Hegel, and I see the notion of spirit/consciousness there "from the beginning," unfolding itself in time, progressing in manifestations that grow in depth, complexity, autonomy, self-expression — as if God is "goddling" throughout nature and history, on the way to some kind of fullness of expression.²¹⁰

But is this just a dream of progress, of reason's power, and humanity's rulership? Is this stuff true or not about the universe?

²¹⁰ This progression is traced out conceptually and historically (if idiosyncratically) in G. W. F. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

It is in the nature of consciousness to be progressive. Look at the development of awareness in the young baby over a long period of time, and the development of “higher” and “higher” creatures in evolution, until you finally have ones that are conscious, and self-conscious, and capable of self-determination.

It is in the nature of consciousness not merely to have an object (which is static, structural), but to play with the object and the conditions of its existence as a way to express itself and progress beyond itself as currently constituted. That happens on so many levels — think of an artist, an athlete, always experimenting, practicing, learning, such that their skills e-volve — roll out, expand — rather than simply re-volve. The universe is doing that in some very interesting ways.

Can you say more?

Sure. I’m usually willing to do so when nicely asked.

Let’s start by imagining a ball sitting in an empty room. Nothing is happening, but the potential is there for action. By virtue of the ball being a sphere — a circle in all directions — it can move in all directions. The slightest force might get it rolling. Once it’s rolling its actions may elicit reactions. That is, it might roll at an angle toward a wall, bounce off at a complementary angle...then it’s heading in an entirely new direction.

If we neglect, for the moment, the forces of friction that would bring it to a halt, those tiny ingredients — a thing (ball) and a force (a little push) will set a whole mini-universe into being which will never stop. The ball will go rolling forever with ever new angles and impacts,

which also might gradually wear down the wall (let's reintroduce friction), opening up new, expanding horizons for the ball to explore. Okay, it's not an incredibly exciting universe — but a universe nonetheless.

Now, let's make it more exciting. God did. Add the panoply of forces that operate within our universe, give it a kick with the “big bang,” and step back and watch. It turns out very interesting things will happen, including this — that you will be here writing down this dialogue. Yes, I call it a dialogue, and not a monologue — isn't that what it feels like, a more accurate designation — .so “I” must be here too.

That's how the more interesting human games work too: Set up the initial conditions — a board, rules, player pieces, some dice — then roll them, set everything in motion, and in really good games an interesting, and unpredictable, and rich, and challenging, and sometimes educational game will unfold that also will be fun to play.

I understand that characterization of the world — the Hindus call it *lila* (divine play) — but I have two problems with the account. First of all, I didn't hear the purposiveness and progress [embodied in the universe] — games don't necessarily lead anywhere ever richer and more complex. Secondly, this “game” is filled with suffering — we seem not so much the player enjoying it, as we are pieces within the game that might have to “go to jail” (Monopoly), or even get sick and die, feel frustrated, incomplete, and then be discarded. It's not so fun a game when you're in that position.

Ah, but you are not unless you choose to be. Let's switch games in this analogy and I will show you how you can either be a manipulated piece or the player.

Imagine you're a volleyball player. You are given one position on the playing field. The coach gives you your orders. He or she may even pull you and substitute another player. Your team may win or lose. You may play well or not. There is so much you can't control. You might end up like feeling a victim of your (volleyball) life, abused, manipulated, like a chess piece without autonomy.

However, you need not. As a player you have an opportunity to see things from the perspective of the whole. You are participating in a game which is self-validating. That is, it is (or has the potential to be) fun for its participants — challenging, exciting, enjoyable. It also is educational in the broad sense: You are building skills, building muscles, building relationships with your teammates and coach, and the ability to work together as a larger whole.

When you expand this vision you see that, in a certain sense, you are also working with the other team. You need an opponent to have the game, the league, and to bring out the best in you, so you are “teammates” with them as well.

By the way, “team” and “mate” are anagrams. In a certain way you are mated to a team, something larger than yourself, and ever expanding. You are a team with your fans, with the school or city you represent, other participants in the league.

You need an opponent to have the game, to bring out the best in you, so you are “teammates” with them as well.

See how you can widen and widen your point of identification until to some degree you identify with the whole.

As we progress emotionally, intellectually, spiritually, this happens to us in life. We begin to identify not simply with the little ego-self but with the natural world around us, the fate of the earth, a diversity of people (including those who live in distant lands), the fate of

our children and family (that may come to feel even more important than our own), our ancestors and the gifts they left us — and thus we expand in space and time and affiliation.

We begin to understand and embrace the whole game.

And now we come to the answer to your other question. Here is the purposiveness of it all: to awaken to it all, to The All, if you will.

Let me give you one more example. Say you were asleep in your bed dreaming a complex set of events. It's all unfolding as a product of your mind but while asleep it sure doesn't feel that way. Within the dream you are but one individual — scared, threatened, confused.

Doesn't it feel good to wake up and breathe a sigh of relief — it was only a dream! I was really in charge, the game-master, even when I thought I was but one lonely player.

That is true, in a sense, for you, for every part of the universe. It feels itself to be but one lonely threatened player in a situation that is not of its making but finally awakens to discover it is the One Dreamer — the Game-Master. What a relief!

I can imagine that might be true for a human being, but how for an ant. rock or piece of empty space? What do you mean this is true for “every part of the universe”?

You misunderstand me I am afraid. You imagine that when I speak of “every part of the universe” I am envisioning an indefinite bunch of individuals each of whom has his, her, or its own consciousness, and must realize its independent awakening.

It's a little more like this: When you blow up a balloon, is there any part of it that doesn't participate in the balloon's expansion? The air, the rubber, it's all getting bigger

(that’s what it means for the balloon to expand, right?) just as with the big bang, space and time itself is everywhere expanding. In this way the whole universe is “redeemed” and participatory as the whole universe (the mind of God) awakens from the dream.

When you awaken from your dream, wander into the bathroom, and comb your hair, we might say “your hair has awakened” too — it has taken on its real nature as part of you, unlike your dream hair that might have been who-knows-what shape or color. So your awakening brings an embodied universe with you into self-conscious being.

Are you saying that every time someone awakens (like the Buddha) he/she brings the whole universe along?

Yes and no. The bodhisattva tradition acknowledges that many remain in illusion and suffering, and the job of the awakened one is to postpone the completion of that task in order to remain incarnate and help others on their journey²¹¹. In that sense, the “awakening” of the individual is necessarily incomplete, imposing a moral and spiritual imperative to help the rest of the universe awaken.

But in another sense, yes, the awakening of a part of the universe (a Buddha) awakens everything. It is the Universal Mind that awakens using the Buddha’s mind as a tool. This is a better way of understanding it than to say “the Buddha awakens.”

Let me give you an example. Say you are a child trying to learn to ride a bicycle. You fall and

It is the Universal Mind that awakens using the Buddha’s mind as a tool.

²¹¹ The ideal of the *bodhisattva*, a realized individual who yet delays entry into the nirvanic-state in order to help relieve the suffering of all sentient creatures, is central to Mahayana Buddhism.

fall, yet you keep getting up. You and the bicycle are “two,” to some degree at war with each other.

