

Breaking free from a damaging religious background is one of the most difficult things a person will ever do. It can be a volatile transition impacting every aspect of one's life such as personal identity, relationships with others, and evolving new beliefs about life and God. This is a difficult path to walk alone, which is why I created the Life After Religion 30-Day Guide.

Some of the topics I cover in this guide include:

- *making peace with your religious past*
- *undoing religious pathology*
- *learning new tools for personal liberation*
- *exploring what spirituality is for you*
- *cultivating a new kind of relationship with yourself*

The Life After Religion 30-Day Guide is a 50,000-word resource I created to assist people in disentangling themselves from the crippling impact of toxic religion. I created these investigations out of my 20 years of individual and group work with people recovering from spiritual abuse. Each investigation includes an assignment to help you process the themes and subjects in light of your own spiritual journey.

Each investigation includes an assignment to help you process the themes and subjects in light of your own spiritual journey.

These investigations are for your eyes only. This is copyrighted intellectual property. Please do not send it to others or reproduce or post it in any way. Thank you for understanding.

Every person's deconstruction process is unique to them. Some investigations may be more useful to you than others. I hope you find this guide useful.

Jim Palmer

Day-1: Personal Inventory

“The unexamined life is not worth living.”- Socrates

Asking the right questions

Socrates said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” That's a bold and absolute statement. He doesn't say that the unexamined life is "less meaningful than it could be." He unequivocally says it's not even worth living. At the very least it causes one to wonder about the consequences of a life that is left unexamined.

Socrates also said, "One question can be more instructive than a thousand answers." A great question can change the world. A great question can change your life. If you want to live a powerful life you have to ask powerful questions. Some questions can't be answered immediately. You have to look deep inside and search yourself for the answer. They don't have to be complicated questions. Sometimes the most profound and life-altering questions are very simple ones such as:

- *What truly matters to me?*
- *Why am I doing this?*
- *Is this good for me?*
- *Is this who I really am?*
- *Why can't I love myself?*
- *Why am I angry?*
- *What is behind my people-pleasing mentality?*
- *What is the source of my chronic discontent?*
- *What am I afraid of?*
- *What wound remains unhealed within me?*
- *What do I fear admitting to myself?*
- *Is this the life I want to be living?*
- *What do I need to let go of?*

Day-1 Investigation

Our Day-1 Investigation is about asking yourself questions about your shedding religion journey and where you are in the process of recovery and rebuilding. There are two parts to this investigation.

Part 1: Personal Inventory

It's somewhat obvious by the nature of this group why you decided to participate. But it would be useful to ask and probe more specific questions about this. The Day-1 Investigation involves taking an honest look at where you are right now in your life and spiritual journey. There are a set of questions to answer in four key areas as it relates to your life after religion. I encourage you to use a personal journal to record all the work you do in these daily investigations and assignments.

Personal Inventory:

Motivations and Expectations

- *What specifically motivated you to participate in the Life after Religion Group at this time in your life?*
- *What would you identify as 2-3 benefits you most hope to gain as a result of your participation?*
- *What one word would you choose that best describes your overall feeling about being in this group and why?*
- *What fears and apprehensions do you have?*

Life As You Now Experience It

- *On a scale of 1-10, how happy are you in life, and why?*
- *Do you feel at peace and free in your life, and why?*
- *What are a couple areas in your life that you would say are not working?*
- *What do you most wish was different about your life?*
- *What suffering do you experience in your life*

Unresolved Questions and Issues

- *What are some of the big post-religion questions for you right now?*
- *Is there something you are specifically struggling with about God and spiritual living?*
- *What is there for you from your religious past that needs resolved?*
- *What do you feel is most holding you back from recovering and being free of toxic religion*

What moves you

- *What are you passionate about?*
- *How do you understand the meaning of life and your purpose for being here?*
- *Where do you see your life heading?*

- *What potentialities and possibilities do you see for yourself that you want to fulfill in your life?*

Part 2: Sharing your journey

Part 2 of the Day-1 Investigation is about sharing where you're at with others.

- *An optional part of this investigation is to send me what you have written in response to the above questions. No one will see these except myself. Receiving your responses helps me know more about the questions, challenges and issues group members have in their shedding religion journey.*
- *Consider posting in the comments on this post, one or more answers to the third area of questions "Unresolved Questions and Answers." In most daily investigations I will be inviting you to share in the group for the purpose of building a supportive and meaningful online community. Share as much or as little as you are comfortable. It's not mandatory that you share, it's optional.*

Day 2: Making Peace with Your Religious Past

“Even the saddest things can become, once we have made peace with them, a source of wisdom and strength for the journey that still lies ahead.”

- Frederick Buechner

What it isn't, what it is

You must make peace with your religious past, however damaging it might have been. You must now take full responsibility for your spiritual journey. Perhaps you feel you gave too many years of your life away in vain to religion. Don't make the mistake of giving away more years in your bitterness. You have to move on. Making peace with your religious past is a necessary part of creating a liberating life beyond religion. Without this peace it will not be possible to truly be free.

What does it mean to make peace with your religious past? Let me start by identifying what it is not.

- Making peace with your religious past is NOT:
- Denying, minimizing or burying the damage of your religious past
- Excusing or a fake “forgiveness” of those who harmed you and were complicit in the damage that was done
- Judging and repressing the volatility of emotions one naturally feels such as hurt, betrayal and anger
- Blaming yourself
- Doing nothing and assuming the negative impact of religion will just eventually diminish and naturally work itself out

Making peace with your religious past IS:

- A conscious decision to do your personal work to process and heal from the damage experienced through one's ties to religion
- Owning, acknowledging and expressing the volatility of emotions that are a natural part of what one feels as result of the wounds and scars of religion
- Reflecting on the dynamics of your journey and experiences with religion to identify the lessons one can learn from

- Letting go of anger, bitterness and resentments, and coming to a place of healthy acceptance of your religious past and compassion for those who were part of the system or still are

Investigation: Processing Your Religious Past

This Investigation involves reflecting upon your journey through religion. This is the first tool that will help you disentangle yourself from your religious past. It will aid you in sorting out the dynamics that entangled you, and give you the opportunity to process your former religious involvement. There are five key areas to consider:

Identifying what your religious past cost you

This part of your self-reflection involves specifically identifying what your religious past cost you.