Then finally it all slips into place: You climb on the bicycle, find your point of balance, and go. You can even ride the bicycle down a hill lifting your feet off the pedals and saying “Wheee!” as the wind whips through your hair.

We say “you are riding the bicycle” but isn’t it more accurate to say that the bicycle itself rides — and it has learned/taught you to be an instrument that allows it to whoosh down the hill and, with the aid of your muscles, even to go up a hill — which the bicycle would be unable to do without your aid?

In a sense, the very difference between you and the bicycle, your body and its, becomes experientially eradicated as you learn to ride it. You become one. In that way, when the Buddha “becomes one” with the universe, there is no separate Buddha anymore. There is the whole universe enjoying the ride with the Buddha at the pedals.

Are you saying that the Buddha, the human mind, is an organ of consciousness for the whole universe — whose body is the entirety of the material world?

Well, yes and no. Your way of putting it is rather dualistic — human mind as consciousness, material world as body. It’s not quite so simple because we are embodied, and other, non-human bodies embody many different forms of consciousness.

But I am saying this: There is a way in which your mind, and mine, and particularly that of an enlightened and enlightening being like Buddha, are the “leading edge,” a most developed form, of the universe coming into consciousness of itself.

The eye is a more developed way of registering the universe than an ordinary patch of skin. It is specialized, complex, contains rods and cones and other very sophisticated apparatuses, that allow it to register the world, both near and far, in intricate detail.

So too does the “I” within the universe, especially the human “I,” register things with particular depth, breadth, and sophistication. The universe can use the squid-mind too, but there is more limitation in certain ways. To go back to our previous analogy, the human being can pedal the universal bicycle farther, better...in certain ways.

Insofar as the bicycle rides the rider (and not the reverse, our usual way of thinking of things) the universe is moving forward in and through our consciousness. When we make a revelation it is on behalf of the whole shebang!

Evolution: The Scientific “How” and the Religious “Why”

Hari, can I talk with you about the theory of evolution and the relationship of the scientific and spiritual world-views?

By all means. Evolution is real and not real. It’s not real in the sense that time itself is not ultimately real. Even Immanuel Kant knew this²¹² — that time is a (human) mode of apprehending the universe and, of course, evolution takes place in time — so it is not ultimately real.

In a sense, everything that is, and will be, is already there in the beginning. That makes metaphysical sense of the Genesis story where God creates everything in the beginning

²¹² In his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) Immanuel Kant changed modern philosophy by arguing that “time” and “space” were not properties of the objective universe per se, but forms through which consciousness apprehended the universe.

(considering the first “week” as one unit). Things don’t really show up “sometime later,” since there is no later. We live in the Creation moment, which is perpetually beyond time.

Yet, at the same time, like a Chinese scroll that is examined sequentially even though it’s all there all the time, time itself unfolds sequentially such that newness seems to appear.

There were dinosaurs...and now there are

human beings. There are human beings

and there will be...ah, but this line of

thought makes you uncomfortable, doesn’t it? You’d like to think your species and life-form is the be-all and end-all, wouldn’t you?

***We live in the Creation moment,
which is perpetually beyond time.***

Well, in the sense of your God-nature, you all are the Be-All and End-All, but not your species-being.

Why evolution? How evolution?

Evolution is about change, novelty, the introduction, alteration, and refinement of species.

Remember that Darwin’s seminal book was called The Origin of Species. Once again, it is like the doctrine of creation in Genesis. How funny that people see the story of Genesis and of evolution as in conflict with each other though they both say, “and then God (life-energy) created...” There is actually a very close match.

Why would God choose to create sequentially over long periods of time, rather than everything at once from the beginning (now speaking physically, rather than metaphysically as above, in which everything is there in the beginning, which is also middle and end).

Well, think of it in terms of lila, play. Isn't a game more interesting, or a story, that introduces new characters and therefore new possibilities? And isn't a game, a story, more interesting that progresses in a way that becomes more rich, more complex, more filled with possibility? That's what the process of evolution adds to the Creation — both novelty (the radically new appearing on the scene) and progress (greater richness and complexity). It is a story progressing toward an end, not simply endlessly cyclical or decaying.

Thus modern science has enriched the time-old religious stories, made the process of the universe even more glorious than had been previously understood (when it seemed like a machine that was spinning its wheels in place, or falling away from a previous place of glory). Now it is understood as moving forward, ever enriching, and the story of life's evolution on earth is understood as embedded in, inseparable from, expressive of, the evolution of the whole universe.

For example, we arise from the evolution of a complex molecule like carbon in the furnace of exploding stars, stars that themselves came about by an evolutionary process. Understand, then, that evolution has a much broader meaning than that of life's evolution on earth. The whole universe is evolving, and we see in the microcosm that we, ourselves, are a reflection, an image, of a much larger process.

I'm not sure, though, you've answered my questions concerning the why and how of evolution — maybe the why-part...but can you say more?

Well, let's take a look at the difference between the words "evolve" and "revolve." [I look it up in the dictionary.] To revolve means "to roll back" — that which is revolving is always

*returning to the same place, rolling back upon itself. To “evolve” means to open up, to unroll. Once again, what a more interesting universe to have what is only latent, possible, within the quark-soup of its origins, gradually unroll, unfold, manifest itself, with ever greater richness and complexity.*²¹³

It would be like, with food, a dish that as you bite into new flavors are released, new layers penetrated, so that your taste buds go through a sequence of delights, different flavors interacting and relating to each other contemporaneously as well as sequentially. Or like a piece of music with both harmonies and melodies that sequentially evolve from simple beginnings. Think of the universe as musical, artistic, in this way.

But the process of evolution, as described by Darwin and his followers, seems to contain within it a good deal of randomness, and certainly harsh brutality — the struggle to survive, killing, wild procreation — not simply the “divine music” you describe like some Bach cantata.

Ah yes, but there’s the beauty of it — that you needed this whole evolutionary process, this struggle to survive, to arrive at Bach’s cantatas. Where do you think these came from, what made these possible? The whole struggle for survival in the animal kingdom (and queendom I must add) that led to the giant frontal cortex of human beings, as well as the need for money. (Bach had a large family to feed!)

You like some of the ends but not the means, yet these are inextricably entwined.

²¹³ In the first instances of the big bang, subatomic quarks were able to bind together into protons and neutrons only when temperatures fell below one trillion degrees. Then, with progressive cooling, atoms were able to form after 300,000 years, allowing for the gradual development of macroscopic phenomena such as galaxies of stars (after one billion years), which in turn were necessary for life on our planet to evolve.

But why these particular means?

Why not?

You think I mean that facetiously or sarcastically, but I really mean it. Why not?

Because it involves pain, and brutality, and death, suffering at many levels of the food chain. And because it involves contingency, natural disasters, unkind creatures triumphing over kind ones in the struggle for survival. That is, it makes the universe immoral, or amoral.

Well, yes and no. As in the story of Job, the universe doesn't fit nicely into human categories of good and bad. But isn't this good? (And bad?)

Let me explain. Say you had a pet and it pooped on the living room floor. You would say "bad dog!" And then it ran up and licked her master. You would say "good dog!" But it's not a bad or good dog — it's just a dog. These are conceptual categories and valuations you impose relative to your ends, but they are not absolute.

Similarly, when you try to judge the entirety of the universe (Bad universe!...and/or Good universe!) it becomes an absurdity. After all, your moral faculties, as I said earlier, or implied in my discussion of Bach, are themselves the product of evolution. So for the moral faculties to judge evolution as "bad" is to will their own non-existence — in which case evolution wouldn't be judged as "bad," and so you have a logical absurdity, a self-negation.

Really, to judge the universe as bad you have to negate your self, because you are one of the universe's finest creations. It's like saying "I hate my father, I hate my mother, I should

never have been born.” Not a way to self-understanding and self-love, is it? Everything had to be as it was for you to be, whether you judge the means messy or incorrect.

Have you got a better plan? (Once again, it sounds like a facetious question, but I mean it.)

Well, I would think better a universe without so much pain, death, and suffering — much of which seems pretty meaningless and absurd, the product of blind mechanical processes rather than divine, harmonious, self-expression.

Yes, but let me underline the word you used — “seems.” Look up the etymology. [I do, and I find words like, “fitly,” “reconciliation,” and “agreement,” as reflected in the English word “seemly.”] Ah, that’s interesting isn’t it? The universe doesn’t seem to be “seemly,” “fit,” “as it should be.” But maybe it is more so than it seems. Let me give you an illustrative example:

A man and a woman (or it could be a man and a man, or woman and woman) are lovers, and then break up. It all seems so unseemly. There’s a messy “divorce” — look up that word as well. [It means “separation.”]

Such separations can be painful, seemingly destructive, contingent, no good. Yet looking at it from a higher and wider vantage point, that may turn out to be the best thing possible for both people — something that spun them forward in their lives like a spinning top — so that they both revolve, but also evolve into something new and rich and complex, something that would not have been possible within the “marriage.” Both people evolved through the mechanism of their breakup.

Similarly, the process of evolution includes a lot of marriages (symbiotic relationships, as in the marriage that brought about eukaryotic cells²¹⁴, and then organs, and then highly complex organisms such as yourself) but also includes a lot of divorces, differentiations, messy break-ups and conflicts, bitter fights to the death that lead to new species, and then to the species that reign victorious...including the human species (the biggest, most brutal victor of them all, at the moment).

Good or bad? That's just how the universe works.

As the Taoists know, and the Hindus, and perhaps the author of the book of Job, the universe is beyond “good” and “bad.” It just is.

“I am that I am,” God said to Moses.²¹⁵ Not “I am good,” or “I am bad.”

One of the good things (so to speak) about the scientific perspective is that it is value-free. It seeks to describe what is without moral judgment, and this — as you can now see — is reflective, in a certain sense, of the Divine. It instantiates a real spiritual value of seeing the truth unconstrained by value-judgments, a religious impulse to know, to uncover truth, and to do so without the distortion introduced by comfortable fictions and social mores that would make us want the universe otherwise. This scientific discipline is akin to a monastic discipline, and the attitude of a yogi searching for an unimpaired perception of reality.

However, what the scientific perspective misses is understanding the “I” part of the “I am.” It gets the “am,” the “isness” of it all, and tries to describe it accurately — e.g. the processes of random mutation and selection that lead to evolutionary change. But it doesn't get that there's any “I” behind it, just a random series of occurrences driven by the senseless operations of natural laws.

²¹⁴ According to a leading theory, eukaryotic cells, with their specialized cell membrane and organelles, formed when simpler prokaryotic cells, including ancient bacteria, merged in a symbiotic community.

²¹⁵ Exodus 3:14.

What the religious perspective introduces is that there is an “I” (“eye”) watching and creating. There is a kind of intelligent design. Not in the sense that the proponents of “intelligent design” theory postulate — a God who is always gumming up the works, or ungumming them, intervening and creating new species.²¹⁶ No. It is evolution itself that is intelligently designed to further the ends of a universe unrolling, e-volving, in ever new and enchanting ways.

When Ford designs a car it doesn’t reach in and later alter (interesting anagram, these two words) that vehicle, or guide and direct it while it is driving. That’s up to the driver who is the choice-maker, and the implanted nature of machinery in the car. The maker lets go — or it’s never your car, you, the owner.

The God of evolution is one who has let go of the universe and allows it independence, its own capacity to transform from within on the basis of biological processes, the competition to survive...and increasingly to transform as the result of human intelligence and choice. (For example, how are we going to handle global warming and its effects on other species, ourselves, and ecosystems of the earth?!)

In Genesis it is said that man is “granted dominion over the earth.”²¹⁷ Again, that moment of creation, metaphysically understood, captures something that will manifest and unfold sequentially. It is only now that humans really have, and progressively increase, their “dominion over the earth.” This was a prophecy, a state of affairs predestined to come to be.

²¹⁶ “Intelligent design” theory, argued for in scientific terms but often considered a pseudo-science, contends that evolution proceeds by the conscious intervention and design of an intelligent agent or agents (e.g. God) who, for example, designs and introduces new organs and species that could not have been arrived at by a non-directed process of genetic mutation and natural selection.

²¹⁷ Genesis 1:26-28.

Let it be done wisely, let it be done in God's name, let man be the caretaker that helps the earth to flourish (as well as to satisfy the needs of human beings) — this is the larger spiritual meaning embedded in the Bible discussions.

Of course, its meaning is only now becoming clear in the midst of an environmental crisis, and the need for human practical wisdom. This environmental consciousness is an evolving wisdom brought about by the struggle for survival. So, it too, is a product of our evolution.

As you can see by this example, evolution is not only a matter of increasing physical complexity, adaptability and efficiency, but of an evolving consciousness which is better able to contribute to survival, not simply by winning a competition against prey and co-predators, but eventually ensuring a survival of the life-system as a whole by identifying more and more with the whole. Moving from a prey-consciousness to a pray-consciousness, one might say.

A cancer cell struggles for survival, but it endangers the whole organism. In evolution, larger and larger holons emerge that keep the parts subordinated to a higher aim.²¹⁸ Ultimately, we identify with a world-organism, evolving a concern with world peace and prosperity, not simply “getting ours.” We thus become increasingly Godlike in our perspective, able to see and influence the big picture.

We are God becoming God — that's really what the evolutionary process describes.

²¹⁸ A term coined by Arthur Koestler, and used by Ken Wilber (see *A Brief History of Everything*), a “holon” is a system that is a whole in itself, but also functions as a part of a larger system. For example, atoms, molecules, organelles, cells, organs, organisms, and a society of organisms, function as a “holarchy” of nested holons, each an organized system within itself, and a part of a greater whole.

We must think of God not only as the Alpha, a mover and shaker who starts the whole process, but also as the Omega, the Cosmic Consciousness that the process arrives at through its ever-expansive evolutionary movement.²¹⁹ God is also that process itself — the process of creativity — not simply its products. God gods and God is this godding.