- How do you feel that religion most negatively impacted your life?
- In what ways did religion damage your spiritual, mental, emotional, physical and psychological health ?
- What deep wounds did religion leave behind in you?
- What do you feel your involvement in religion stole from you?
- What do you most grieve having missed or lost as a result of your involvement in religion?

As you work on this part of your personal inventory it's natural to feel hurt, sadness, disillusionment, anger and betrayal.

Naming destructive messages you internalized

This second area involves specifically naming the damaging fear-based and shame-based messages you absorbed through your involvement in religion. It's important that you identify these messages as succinctly and accurately as you felt, experienced and internalized them. Some examples may be: "I am not good enough." "I can't trust myself." "I am bad." "It's not okay to be me." Identify and write out the three most damaging messages you internalized from your involvement in religion.

Owning the ways you got entangled

In this part of the assignment you are owning the ways you unconsciously got entangled in the dynamics of your religious involvement. This is not blaming yourself but investigating in hindsight what happened along the way.

Looking back can you identify things you did or didn't do that were contributing factors? (For example, some people report that they had moments along the way when they

pushed aside their questions and doubts. Others speak of having been caught up in a groupthink mentality, which occurs when a group promotes “unity” based upon blind allegiance and fear of dissent.)

- What ways do you see that you got roped into destructive religious mindsets?

Noting the lessons you learned:

- Identify the most important lessons you learned through your involvement in religion.
- If you were asked to be a presenter in a panel discussion about the mistakes made and lessons learned through your involvement in religion what would you say?
- What are the two or three most significant lessons you learned through your religious past?
- What are the mistakes or choices you made that you would not want to repeat?

Consider recording your responses in your journal.

Acknowledging the continuing impact of religion

The last area involves taking an honest look at where you are now in terms of the continuing impact of toxic religion in your life.

- Thinking about your life and spiritual journey, what religious beliefs, mindsets, narratives and mentalities have been difficult for you to shake and still impact you?
- In what ways is your religious past still holding you back, preventing your peace, freedom, happiness and personal growth, or at the root of self-sabotaging beliefs and mindsets?

Working yourself through these questions is not something to tackle in one setting for thirty minutes or even an hour. It’s more the kind of personal work that could take a few days. It’s an activity of vigorous self-reflection. It’s important that you record your thoughts and feelings in your written or computer journal.

A second optional part of this assignment is to share this personal inventory with someone else. That person could be a trusted friend, someone who is walking a similar path, a significant other you trust, or a therapist. Also feel free to share as much as you would like with our group in a comment on this post. I encourage each group member to consider sharing an insight, discovery, or realization in a comment for each day’s investigation.

Day-3: Undoing Religious Pathology

“The difficulty lies not so much in developing new ideas as in escaping from old ones.”

- John Maynard Keynes

Religion can make you sick

I began a spiritual direction practice many years ago because I recognized that guiding and equipping people to address their religious pathology required significant individual work and support. Though this Life after Religion group offers tools and skills to begin addressing religious pathology, it's unrealistic to assume that this 30-day group can address all the issues one might face in addressing the damaging impact of religion.

Religious pathology are the psychological abnormalities or maladies that are developed as a result of one's dysfunctional religious experience. The degree of damage caused in a person's life as a result of their involvement in religion differs. Today it is recognized that many people suffer from Religious Trauma Syndrome (RTS). Religious Trauma Syndrome is a set of symptoms and characteristics that are related to harmful experiences with religion. Typically they are the result of two things: immersion in a controlling religion and the secondary impact of leaving a religious group. People who were indoctrinated into fundamentalist religion from an early age are likely to find the damage done by religion to be formidable.

Religious dynamics that damage people

The religious dynamics that are typically damaging to people's lives include:

- Fear-based orientation toward life

Many of the doctrines and teachings of organized religion are based in fear such as: fear of God; fear of God's disapproval, judgment, condemnation and rejection; fear of eternal hell; fear of God's discipline or the loss of God's blessing and protection; fear of oneself;

fear of life; fear of Satan and demonic influences; fear of the world; fear of others who are different.

- Shame-based view of self

Many people internalize the destructive religious message that they are intrinsically bad, absent of inherent worth, and repulsive to God in their natural state. It's not uncommon for traditional Christianity to teach that one's inherent sinfulness is so bad that it left God no choice but to brutalize, torture and kill his only son.

- Mistrust of self and the externalization of authority

Another component of harmful religion is the message that people cannot trust their own thoughts or feelings, and must accept and follow the authority of religious leaders. Fundamentalist theology damages one's intellectual development by explicitly warning against trusting one's own mind while requiring belief in far-fetched claims. Believers are not allowed to question dogma without endangering themselves. Critical thinking skills are under-valued. Emotions and intuitions are also considered suspect so people learn not to trust their own feelings. With external authority the only permissible guide, people lose touch with inner instincts necessary for decision making and moral development.

- Loss of authentic self

In many cases people learned to hide and suppress their true selves in their religious community, and perform an inauthentic identity of well-being and spirituality. Too often people were told that personal problems, depression, substance abuse and addiction, and other psychological struggles and disorders were an indication of a spiritual problem, lack of faith, disobedience, or falling out of God's favor. As a result people failed to divulge and seek help for inner struggles and maladies that could have otherwise been addressed through various avenues or professional treatments. Religion is often an assault on one's individuality by pressuring people to conform to the rules, norms, expectations and preferences of the religious group.

- Abuse of power

The abuse of power within toxic religion is a central component of the damage it afflicts in people's lives. In many cases mental, emotional and sexual harm is inflicted in families and churches because authoritarianism goes unchecked. Too many secrets are kept. Sexual repression in religion also contributes to child abuse. The sanctioned patriarchal power structure allows abusive practices towards women and children. Severe condemnation of LGBTQ individuals takes an enormous toll as well, including depression and suicide. So while the religious community can appear to offer a safe environment,

the pressures to conform, adhere to legalistic requirements, and submit to abuses of power, can cause great suffering.