That is one reason it is silly to see religion and science as so oppositional on this point. Those who deny the truths of evolution force themselves to not see God godding (creating) in the world, threatening to end up with bad science and bad theology. For bad science and bad theology go hand-in hand.

It should never seem the reverse (as it often does) — that doing “good theology” should make us bad scientists, and being good scientists must necessarily make us bad at theology. No, these realms of truth are not at war with each other, though they seem to be, having isolated out as polar antinomies, on the way to Hegelian synthesis.²²⁰

When we understand evolution as God godding, of science as exploring the how, and religion giving some sense of the why — then we would have found a synthesis greater than the sum of its parts. A One that arises out of such seeming conflict must always be greater than the sum of its parts. In a heap of parts, all the parts are there, but the “greater thing” missing is the Oneness of it all — including you and me, past and future, the scientific and religious contributions to understanding.

We need the scientific way of understanding evolution — and the spiritual way of understanding evolution; evolution of the material world — and of consciousness; evolution

²¹⁹ For Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, scientist, Jesuit priest, and philosopher/theologian, the universe is evolving toward higher and more synthetic forms of consciousness and unity, the Omega Point, which is Divine (see *The Phenomenon of Man*).

²²⁰ One simple way of understanding the progression of consciousness and world outlined in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* is that an idea, practice, or social form (thesis) is clarified in contrast to its antithesis, which then leads to a higher synthesis of the opposites, continuing the progress up a dialectical ladder.

as the result of physicalistic processes — and of Divine intention; as a process that unfolds in time, introducing novelty and progress — and as a progressive revelation of what was already there from Genesis, from the moment “God said let there be light”²²¹ — for the energy of these photons still drives the system forward.

Just as it is through the different angles provided by our two eyes that we see the third dimension of reality, so it is in this synthetic way that we must see evolution. Nowadays, science is one eye, religion/spirituality, the other. We must look at the world through both eyes to see “God godding,” to understand the meaning of “I am that I am.”

Two eyes to see these two “I’s” and know them three-dimensionally as One.

²²¹ Genesis 1:3.

CODA:

HOW DO I KNOW THIS SPIRITUAL STUFF IS REAL?

The Quarrel Between the Mind and the Soul

How do I know this spiritual stuff is real? It seems so easy for it to be the product of wishful thinking in a world where we finally are our bodies, and when we die — that's it. How can I authentically dispute that in my heart of hearts? Even now, I don't know whether to trust what I get from you., or if I am producing it from wishful thinking.

At a certain level you do know. That's what is so frustrating about it. Your soul knows but it cannot come up with arguments to convince your mind, because the soul doesn't know on the level of argument. Let me give you an analogy:

A little boy goes into an ice cream shop and tastes from a variety of flavors. He settles on the one he likes best — say, Peppermint Patty — and then his mother says, “Are you sure? How do you know you like it best? What's better about it than the other flavors?”

What can the boy answer? He can't really, and the mother might use this as evidence to show him that he doesn't know his own mind — that he should let her pick.

Something feels funny about that reasoning to the boy but he can't quite find the problem with it. By the end he's so confused that he doesn't know what flavor he wants, and allows the mother to choose. That was her goal all along — she likes to be in control!

The boy is like the soul which has tasted of spiritual experience and wants to choose it, eat it, build its life around it. The mother is like the ego, the thinking mind, that hasn't tasted and therefore doesn't know, doesn't trust the soul, and would prefer to be in control.

The blind leading the sighted! Or in this case...the tasted.

APPENDIX ONE: HARI'S WORLDVIEW

Note: This is an attempt, for my own sake, and for readers whose mind works like mine, to construct a more linear, systematic overview of some of the key teachings that emerge in these dialogues.

Different Realms of Reality

1. The material world unfolds in space and time through cosmological and biological processes as described by modern science.
2. The human mind is an analytic tool for perceiving, conceiving, and successfully negotiating that space-time grid of separate beings and objects.
3. However our mind, insofar as it takes this world to be all of reality, traps us in *maya*, illusion.
4. This *maya* can be painful. The ego-self, qua individual, feels profoundly threatened in the world since its continued existence is so precarious.
5. Moreover, the mind, constructed to negotiate this material world, also feels profoundly threatened with destruction when we seek to explore other realities of which it knows little.
6. The “heart” (not the physical, but metaphysical, heart) is an inner conduit that enables us to go to “the heart of the matter” and experience spiritually-based dimensions of reality to which the mind is often blind.
7. The heart can, however, induce the mind to work in concert, exploring, understanding, and expressing these deeper realities.
8. The universe is then discovered to contain realms of reality beyond that apparent to ordinary perception.
9. In addition to the material universe we inhabit, there are dimensions of awareness/being which are more purely “psychic constructions” — e.g. the world of dreams, and the “subtle” or “astral” realm experienced after death, and sometimes accessed by the living through paranormal experiences.
10. Such realms are largely separated off from one another — for example, the land of the living from the dead, of the dreamer from the waking self — because otherwise the “game” would collapse, the “story” wouldn’t unfold in a linear and compelling way. In short, it would be *confusing*.
11. However, there can be (permitted, limited) communication between realms, as with ESP phenomena, or “after-death communications.”

12. These realms, considered both as productions of consciousness and yet “embodied,” manifest different vibrational levels as a piano has many keys. The material world exhibits what might be termed a lower vibrational level than other, more purely psychic, planes.

13. Ultimately, the material universe and other realms are a production of a consciousness or Spirit — what can be called God — that is unitary, intentional, and beyond all the divisions and limitations of the perceived world.

14. As such, consciousness is there “from the beginning” — it is not simply a later, contingent development within the universe, as contemporary science tends to view it.

15. However, to say it is there “from the beginning” is not to say it arrived really, really early — rather, that all things in time ultimately emanate from a timeless, eternal realm, one that is prior to and outside of the spatiotemporal framework. This consciousness is the “place” in which the big bang occurs, and its products: the space, time, and entities of the material universe.

16. If science excels at describing the unfolding material world, religion/spirituality specializes in exploring the consciousness from which this unfolded. Together these perspectives can work in concert, supplementing each other to provide a multi-dimensional vision of the universe.

The Evolution of the Universe, the Soul, and the Social

17. From a spatiotemporal point of view this universe develops with an evolutionary, progressive logic that allows ever more complexity and consciousness to be realized. We might call this “God godding.”

18. From the timeless standpoint, this is all already present from the beginning, always was, is, and shall be. Becoming is an expression of eternal Being.

19. Consciousness uses and creates the material world because, due to its vibrational solidity, the material world gives consciousness something to “push off of” and create with, thereby providing itself with a wonderful field of manifestation.

20. In this sense the world is “good” (as per the Book of Genesis), or “divine play” (as per the Hindu notion of *lila*), even with its horrors, conflicts, divisions.

21. These horrors and conflicts play their role in evolutionary unfoldings, and help awaken us to higher truths.

22. As such, the “goodness” of the world is beyond the usual moral judgments differentiating between what is “good” and “bad.”

23. All manifestations in the universe play with a paradoxical harmony of individuality and interdependency. Each being is one unto itself and also part of the One, negotiating that dialectic in its own unique way.

24. As such, each being is a unique expression of the Divine. There is not, for example, simply “me praying to God” — *I am God unfolding*, my evolving consciousness and actions one expression of “God godding.” This is true of every entity in the universe.

25. Individual souls, like the universe as a whole, unfold in a process of evolutionary growth.

26. Karma is the instrument of the soul’s learning and evolving. It is not a mechanical cause-effect process, but rather progresses like a piece of music wherein one’s current situation and options are constrained by what has come before, yet also create the preconditions for moment-to-moment artistic improvisation.

27. Along with karma, reincarnation IS. It is both a sequential process of lives unfolding over time, and (from the timeless point of view) a structure in which all one’s lives take place “simultaneously,” enriching each other and operating in concert.

28. Within the soul’s, and the social, journey, that which is harmonious with the way of things (the unity of the universe) leads to harmonious results, and that which isn’t (egotistical actions) bear fruit in destructive consequences. In this way the system is designed not so much to “reward” and “punish,” as to teach and encourage soul-growth.

29. An example of this on the social level is *warfare*. Rooted in delusion, unbalancing the dialectic between independence and interdependence, war gives rise to horrors so evident they can point us toward higher consciousness.

30. All repetitive or “unsolvable” problems show us that our world-picture is delusory and we have to “up-level” to a different consciousness in order to solve (or dis-solve) the problem. This applies equally to personal problems (repetitive anxiety, anger, dysfunctional relationships) and worldwide problems (warfare, nationalism, global warming).

The Power of Thought and Intention

31. Karmic problems and solutions are produced not only by physical actions but by our thoughts. These themselves are subtle actions, having powerful effects upon self and others.

32. While individual thought is not entirely creative of reality — it is receptive, responsive to a larger world — it represents our way of processing reality, constructing its experienced meaning, and thereby shaping our consequent perceptions, emotions, and behaviors.

33. The key to creating “happiness,” then, is to produce thoughts that foster pleasurable and fulfilling emotions and actions.

34. Such thought involves principles such as: seeing, affirming, and appreciating the positive; understanding that negative events play their part in a larger, benevolent universe; seeking the

good of others, not only oneself; and practicing acceptance of “what is.” These are different *yogas*, paths of bringing mind and life in harmony with the Way of things.

35. Similarly, we can master negative emotions and physical pains through a variety of strategies such as: accepting and relaxing into them fully (non-resistance); producing new experiences through the conscious choice of our thoughts; calling on the help of a Higher Power, the One which our various images help access.

36. This all becomes easier when we clothe the power of intention in our chosen spiritual methods (meditation, prayer, chanting, etc.) These enable us to progressively realize the divine energy underlying the universe.

37. This need not involve turning away from the world, renouncing all desires and engagements. Rather this is compatible with enriched involvement in the world — but one not trapped by mind-generated limitations such as fear and craving.

Experienced in this way, life is *good* and meant to be *lived fully*.

APPENDIX TWO: WHO ARE YOU? — THE GUIDE RESPONDS

Drew: Are you a guru?

Hari: Depends what you mean by a “guru.” If you mean someone to whom you turn over your heart, mind, soul, someone who directs all your actions, then I am not. That is not healthy, not what you want.

But if by “guru,” you mean a perfect guide, at least as perfect as can come through on your plane of manifestation, then I am that.

I am come to teach you to be more playful. To be playful is one of the more perfect manifestations of God on your plane — God’s lila (spiritual play). The Bible quote might have said, “Be ye therefore playful, as your Father in heaven is playful.”^{222,223}

* * *

Are you my “guardian angel”?

Perhaps the best answer is yes and no. I’m not, in the sense that it is somewhat romantically portrayed: a being that hovers over you protecting you from all manner of physical harm.

Would that it were that simple. Sometimes physical harm is the soul’s grace.

But I do have a unique assignment to work with you on the soul-level and provide you with soul-aid — a kind of mentoring program from above. A freshman works with [the help

²²² Matthew 5:48 reads, “Be ye therefore perfect even as your Father in heaven is perfect.” Note that “perfect,” derived from the Greek word *telios*, might be better translated as “complete,” or “fulfilled.”

²²³ The three asterisks that follow (* * *) are used to signal a point where I am linking together different dialogues on a common topic. I do that very little in this book (preferring to let each dialogue stand by itself), but use the device in this chapter to gather some of Hari’s self-reflections.

of] an upper-level student, someone who's been there and in certain ways is more progressed, more aware of the full program, able to help the neophyte along.

You might call such a person a "guardian angel."

Do you bring me specific teaching experiences? Do you ever intervene directly in events?

Well, I hate to say it, but again the answers are yes and no. I don't suddenly cut through the web of life to intercede on your behalf. I don't create specific events like a teacher designing the day's curriculum. I'm more like the teacher who works with the students' experiences, helps them to process and understand them in new and creative ways they might not have arrived at on their own.

In that way, they are given "new experiences," or "new interpretations of old experiences," depending on how you define it.

But how do I really know you're real? I've gotten no independent confirmation. You seem to fade in and fade out. I guess you're just an imaging of my "Higher Self." Nothing wrong with that — but I was hoping for a truly independent being on another plane. Is that unrealistic? Who the hell are you?

Yes, most essentially I am you. You're right about that. I do sense your disappointment that it's not as "magical" as you would wish.

But wait a minute, don't jump to conclusions. On your earthly plane it's "either-or": A voice is yours, or it is another persons'. On this plane, it's more "both-and": It's your own voice, and that of another being. And I don't mean God, though that's always the third voice that knits two into one. This is the core meaning of the Trinity.

Huh? I kind of understand conceptually but I don't have a deep feel for what you are getting at.

Let me give you a metaphor to work with. A truck driver is communicating with another truck driver via CB²²⁴. Let's call truck driver A "Rubber Duck", and truck driver — "Fatso." They have never met in person but they form an image of what the other is like, project certain attributes onto them, and interpret communications in light of these images. Is "Fatso" a creation of Rubber Duck, or a genuinely separate person — or both?

In this way I both have an independent reality, but also am your imaginative creation, heard and interpreted through your system of ideas and skills — such as your writing skills. How else could we communicate? How else could I be available to you?

* * *

I am becoming more and more convinced, rightly or wrongly, that you are just my subconscious, not another spiritual being, or even my "Higher Self," and it is undermining a bit my faith in this dialogue and its ability to touch me in a deep way.

²²⁴ Citizen's band radio, still somewhat used, is a way in which truckers communicate with one another while on the road (before the days of cell phones). Again, here Hari is using an idea in my mind that he can work with, though CB's may be less familiar to some readers.

You say so many things that seem to clearly come out of my mind, my experience, my frame of reference — not anything independent. Yet at the same time the experience I have is of someone talking to me who often takes me places I wouldn't have gotten to on my own, and finishes sentences and parables and advice in ways that I could not. What gives???