- Volatility of discontinuing religious involvement

Breaking out of a restrictive, mind-controlling religion is understandably a liberating experience. People report huge relief and excitement about their new possibilities. Certain problems are over such as trying to twist one's thinking to believe irrational religious doctrines, and conforming to repressive codes of behavior. However, the challenges of leaving are daunting. For most people, the religious environment was a one-stop-shop for meeting all their major needs – social support, a coherent worldview, meaning and direction in life, structured activities, and emotional/spiritual satisfaction. Leaving the fold means multiple losses, including the loss of friends and support at a crucial time of personal transition. Consequently, it is often a very lonely and stressful life event.

For many men and women who leave religion, struggles with self-worth and fear of punishment continue. Coming out of a sheltered, repressed environment can result in a lack of coping skills and personal maturity. Prior indoctrination makes it difficult to avoid the stabbing thought, even many years after leaving religion, that one has made a terrible mistake, thinking "what if I am wrong?"

Breaking free from religion is one of the most volatile, disruptive, and destabilizing experiences a person walks through in life. One's sense of personal identity and security is tied to their religious belief-system. Leaving one's faith can feel like a death or divorce. "Relationship with God" was a central assumption, such that questioning this or giving it up feels like a deep loss to be grieved. Religion claims to offer the security of correct answers to life's biggest questions such as the existence of God, the meaning and purpose of life, and what happens when you die. When a person questions and loses confidence in these answers it often produces a debilitating burden of existential angst.

Understanding habit-energy

How does one address and move past religious pathology? In the previous post you identified destructive messages you internalized through your association with religion, and the ways your religious past still negatively impacts your life. How do you get past these? There is no quick fix or magic formula for rooting out religious pathology from your life. There are, however, some skillful ways to address it.

Each of us has created a tremendous amount of habit-energy that perpetuates religious pathology in our lives. Habits can be described as connections between neurons—or bonds—that are strong and induce us to continue a behavior. The more that we do the

behavior, the stronger the neural bonds, and the stronger the habit. Religion encodes people with ways of thinking about ourselves, God, life, others and the world. It becomes an embedded script that we reinforce through our thoughts and actions, which only strengthens its power further. This dynamic has an energy fueled through many years of reinforcement, which keeps people stuck in their religious pathology. Even after a person becomes conscious that the messages, beliefs, mindsets and narratives they learned from religion are erroneous, the habit-energy of these deeply imbedded beliefs and their damaging impact persists.

We have all heard the phrase, “use it or lose it.” The idea is that if you don't continue to practice or use an ability, you might lose that ability. Similarly, if we choose not to operate within those false messages we internalized through religion, the power of those messages gradually diminishes. At the same time, if we operate within what we have chosen to replace those harmful messages then we start to re-pattern our lives according to more whole, liberating and empowering mindsets.

Investigation: Re-Patterning

There are two parts of the assignment for undoing religious pathology.

- Part 1: Changing the message

Part 1 involves choosing what you feel is the most debilitating message you adopted through religion or identify the religious mindset you feel most continues to have a destructive impact in your life today. Review your personal inventory from the last investigation, specifically from the section, “Naming destructive messages you internalized”. Choose one of these messages.

With the message you chose, identify all the ways of thinking, feeling, being, relating, living and acting that you see in your life that are consistent with that destructive message. In other words, when you are operating within that harmful mindset, what or how are you thinking and feeling? What are you being? How are you living and acting? How do you relate to yourself, others, God, the world and life?

For example, let’s say the most damaging belief you adopted through religion is the belief that you can’t trust yourself. People who are impacted by religion in this way are prone to externalize the authority of their lives to someone or something outside themselves. They will typically look to a spiritual religious or spiritual guru to follow and adopt their teachings. Because religion taught them to mistrust what’s inside them and implied that they were not equipped or capable to guide their own spiritual life, they easily attach themselves to others for a sense of stability and security. Self-doubt, lack of self-confidence, low self-worth, self-judgment, shame, self-limiting beliefs, self-criticism,

people-pleasing and codependency may be some of the ways this manifests in that person's life.

Think about your life. What are you thinking and feeling inside when you are operating within that internalized religious lie? Who do you become? What does your life look like and become? How does it impact your wellbeing and relationships?

Consider recording your thoughts in a journal.

Next, create a new statement for yourself that you choose to believe or that expresses what is real and true to you, and which replaces the religious lie. For example, let's say that one of the destructive religious messages you internalized and still impacts your life is the message: "I am bad and unworthy; it's not okay to be me." Let's say your replacement truth is – "I have infinite worth; being me is good."

Take some time to reflect on what it might look like if you operated within the truth of your new message or statement. What would be different? What would your inner condition be? How would it change who you are in the world? When you are operating within that liberating place, what are your thoughts, feelings, ways of being, acting, living and relating? How would your relationships be different? Write it down. That's Part 1 of the assignment.

Feel free to share your insights, discoveries, realizations and statements with the group in a comment.

- Part Two: Witnessing your life

This part of the assignment involves being a student of your lived human experience. For the next few days be mindful of which mentality (religious lie or new belief) you are operating within. When you become aware that you are operating within the destructive mindset, make note of that. Look around and notice what the situation or circumstances are. Is there something to learn? Don't judge or condemn yourself. Like I said, it takes time to diminish habit-energy and re-pattern new ways of being in your life. Have compassion on yourself. Simply being mindful and noticing when you are operating within a destructive mindset helps to diminish its sway over you. Likewise, when you become mindful and notice you are operating within that liberating place, make note and celebrate! Acknowledge yourself and the changes that are unfolding in your life.

Day-4: Learning new tools for liberative living

"If I can't dance to it, it's not my revolution." - Emma Goldman

It's okay to be where you are

Many people feel shame about moving forward with their lives after they discontinue their association with organized religion. Here are some areas in which this guilt happens.

- Leaving Guilt

After one discontinues their active involvement in a church or religious organization, they may have lingering guilt feelings or remember all they might have heard in their religious environment about "falling away" or being "backslidden." Discontinuing involvement with one's religious community is a necessary and wise step for many people. This is a sign that you are taking personal responsibility for your spiritual journey, and honoring what feels right for you and the path you are on.

- God Ambivalence

Many people who leave religion become disinterested or put off by incessant talk, teachings and debate over various theological beliefs and concepts in personal conversations or on social media. It can start sounding like, "Blah, blah, blah..." There's no reason to feel badly about this ambivalence. Religion insists upon working out and packaging up God and spiritual things in concepts, formulas, elaborate explanations and belief systems. It can become a hamster wheel and never-ending conundrum of achieving "correct beliefs." For many people who leave religion, this endeavor feels overdone, boring, and even pointless. You are free to explore spirituality in whatever ways are meaningful for you, which may or may not involve the need to conceptualize, theologize or even explicitly verbalize a lot of talk about "God."

- People Reversal

After religion you may find that the very people your group or tradition judged and condemned are the very people you most find interesting and enjoyable, and with whom you feel resonance. Once you come out from under the judgmental labels, views and stereotypes you learned through religion, you start realizing how much you truly like and enjoy the people you were taught to hate. This is a good and liberating aspect of shedding religion. For too long you were shut off from a lot of beautiful and extraordinary people in this world to enjoy and learn from.

- Defiant Side

People who leave religion often find and express a rebellious or defiant part of themselves that was tamed by religion and became dormant. Don't feel bad about this. Too often religion turns people into nice, compliant, repressed, timid, inhibited, mannerly, obedient, fearful, amiable, submissive people. By the way, I would not use any of these words to describe Jesus. You can be a loving, compassionate, respectful and kind person AND be a rebellious, defiant, passionate, disobedient, subversive, nonconformist, mischievous, self-willed, fully expressed, freethinker, heretic, and free spirit human being.

- Enjoying human life

After leaving religion, you may find less fulfillment in religious things, and more satisfaction in human things. It's okay and good to be human, and to enjoy each moment of your human journey. Religion caused many people to create a false division between "sacred" things and "secular" things. There is no such line. All of life is sacred, spiritual, and divine. There's no need to defend, theologize, or spiritualize your human experience. Just live it! That is enough. Life is made complete by you living each moment. There's no need to maintain a running commentary about how God is part of it. God IS part of it. Life and God are inseparable. End of story. It's okay to enjoy life, experience delight and pleasure, do the things you enjoy doing, and breathe life into you, whatever those things may be.

Creating your path from the inside out

You are free to create a life that is satisfying and fulfilling, but for many people who spent years in religion it is difficult identifying what exactly that is. Here is a list of 18 questions to aid you in exploring what a liberating life is for you:

- What makes you come alive?
- What satisfies you most deeply?
- What fills you up?
- What brings you joy?

- What centers you?
- What need in the world moves you to action?
- What hardship and suffering in the world weighs heavy on your heart?
- What injustice in the world makes you angry?
- What is a source of delight and pleasure for you?
- What areas, fields, or subjects are you interested in exploring?
- What makes you feel connected to yourself?
- What forms of self-expression are the most gratifying?
- What would your sense of adventure tell you to do?
- What way of being in the world resonates most deeply with your heart?
- Where does your sense of curiosity take you?
- How are you most compelled to aid the liberation of others?
- Where in life are you inspired to be a tangible expression of love, acceptance, and compassion?
- What nurtures a greater love for yourself and others?

The answers to these questions is a good place to start in determining what “spirituality” means for you.

This Investigation is a three-part assignment.

Part 1 is investing time to reflect upon and answer the above 18 questions. Record your answers in your written or online journal. You may have more than one or even several answers to any one question. Religion has a way of programming people with prescribed answers and responses that are not authentic or generated from one’s inner self. The key is to truly listen to your innermost thoughts and feelings as you answer.

Part 2 of the assignment is to identify two or three concrete or tangible actions that relate to your answer for each question. In other words, what would it look like or what would you be doing or being in the world if you were to step out and apply your answers to your life in a practical way? Identify two or three of these that relate to your answers for each question. Be as specific as possible in the way you identify these actions. After you complete part two of the assignment you should have 36 – 54 specific and direct actions you have created from your answers.

Part 3 of this investigation is to take the next 5 consecutive days and choose one or two of those actions to live each day. Choose a different two for each day for those five consecutive days. Look through the list each morning and pick one or two that especially feel inspiring and do/be them that day. At the end of each day, record in your journal your thoughts about your experience.

Day-5: Cultivating a revolutionary spirituality

“No one is free until we are all free.” - Martin Luther King, Jr.

The beliefs, mindsets, narratives and ideologies of Martin Luther King Jr.'s day diminished, oppressed and divided people because of their color and race. Suddenly he got real, and spoke the truth from his deep feelings and convictions. His "I have a dream" speech was not spoken from his head. It has the ring of power and authority to it because he was lifting it up out of his innermost being. He challenged people to turn away from what was programmed in their heads, and to turn toward what was real deep inside them - that all human beings are equal brothers and sisters in one human family. I wonder when we are going to turn away from lies of our day that are running our lives and dividing us against each other.

Inner Anarchy

I use “inner anarchy” as a way of talking about revolutionary spirituality. This mindset understands that the lack of peace, freedom, harmony, and well-being in our world is a reflection of the lack of these within ourselves. The inner anarchist addresses the root cause of their own suffering, disharmony and oppression, and realizes that this is necessary in order to aid the liberation of others. The inner anarchist questions the beliefs, mindsets, narratives and ideologies that are ruling, governing, and determining their lives. They turn away from these powers that have been programmed into their heads, and reclaim possession of their own lives. Inner anarchists stop externalizing the authority for their lives, and operate from the power and authority within themselves. They trust what is real in their deep feelings and what they know is true in their gut. They march to the beat of a different drummer, which is a higher awareness inside them. Their lives are an expression of that awareness.