Ah, so you're checking in on that issue. Who am I? Am I you? Am I other? From whence comes this voice in your head?

Again, I refer you back to the fallacy of the either-or. On your plane of individuality it is clearly either-or (or else you're psychotic). It's a you or a not-you, and nothing in-between. But can you open your mind to a dialogue²²⁵ in-between?

*I can, so to speak, use everything that is in your mind. This is the text I have to play with, just as Dr. Seuss was given a set of words with which to compose *The Cat in the Hat*.²²⁶ (You see, you know that [about Dr. Seuss] so I can use that.)*

Your brain is not exactly under your control in the usual way. I am writing on it, like someone typing on a computer. You are the computer with your mental keyboard, software, memory, etc. But when you give the keyboard over to me I'm the one doing the typing, and so I can bring forth some unusual words and combinations you would not have thought of typing yourself. It's a variation of what happens when we pray to God. We invite God to type out answers, especially when we don't know what to say or do ourselves, and are dis-invested enough, open to un-controlled answers.

Can you tell me more about this process?

²²⁵ From the Greek *logos* (speech, words, reason) and *dia* (across, between).

²²⁶ Dr. Seuss (Theodor Geisel) was asked by a publisher to write a children's book using only 225 "new-reader" vocabulary words. The result was *The Cat in the Hat*.

It's not that different from being a teacher, at least an effective one. You have to speak to students in language they understand, and progress slowly, concept by concept, example by example, to gradually expand their mind. You effect the trans-mission²²⁷ using words and ideas that are followable or else you "lose them" — the trans-mission ceases.

Similarly, I trans-mit things to you, word by word, concept by concept, so your mind gradually expands and changes, even though nothing I say is thoroughly foreign or beyond your capacity to think. All true teaching has one leg in the mind of the receiver, and one leg outside (to use a mixed metaphor).

Perhaps the only difference is the thoroughness of my acquaintance with your mind, the extent of the merger I effect. Not being a corporeal being I am not restricted to being outside your brain-body in the conventional way you are familiar with. Not being limited by normal human consciousness and individual difference, I can effect transmissions instantaneously from within. That makes our conversation rapid, and almost like one entity talking to itself. But not quite. Right?

Yes, right. But as Braude says, in phenomena of disassociation one can arrive at the same kind of experience.²²⁸ How do I tell these apart?

You can't. There's the rub. This isn't one of those provable, or "high-evidential-value" cases. It clearly fails all the evidential criteria — except one — it can be self-verifying for the experiencer.

²²⁷ From *mittere* (send) and *trans* (across).

²²⁸ In *Immortal Remains: The Evidence for Life After Death*, philosopher Stephen E. Braude discusses how by psychological disassociation one can mistakenly attribute an inner voice to an independent being or spirit.

But that is only if you permit it to be so. Again, you like to doubt your faith and have faith in your doubt. You might reconsider my opposing advice — to doubt your doubt and have faith in your faith. Try it and you'll like it. It only opens the door further to our conversation, and its potential meaning and transformative value.

* * *

Why are you spending so much time and energy talking to me, trying to help me? It's so kind of you (especially since I'm so unappreciative). Is it your job, or your love?

Well, it's both. Let's just say I love my job. You are not my only client — but in another way, every client is my only client. Our relationship, while it goes on, is that all-encompassing (literally). And again, remember, your experience of me is unique, filtered through your own mind and capacities. So in that way it's very personal, very exclusive. You and me, baby. You and me.

Until it's just Me.²²⁹

* * *

Hari, I'm losing faith in the possibility of turning this conversation into a book. It seems to me either personal material, or trite, or esoterically philosophical, or undeveloped. I fear the

²²⁹ In my understanding, Hari is not speaking here of "me," himself qua individual, but "Me," the Divine Self within which we all are enfolded.

humiliation of trying to work with it and put it out into the world, and having to go through the process of rejection. What to do?

Help. You are in need of help. And hope. Hope in me — and yourself — and the process. It is not given to you yet to see the finished project, so trust in the process. Trust in the guidance you have and will continue to receive — continuing revelation.

Have it be a reveille — a wake up — and a reverie — daydreaming — and a revel — a making merry, a having pleasure. Have pleasure in this game — don't make it a thing of misery and shame. Take pride in the process.

Re sharing this material, be sure your motives in doing so are thoroughly good — or at least good as can be in the situation of imperfection, yours, others, the world's — even mine. Ask God to remove the prideful, self-centered, and ambitious impulses to make this “your” work and to earn a little bit of money and fame by packaging it — or praise and an impressed response.

The truth is that if “you” didn't write it, you don't exactly deserve credit for it either, do you? The more your writing “just comes” the less should you take credit for as yours.

That's hard to do, that release...but it is indeed releasing.

APPENDIX THREE: A PHILOSOPHICAL POSTSCRIPT — THE UNIVERSE RE-MEMBERS

Note: I view the content of this dialogue as an important part of Hari's message, both personally and metaphysically. At the same time, it is a philosophically challenging conversation, focusing as it does on memory not simply as a psychological, but cosmological function, linking the temporal to the eternal. Not for everyone, I have placed it in an appendix, but encourage the willing reader to take it on.

Hari, is there really a stability of being, or does everything pass away? Can you show me or tell me anything that will reveal whether or not there really is life after death?²³⁰

Here goes:

When you look inside your mind you find first and foremost among its capacities its capacity to record. That doesn't sound too highfalutin'. The temptation would be to consider it a second-rate faculty as opposed to, say, the intellect and the imagination. But consider this: Without the capacity to record, what we often call "memory" (interesting word that, look it up), none of the other faculties would have anything to build on.

Imagine an imagination without a memory. What kind of syntheses, extrapolations, weird reversals, could the imagination pull off without the elements painstakingly recorded, and re-ordered, and stored, and re-stored by memory?

²³⁰ In this 4 a.m. conversation my memory of my initiating questions is dim (I didn't write them down) but I did write down the entirety of Hari's long answer which here is shortened with selective edits.

Sure, memory is the lowly clerk, but without its dutiful service the whole company would collapse. It's as if the CEO was slumming in disguise, pretending to be the bookkeeper working in the basement.

Recording is something you, we, now take for granted, with all our iPods and MP3's, VCR's and TiVo's. We have a world built out of recorded images, and often live more in that world than in the "real world" of the originals. Plato's cave indeed!²³¹

But as Baudrillard has pointed out, it's very difficult to decide where the "real" and "replicate" part.²³² Our encounters with the "real" are shaped by our images, our recordings, of previous encounters with the object or person, as well as of things we've been told or shown about the being.

A lot of this gets sedimented into our language. The word "tree" becomes a container for these encounters and meanings, though my idealized "tree" may mean something different from that of a botanist.

But let's keep pushing onward. If the imagination rests on memory; if even perception rests on memory's capability to string together, give meaning and structure to diverse fleet images; and if language, and thus human society, is built on the power of words and other symbols to become the repository of meaning — where does the lowly memory (that humble bookkeeper) reside? How does he ply his trade?