As things now stand, there are false beliefs, mindsets, narratives and ideologies that are governing our lives and world. We must first recognize that these are present inside each of us individually. They are poured into us from an early age through religion, education,

government, media, and popular culture. These falsehoods have been programmed into our heads, and we have been socialized into systems and structures that operate upon them. The cycle is complete once we follow suit and perpetuate these false narratives, ideologies, and systems ourselves.

The first step in revolution is rooting out the falsehoods within ourselves, and accepting how we have been complicit in creating and perpetuating the brokenness of our world. We have to start with ourselves.

Birthing a different world that operates upon a whole new way of being human and living together in harmony as one human family is possible. The source of this transformed way is inside you. There is a life, spirit, consciousness, ultimate reality, higher awareness [insert your word here] that runs through all of us. It's the direct and unmediated experience of peace, liberation, love, harmony, oneness, joy, abundance and well-being. It knows nothing of fear, separation, division, greed, injustice, oppression, scarcity or lack. Revolutionary spirituality incarnates this higher awareness into words and actions.

Making the old way obsolete and birthing a new world isn't something that happens all at once. It's not going to fall out of the sky or magically appear. We're going to have to cultivate, nurture and rear it. It starts by deprogramming ourselves from false beliefs, mindsets, narratives and ideologies, and turning toward the guidance and empowerment of our higher spiritual awareness. It's divesting ourselves from the current order, and creating a new reality in its place through direct action individually and collectively. Both the inner world and the outer expression are equally significant, and one without the other will not work.

Start with you

Every day there are countless people who feel they are not making a difference in the world. They wake up with this burden and go looking for something to do or achieve to feel significant. People will go to great lengths to alleviate this burden.

But consider this. Humankind is interconnected and interrelated in the same way as the cells of our human body. The cell is the basic structural and functional unit of all known living organisms. It is the smallest unit of life that is classified as a living thing, and is the building block of life. Humans contain about 100 trillion cells, but the condition of one individual cell has an effect on the wellness of the whole body.

So it is with the body of humanity. Each of us are individual cells – 7 billion of them. The healing of the body of humanity can only occur in the measure of its single cells healing themselves. Each time a human being changes his or her mind from false perception to true perception, the effect on humanity is immeasurable. The impact of one individual

releasing fear and embracing love is beyond measure. One person being awakened from the illusion of separation releases a liberating energy into the world. Turning away from the false beliefs and mindsets that have ruled us from within, and listening, trusting, following, speaking and acting from our higher spiritual awareness is being the change we want to see in the world.

Be a freethinker

Being an independent and freethinker means questioning and deconstructing the prevailing views, mentalities, and ideologies that shape and govern our lives. Don't accept any rationale or justification for the status quo; dig into it and make it legitimize itself to you on the basis of the truth you know inside you. Being willing to question those things that you were told never to question. Being willing to question those things that would never occur to you to question. Being a freethinker means breaking your dependency on others to do your thinking for you. It includes “unlearning” – divesting ourselves from all kinds of beliefs, mindsets, narratives and ideologies that have been programmed within us. Being a freethinker means we break our tendency to externalize authority to sources outside ourselves – no more hero worship or people on pedestals. We grow in confidence in listening to and trusting what lies within us. We hold our own in the face of criticism and disapproval. Being a freethinker means educating yourself. Ignorance is one of the biggest obstacles. A freethinker takes the time to explore what's driving the way things currently are in our world. A freethinker learns the history and developments behind the way things are now, and realizes this will require investigating deeper than popular media.

Birthing a new world

In terms of the outer expression of our inner work, there are two sides of it. With our left hand we divest ourselves from whatever form those falsehoods have taken in our world, and with our right hand we lift up, live and demonstrate the alternative. Through your inner work, you begin recognizing that many of the foundational systems and structures of our world are based upon and operating from false beliefs, mindsets, narratives and ideologies. You become aware of how they oppress people in countless ways, and stand in the way of true liberation.

As a person questions and turns away from the false beliefs, mindsets, narratives and ideologies that have filled their head, they become more aware of how those beliefs and mindsets are driving and dictating the rules humankind have been trained to live by, and the systems and structures that perpetuate them. Once that inner revolution happens with a person they find it less tolerable to keep playing the game. A person who is serious about this begins to divest themselves from the game, and stops participating in the societal systems and structures that are part of it. Makes sense. How can someone

continue to keep the rules and play a game that is based on lies and violates what we know inside is real and true?

This is what the “inner” people can learn from the “anarchy” folk. Whereas many people cannot even conceive the possibility of a society that operates without or outside those hierarchical systems, structures and institutions, anarchists see it quite clearly, and have no doubt that humankind can find new expressions of solidarity and cooperation to build a world that works for everyone. Anarchist concepts such as voluntary association, mutual aid and self-organization are but a few specific and practical ways anarchists see society functioning without any ruling class or hierarchies of power. Can you imagine our society functioning without our current economic and labor models such as capitalism and corporatism? Probably not. Ask an anarchist and they will explain exactly how it could work. The anarchist mindset and sentiment is helpful because it shows and empowers us to see that we can actually break our dependency on the system.

However, here’s the problem. Let’s say we divested ourselves from the current order, systems and structures that are operating upon those false beliefs, mindsets, narratives and ideologies. Let’s say we all did this and the old system and order went obsolete and faded away. What would we create in its place? Well I know this much, if whatever we construct was being generated out of the same source that created the first order, we would end up with the same mess all over again. History has proven this cycle countless times – liberators become oppressors. Why is this? Because the problem was never really the systems and structures themselves but the false beliefs, mindsets, narratives and ideologies driving them. Where are these false beliefs, mindsets, narratives and ideologies? Inside us... all of us!

Anarchy-minded people have to do their inner work – both sides of it: dethroning those false beliefs, mindsets, narratives, and ideologies programmed within them AND turning toward that higher truth and awareness within them. It’s a switch of sources. Anarchy itself can become just another ego-driven ideology that we beat people over the head with if it is being generated out of our heads. Any anarchy that is not being generated from that inner truth or awareness will eventually unravel into division, turmoil, chaos and unnecessary violence.

Divesting ourselves from the old order and birthing a new world isn’t going to be rainbows, ponies and unicorns. When tectonic plates are shifting there is instability. The old order and its mindsets and ideologies are not going to go quietly into the night. There will be conflict and confrontation. We should not think that the new world is just going to be some re-configuration of ideas that we mine out of our heads. The true source for a new world is that spirit of transcendence and higher truth within us all. We

must listen, trust, follow, speak, lift up and live what we know is real and true from that deep awareness.

We have to wed the two together: Inner + Anarchy = New World.

Day-5 Investigation: Part 1

There are three parts to the Day-5 investigation that are based on this question: What would it look like for you to live a revolutionary spirituality?

Review the below areas of revolutionary spirituality:

1. Being an independent and freethinker, questioning the way things are.
2. Imagining new possibilities for a liberated humankind and social order that works for all. Not just knowing what you're against, but what you are for.
3. Unlearning – identifying and divesting from our lives the falsehoods that have been programmed into our heads.
4. Probing farther and looking deeper, educating oneself on the current situation of our world and issues of our day.
5. Looking upon the world through eyes of compassion. No longer dividing the world up into “us” and “them” or any label – see only one human family and every person as your sister or brother, mother or father, or son or daughter. Approaching humankind with compassion, realizing that every person is a manifestation of their conditioning until they become conscious of it.
6. Honoring what you are passionate about – identifying issues, problems, needs, opportunities, injustices, etc. that touch your life on a daily level that you deeply care about.
7. Networking with people who share your passion, and desire to live a revolutionary spirituality as well.
8. Be willing to take risks. Taking a stand and staying the course in the face of opposition, resistance and risk.
9. Converting your good intentions into tangible actions. Committing to daily actions that reflect your highest beliefs.
10. Divesting yourself and discontinuing your support or involvement in the false beliefs, mindsets, narratives, ideologies and systems afoot in the world. The current system and order only has the power we give to it through our participation; divest yourself from that old order by refusing to play the game.
11. Expressing yourself and your revolutionary ideas – making videos and art, speak, sing, and write blogs, books, comments, social media posters, rhymes, stories, and articles about what emerges from all of the above.

12. Expecting resistance and don't back down – exposing and confronting the systems of our world that perpetuate domination, injustice, oppression, and disharmony in our world won't be thrilled with you.
13. Switching sources - getting out of your head and turning toward what is real in your deep feelings and what you know is true in your gut - listening to it, lifting it up, expressing it, speaking it out naturally in your own words.

Write down in your journal for each of the 13 areas how these ideas of revolutionary spirituality could be incorporated into your life in a way that truly inspires you. This may take you a few days to complete. Don't rush through the areas in one setting; perhaps ponder a few of them each day.

Day-5 Investigation: Part 2

Part 2 of this investigation is to spend the next five days practicing revolutionary spirituality by living one of the items you identified in Part 1. Choose a different one for each of the five days. At the end of each day, record your thoughts in your journal about your experience.

Day-5 Investigation: Part 3

The 3rd part of this activity involves a greater commitment and risk. Think through the people you currently know and invite one or more people to do a 30-day revolutionary spirituality project with you or as a group. Share with them the list of 13 areas and agree on a set of revolutionary ideas to put into practice together.

Day-6: Not Laying a Cracked Foundation

“When a builder builds he clears the ground for his new foundations. Then he sees that the basic structure will support the whole. Should we not also clear the mind - at least that part of it that we can reach - of the ruins of past thinking.”

- Christmas Humphreys

What follows are a few mistakes I made in my journey out of religion. Referring to these as “mistakes” may be unfair. What I describe below is typical, probably unavoidable, and perhaps even necessary at the time. I refer to them as “mistakes” because they are not very productive as a regular practice, and I would not intentionally repeat them again. I have discovered that these are common challenges many people experience in leaving religion.

1. Fundamentalism

The term “fundamentalism” is normally associated with religious extremism. Fundamentalism is a strict, rigid and fanatical attachment to a belief-system. Typically, fundamentalists condemn, vilify, and hold contempt for those who do not subscribe to their views. Virtually any set of ideas, beliefs or views can become fundamentalist. We tend to think especially of ultra-conservative fundy Christians when we hear the term fundamentalism. But there can be progressive/liberal Christian fundamentalists, Atheist fundamentalists, Buddhist fundamentalists, Muslim fundamentalists, Jewish fundamentalists, New Age fundamentalists, and many more. Fundamentalists insist that their belief system, philosophy, understandings or experiences are superior. Religious fundamentalism often leads to the objectification and demonization of the “unbeliever” but there is also a kinder/gentler fundamentalism that is still in the end ... fundamentalism.

We can create a fundamentalist mindset out of any new understanding, concept, experience, or discovery. We become beholden to our latest epiphany, make it the new

standard, and it becomes our new religion. You don't necessarily have to be nasty or belligerent about it but there is still a certain insistence, silent pride and arrogance to it. What sometimes happens is that a person switches sides from a fundamentalism that was a proponent of religion, to a fundamentalism that becomes an opponent of religion.

The way I reasoned this out for myself is as follows:

I am not against religion categorically, but I am unwaveringly against the misuse of religion. I will fight tooth and nail against the abuses of religion whenever I come across them, which is often. However, I will not belittle genuine people of faith or mock and disparage what others find meaningful and sacred. Not everyone's experience of religion is the same. It's not necessary that we all have the same religious, non-religious, spiritual or philosophical beliefs. A basic human right is the freedom to choose our beliefs. It is self-evident that teachings that promote mindsets and actions such as hatred, injustice, greed, oppression, prejudice, and dehumanization are unsound, and teachings that engender mindsets and actions such as love, compassion, goodness, courage, harmony, and human solidarity are good. I will take issue with any religious doctrine, teaching or practice that encourages the former, and will affirm those that promote the latter.