Ah, here's we run across a delicious paradox. Science (neuroscience) doesn't really know. It's a bit mysterious how we could, from the billions of synaptic connections, suddenly extract an image of Aunt Betsy burning her Sunday pie and throwing it out to the protest of

²³¹ In Plato's *Republic* Socrates presents an allegory of prisoners chained in a cave so all they see are shadows on the wall which they take to be real and substantial entities. Similarly, Hari implies, we now live in a world where our electronically produced images reign supreme.

²³² In *Simulacra and Simulation* French philosopher Jean Baudrillard suggests that the modern world is so reliant on simulations that the very distinction between what is real and what is symbolic representation breaks down.

the children who sneaked out back and smeared gobfuls in their face when no one was looking.

Yes, that memory is still here. What was then, lives on! There is some kind of glue that holds together consciousness into a unity, though the events remembered are far distant. That's what makes there be a "me" (contrary, in some ways, to what the Buddhists say²³³) — this memory-glue that keeps my identity together.

Now, instead of looking downward for the answer — to the enduring nature of certain neurosynaptic pathways, or of "memory molecules" — look up to the spiritual world.

God Is. Time does not rent God in two. There is a "glue" in the heart of God's being that keeps all the unlimited diversity of the world hanging together in a "uni-verse," not a "diversi-verse." It all hangs together, "remembers" the same physical laws, expresses its nature built in the past, composed of elementary particles that have been there since the beginning.

The universe can only change and evolve because it remembers. No creation and destruction of energy permitted.²³⁴ It all has to "even out" — the bookkeeper remembers.

This is not fundamentally a material principle (though it finds register in the material world, both non-living and living). Rather it is a spiritual principle, a principle of consciousness.

Look at this conversation. It is capable of being recorded because, more generally, the mind, consciousness, is capable of recording thoughts, impressions, experiences, words, and then processing them in any number of ways.

²³³ According to the Buddhist doctrine of *anatta* there is no true, substantial self — we are composed of constantly transforming physical and mental processes such that there is a different "me" from moment to moment.

²³⁴ This is the law of conservation of energy (found within the first law of thermodynamics) which states that though energy can be converted from one form to another, the total amount of energy in a system remains constant.

*What am I getting at with this “lecture” (a little more pedantic than usual, huh)?
Simply this: You wonder about whether there is any true Being, and whether the self
continues on after death, whether our life has any real meaning and purpose. But aren’t these
all questions of memory?*

*Will anyone remember me after I’m gone? Will I have any memory? Will I be able to
build new life upon that memory, consciously or subconsciously still present?*

*Any vision of heaven and hell, of reincarnation, of communication with loved ones, of
the soul coming before God for validation or transformation — they all depend on the
continuance and power of that most fragile commodity — memory.*

*It seems so easily lost — in a moment of forgetfulness; later years spent with
Alzheimer’s; a single blow inducing amnesia; waking up in the morning to find vivid dreams
vanish in a twinkling.*

*That’s what we’re trying to base a universe on: memory?!?! (Uh, what were you just
saying?)*

*But that’s the truth. Memory is what you base a long-term love relationship on, as with
your wife. That’s what gives strength, solidity, texture to all you’ve been through together,
meant to one another, in the journey.*

*In a similar way, everything in the universe re-members itself back to the big bang and
participates in the journey of everything else. It has, so to speak, its own collection of baby
pictures, on up, as the universe grows into maturity.*

*God (the happy parent) is taking [these pictures] we might say, but each kid (particle)
has a camera of its own. Its present state is nothing more than its collection of snapshots from
the past which have determined its current place and properties.*

Let's pause to assimilate this and infer the cosmic "punch-line": You are what you remember. You are that you remember.

(I now look up the meaning of "memory," as Hari previously suggested, and find it is from the Proto-Indo-European base *men/mon*, meaning to "think.")

Yes, look at how tied memory is to the mind's capacity to think (or vice-versa). Consciousness is, in a sense, thought, which is, in a sense, the capacity for memory and the ability to rearrange that which we remember. This is [also] what keeps the universe from flying apart, enables it to be coherent and evolving.

So the real punchline is not that "you are" per se, but that Memory Is. The universe retains and records all. The universe is a great Memory Machine, and you are not forgotten, lost, abandoned, destroyed.

Along with the principle of creation and destruction, the missing piece, often taken for granted, is the principle of remembering. (Vishnu, the God of preservation and renewal of what already is, is just as important as Brahma and Shiva.)²³⁵

So if you are here, man you've got it made. You aren't going away. You will be remembered eternally.

You've got it made. You aren't going away. You will be remembered eternally.

But what does that mean? That people will always have some

²³⁵ In the Hindu "trimurti" (three forms) the Divine energy of creation is personified, in *Brahma*, transformation and destruction in *Shiva*, and preservation and renewal in *Vishnu*.

dim memory of who I was? That somehow the results of my life will go into the Supercomputer's storage data base? Or that I will be eternally alive, conscious, remembering myself? That's a pretty big difference, you must agree.

Oh I do, sort of, but I see that you are not fully grasping my point. Naturally you are seeing it from a human, individualized perspective. Will I be remembered (how?) or will I, myself, remember? I, I, I, orient these kinds of consideration.

But listen up. Memory outruns the "I." It is not just an inner psychological faculty, it's a metaphysical fact. The tree remembers a century of harsh winters and balmy springs in the size of its trunk rings. Memory far outruns the self [of the tree] — it is the weather, and therefore the sun and tides, and therefore the universe that is embedded in that tree.

So "you" are the memory of the universe up until now: all its chemical syntheses forged and exploded outward in distant stars, the history of the evolution of life on earth, and then of human society and its laws, science, religion, language. All this is remembered in you. Is you. So it's not exactly the right question of whether and how "you" will be remembered, since "you" were much larger than that to begin with. You are a memory-particle of the Whole.

Okay, I think I understand this intellectually, but it still seems to leave no answer as to whether my consciousness lives on after death. (Hey, I remembered that original question!) I feel like we're floating away from even being able to ask it.

You are a memory-particle of the Whole.

Yes, good for you, and there's your answer: You remembered your original question. You come into life, so to speak, with an original question, which is also a question of origins. "Where did I come from? Why am I here? What am I meant to be and do? Where am I headed? When will I die? What will I have accomplished before my death? How will I die? Most importantly, why will I die? And what is death — will I live on after?" These are all variations on the "original question." And you haven't forgotten it, though many go through life in a state of extreme, if only apparent, forgetfulness, seemingly pursuing other questions (how am I going to pay my mortgage this month?)

Thanks for appreciating that I remember the question — but can you answer it!?

Temper, temper. Tempus fugit²³⁶, but not too fast we have learned, for in memory tempus doesn't fugit. Don't worry, I still remember your question, and will answer.

You, you may remember, are both 1) a separate entity with your distinct awareness, and 2) a record (memory) of all that was and is around you — a cosmic recording. Both will be retained even after your death: your separateness, and your participation in the whole. Else the recording would be incomplete.