I am often carping on Christianity for the ways I believe some versions of it damages people and poisons our world. However, I'm not going to post a meme that mocks Jesus in some disgusting, obscene or derisive way. If I do, aren't I committing the same offense I condemn in others? It's true that many people are damaged by being on the receiving end of some preacher's fundamentalist, twisted, or pathological ideas and interpretations about God. I've spent a great deal of my professional life counseling people in recovering from toxic religion. However, in what way am I contributing to a more just, humane, and tolerant society if I lump all religious people and expressions of religion into one group, which I categorically condemn and mock? We can all be fundamentalists. It's an ego dysfunction we all have. I'm not against religion. I'm against the misuse or abuse of religion. Even if I am not a practitioner of any particular religion, that doesn't mean everyone else is wrong or worse if they do.

2. Over-correction

You are driving down the street and notice you are about to go off the road into a ditch. Your reaction is to grab the wheel and by over-correcting, you fly across the road and crash into the ditch on the other side. By avoiding one ditch, you managed to steer right into another. It's no secret that any person who feels led astray and betrayed by their religion is likely to become it's biggest critic. A person lives many years under the oppression of religion and in reaction to this, they make all religion wrong. Their new religion is anti-religion. I'm not saying we should not confront the toxicity of religion. However, we should go further than this and live the alternative. I have met people from

many different religious, spiritual and philosophical traditions and belief systems, and have found in our shared humanity a basis for love and solidarity, and a common desire to work together to build a world that works for everyone.

Over-correction can also occur with respect to our thinking about God. The theistic God of fundamentalist Christianity does not represent a wide spectrum of different thoughts and views about God and ultimate reality.

When you were a child and before you had even heard the word “God”, you had no defined conception of God. Theoretically, you could have been told that a tree was God or one of your stuffed animals, and you would have believed it, in much the same manner that a young child is conditioned into a certain belief about Santa Clause. The point is that we are conditioned into how we think of God and what God is. There are countless factors that are part of this conditioning, including:

- the period of history in which you were born and live
- the part of the world in which you were born and live
- the influences of family, culture and society
- the kind of Christianity you were exposed to
- the particular church you attended
- the view of God held by the pastor, sunday school teachers, etc., based upon all their conditioning

Leaving religion often involves rejecting the notion of “God” you were conditioned into believing. At this point a person could say “there is no God” or they could say “my notion of God was inadequate, irrational, unfounded and absurd, and I no longer believe such a ‘God’ is real.”

I mention this because sometimes it seems that the God landscape is reduced to two options:

Option A: The Fundamentalist View of God (Christian Theism)

Option B: God is non-existent and meaningless (Atheism)

In my view, this is way too simplistic of a framework for considering the notion of "God."

A rational thing to do would be to step back and question every single assumption you have about what God must be. In other words, to forget everything you think you know about God, which would be all the ideas inside the God container you were conditioned into believing.

This logic could be applied to anything. You were conditioned into certain beliefs about many things. For example, you were conditioned into certain beliefs about what is

required to be happy. Perhaps you were conditioned into the idea that acquiring fame and fortune is the trick for a life of happiness. In this mindset, it's either fame and fortune or bust. What's needed here is to step back and question your assumptions about happiness. Maybe your conditioned conception of happiness is fundamentally flawed and absurd, and you need to start from scratch and rethink the entire notion of happiness on different terms.

What I'm saying is that this way of thinking could be applied to notions of "God". People are not inclined to do this because they become attached and entrenched in a particular "position" about God - either for it or against it - and this becomes a central component of their sense of self, identity and security.

I'm not advocating any particular belief in God or non-belief in God. I'm wanting to share some thoughts on how we think about the question of God itself.

The word 'God' is problematic. Perhaps no other word in the English language evokes such a strong response. Whether you are a person of deep faith or an atheist, the word elicits a decisive reaction.

The idea of God is often seen as synonymous with religion. People associate God with a supreme being or deity, and the theism of Christianity quickly comes to mind. In my years of working with people who have been psychologically damaged through their involvement in fundamentalist religion, many people disavow their belief in the doctrines of Christianity, including any belief in God, which seem to be inextricably tied together. Because of the history associated with the word 'God,' whenever the word or idea comes up it is met with vitriol because of the history associated with it, which is understandable.

It is unfortunate whenever the notion of God is solely equated with fundamentalist religion. For a period, people thought the world was flat. Then it was discovered this could not be true and they were wrong. This doesn't mean they denied the existence of a world altogether; it was their working theory about how the world existed that was flawed and mistaken. Turns out, they discovered, the world is round.

The most common notion about God is that God is a supreme being. In many respects this idea isn't terribly original. There's something a little fishy about the idea that God is essentially a bigger and better version of ourselves. It was once said that if a group of cows assembled to define God, it would be some projection of themselves into a supreme cow-like being. Are we created in God's image, or do we create and imagine God in ours. We tend to be fond of the idea of God having something resembling human personhood. Greek mythology entails a plethora of gods with superhuman powers and abilities. Monotheism simply reduces the number of gods (polytheism) to one God, typically the God of the Bible. Many people are conditioned into the theistic idea that

God is an omniscient and omnipotent being who knows your name, and has a personalized plan for your life. This isn't the only way to think about God and may be the most indefensible view.

The idea that God is a supreme being - a perfected version of ourselves with the qualities of personhood - has its problems. How "ultimate" can ultimate reality be if it's basically just a stronger, better, cooler version of ourselves who can do a bunch of magic tricks? How believable can it be that there is a supreme person who single-handedly created the universe in a few days and oversees the daily affairs of human existence? Like the flat-earth theory, this is a rather crude framework or model for the universe in light of the discoveries and understandings of science.

So, what are the options in terms of what God could be?

First, let's take God as a noun - a person, place or thing. We've already covered the idea of God as a person (ie. a "being" with qualities of personhood). It's unlikely that God as a "place" makes sense because the idea of a "place" is limited to a location and boundaries, and people tend to think of God as infinite and unlimited. Then there's the possibility of God as a thing. Most people would not think any one material thing (i.e. rock, tree) could constitute an infinite God, although pantheism views the universe and all living things as a manifestation of God, and panentheism views God simultaneously as both the soul of the universe and one who transcends it. The idea of God as a "thing" can also fall into the category of a non-material thing - soul, spirit, force, energy, etc. Many people who leave Christianity and continue to hold a belief in God tend to have this idea of God as a non-material reality.