Let me explain as best I (we) can:

If you were a zebra in a zoo you would have black and white stripes. To some degree this might look to the zookeeper as reflective of the black and white stripes of the cage in which the zebra was kept. The stripes are also confusing to a predator who gets dizzy when a herd of

²³⁶ Latin for "time flies."

*zebra runs past. He can't tell where one ends and one begins, and what the true outline of identity is.*²³⁷

In a way what we've been saying is quite black and white, but in the way of the zebra. Nothing could be simpler than to say that you and the universe are composed of memory, nothing is ever lost. But when you look at these words on paper (in black and white) they become a little bit confusing. Where does identity begin and end, the zebra, the cage, the other zebras? What is me and not me, death and life? The stripes begin to blur.

That's a little bit what death is like — like a photograph taken in motion that thereby blurs the lines, gives Aunt Sally a little of Marge's nose. You are more than who you thought you were. [After death] you realize that you were not just the little self you thought you were in life, but all the people you came into contact with, injured, helped, or ignored, and all the people who influenced you.

You begin to see yourself more as a collectivity, and this is what you are re-membering and building on for your next life — all the members of your life.

I think I don't understand what this has to do with a zebra stripes. And I find your vision of reincarnation less than persuasive. Can you say a little more?

Sure, that's what I'm here for. To go to that first question (you're doubting me again) I chose a zebra analogy for many reasons: the way in which the zebra's stripes were key to clarity and articulation ("black and white" difference and truth), but in actual fact are one of the way it

²³⁷ On prevalent theory of the adaptive value of the zebra's stripes is that it creates visual confusion for predators who are less able to differentiate one animal from another, causing difficulties when attacking the herd.

masks itself, confuses the mind (of the tiger, and even zookeeper), outruns its limits, and preserves its life. So too, of the subject we're speaking about.

In memory we preserve in black and white (as you do now) conceptual clarities. But we are also creating a moving, fluid identity that is difficult to trap and kill. The universal, even personal, memory, we've been discussing is much more dynamic, fluid, elusive, creative, than any simple sense of photographic accuracy. Think of the fluidity of the big bang and the cosmic evolutionary unfoldings.

Re reincarnation, the metaphor “re — incarnate” — to enter again into meat — is too literal for what we're trying to get at. What I'm saying is that nothing is ever lost. You recognize in the material world the principle of the conservation of matter-energy, cause and effect, so nothing is lost along the way. But you fear that the one exception to that principle is consciousness itself — the very center of your identity. That might be so insubstantial as to blow apart at any moment²³⁸ (step carelessly out on the street and get run over by a truck; catch pneumonia, and get obliterated by some bugs) and then it's simply gone.

Well, be free of your fear. Your mind will be re-membered. Your memory will be re-minded. The universe is very good not only at minding the show, but re-minding it, keeping consciousness alive and re-newed.

It will not be lost, thrown away, forgotten.

²³⁸ “You seem afraid, like children, that as the soul goes out from the body, the wind may literally blow it apart and disperse it...” (Socrates speaking to his friends on the day of his death — Plato's *Phaedo* 77d)

APPENDIX THREE: A NOTE ON THE PREPARATION OF THIS BOOK

I believe the reader deserves, albeit in brief form, a few clarifications concerning the preparation of this book. He or she might be, like me, of a skeptical mindset. “Is what I’m reading here really what ‘Hari’ said? Leder’s a published author — did he write this stuff himself, or at least ‘fix it up’ after the fact? Did he change words, or add points and examples?” If so, that might undermine any claim that this is a “spirit guide” or “spontaneous divine inspiration” at work, and the reader ought to know the truth. Too often a magisterial silence accompanies such issues. In my case I’ll try to be quite specific.

Between 2003-2008 Hari and I had generated some 700 pages of single-spaced dialogues (over a thousand pages in regular double-spaced format). Some of it was fragmentary — in the white-heat of a problem I’d type out a quick question and receive a few lines, or a couple of paragraphs, of advice. Then, too, many discussions were focused on particular problems and people I encountered. While personally helpful, such answers might be incomprehensible, or of little interest, to the general reader. In composing this book I naturally edited out such material, retaining dialogues that I thought might have more general significance. In other words, I chose what I took to be much of the “best stuff” from a self-help or philosophical point of view. Often the choice was easy, but not always. I was sad to leave some rich material on the cutting room floor.

Regarding that which I retained, I did my best *not* to tamper with Hari’s words. I wanted a faithful record of the immediate transcribed discussion even if it had rough edges and literary infelicities. I felt I should not alter the information received by making additions or changes but be faithful to the voice of Hari, and the trust of the reader.

I did play a good deal with one of the few literary devices I felt legitimately able to manipulate — punctuation and typography. The question of whether to insert a comma or a semi-colon; an en-dash or an ellipsis; where to break a sentence or paragraph; what to underline, or separate off into a “text box” — might seem like editorial minutiae. Still, I wanted to both capture the flow of Hari’s speech and to bring out clearly his central points and emphases.

I occasionally inserted a word or two (only) to clarify something that I would have understood at the time but the reader might not. For example, I might replace a pronoun like “it,” with the noun to which it referred (e.g. “the body”) to forestall grammatical confusion. When I felt a clarifying phrase I was adding was significant enough — e.g. three or four words — I have put it in square brackets [] to show that it is a later interpolation.

Many dialogues I edited down in some way. I eliminated inessential connecting words, and, occasionally, larger portions that I felt included no key information, turned to a personal matter, or seemed “anti-climactic” from a literary point of view. I have a responsibility as a writer/editor not to detain the impatient reader with material that doesn’t significantly “advance the ball downfield.” Less can be more, and sometimes I gave you less than the full discussion.

However, on most occasions what you see in this book is pretty much the entirety of what I heard on the matter. As I said in the introduction, often the length of a dialogue was set more by the brevity of my attention-span than limitations on what Hari had to offer. I have no doubt that with a greater focus and patience I would have generated with Hari more lengthy dialogues — for example, on the order of “The Mind and the Heart,” written during a summer week when my family was gone, the house quiet, my mood unusually contemplative.

I generally resisted the temptation to paste together into one dialogue fragments taken from different discussions on a recurring topic. I thought that ran the risk of too much “authorial

construction.” On the few occasions I chose to do this, I signaled the artifice to the reader through three asterisks (* * *) showing the transition from one dialogue to another.

Having summarized my way of proceeding, I’d be happy to make the original transcript of a discussion available to anyone interested (with some limits concerning highly personal material). Like a scientist whose lab notebooks should be open to scrutiny, I believe in transparency. That is part and parcel of taking this stuff seriously and treating it responsibly.

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“I can, so to speak, use everything that is in your mind. This is the text I have to play with, just as Dr. Seuss was given a set of words with which to compose The Cat in the Hat. (You see, you know that, so I can use that.)”

So said Hari explaining how, in working with me, he will use concepts and texts with which I am familiar to get his messages across. Below is a bibliography of works referred to by Hari, or myself, in the course of these discussions.

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