In terms of what you might consider with respect to the notion of God, I would suggest you get out a little. Being indoctrinated into some version of Christian theism, then leaving religion and rejecting that notion of God, and then concluding therefore there can be no God on any terms isn't exactly the height of critical thinking. That's like going to Baskin Robbins, ordering a certain flavor of ice cream and not liking it, and therefore concluding that all ice cream is bad.

Get out a little. Out beyond a person's Bible-thumping tradition, there is a rich and profound tradition of brilliant people who thought of God on different terms. For example, Hegel did not believe God was anything like a supreme deity who ruled the world. Hegel believed God was the process of self-determination that is imbued into the cosmos. In other words, something that makes itself what it is, is more fully real and real in an ultimate sense, than something made by something else and constantly dependent on something else. Whenever we transcend the shackles of our cultural slavery and conditioning, according to Hegel, we are more real in those moments because we are self-determined - we are making ourselves into what we are, rather than being at the

mercy of something else. In other words, God is not some Gandalf-looking guy in the sky granting wishes to people, God is the process of self-determination. Wouldn't that make God the truest reality? Therefore, according to Hegel's notion, God is what is most real. In a nutshell, you might say that Hegel's idea is that God is an archetype of a creative mechanism or thing that sustains the laws of the universe, the evolutionary thrust of the human species, and the self-determining and self-actualizing tendency within every human person.

Hegel wrote, "Religion is a begetting of the divine spirit, not an invention of human beings but an effect of the divine at work, of the divine productive process within humanity." Hegel writes, of God as "... the eternal relationship, the eternal process of knowing in which the subject posits itself as identical with its essence."

I'm not trying to argue that Hegel's notion of God is right or that you should adopt it. I'm simply pointing out that the Christian theistic idea of God isn't the only way of thinking about God. Who said God must be like a person or a being? Just because this is the idea of God a person was conditioned into, doesn't mean this is the only way of thinking about God. It's debatable if even Jesus held to the theist view of God most commonly associated with the monotheistic religions.

What I'm suggesting is the following idea: the landscape for critically working out the notion of God cannot be reduced to the following two-option framework: (1) the God I was conditioned into believing, or (2) there is absolutely no notion of God that can be real or meaningful.

3. Insecurity

Insecurity can express itself in a strong need for your beliefs and experiences to be validated by others. How do others validate your beliefs and experiences? By agreeing with them. We view the people who don't agree or share our beliefs and experiences as a threat to our sense of identity. We feel invalidated. It's very difficult to truly accept and learn from another person as long as your need for validation is running the show. What happens is that you begin dividing people up on sides. You want people on "your side" because that makes you feel secure and validated. People on the "other side" are seen as the enemy. Needing to be "right" is often an issue of insecurity and needing validation from others.

We often tie our identity to a group or tribe. We are unlikely to question, critique or express dissent in our tribe because we derive our sense of self from being a member of the group. In a later investigation we will explore the process of "individuation" as taught by psychologist Carl Jung.

4. Laziness

I don't mean for the word to sound as harsh as it might seem. Here's my point. Most people want a formula or magic bullet. They are not truly willing to do their due diligence at a soul level, and would prefer someone just give them the answer or figure it out for them. We tend to quickly defer to outspoken or popular personalities, our group/tribe leaders, people we put on pedestals, and the so-called experts and authorities to do our thinking for us.

Here are 10 ways to protect yourself from this mentality:

1. Question those things that you were told never to question
2. Question those things that would never occur to you to question
3. Break your dependency on others to do your thinking for you
4. Break your tendency to externalize authority to sources outside yourself
5. Stop participating in hero worship and putting people on pedestals
6. Grow in confidence in listening to and trusting yourself
7. Hold your own in the face of criticism and disapproval
8. Invest time and energy in becoming a more knowledgeable person
9. Learn the steps involved for critical thinking and apply them often
10. Test and verify all "truth" by your own personal experience

There is no substitute for: your own direct and personal experience; your own self-examination and introspection; your own investigation and critical thinking; your own exploration and action; your own inner work and meditation; your own practice and integration... when it comes to transformation and liberation.

Any "truth" you give credence to because it is: an enlightened guru's teaching; carries a celebrity endorsement; taught by some self-help superstar; claims to be channeled from a great sage; passed through a revered spiritual lineage; attached to a preferred belief-system; based upon a particular holy book... cannot be a substitute for your own critical thinking and direct experience. No one can do it for you. The path is made by walking.

The question is not whether we will make mistakes; we will. Your mistakes may be very different from mine. The issue is learning from our mistakes and not repeating them.

Day-6 Investigation

Today's investigation is reflecting upon the "mistakes" that are inevitably a part of every person's process of shedding religion and cultivating a new life after religion. Here are a few questions to consider in introspection:

- In what way do the mistakes of “fundamentalism”, “over-correction”, insecurity”, and “laziness” relate to your shedding religion journey? Are there adjustments, corrections, or changes for you to make that would be advantageous as you continue on your path?
- Are there other mistakes or missteps that you feel you’ve made along the way that you wouldn’t want to repeat? What precautions can you take?

Consider the possibility of sharing some of your mistakes, missteps, and challenges with the group in a comment on this post.

Day-7 Relationship with yourself

“Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation.” - Audre Lorde

Who or what is running your life?

The externally-authored life is a life that is defined, governed and determined by external sources, which could include: religious indoctrination; social conditioning; inherited roles and scripts; imposed pressures, demands and expectations of others. The internally-authored life is a life that is generated from within yourself, and is based upon the use of the tools and competencies available naturally as a human being, such: as reason; intentionality; critical thinking; proactivity; virtue; and freedom of choice. This is often referred to as "agency" or "human agency". An "agent" is a being with the capacity to act, and "agency" denotes the exercise or manifestation of this capacity. Human beings come into the world with consciousness, self-awareness, freedom and agency, which endows us with the opportunity and responsibility to create what we become.

Is God responsible for your life?

Religion typically teaches people that the most important relationship in life is their relationship with God, characterized by submission, obedience, appeasement, and dependence. People are further taught that they cannot trust themselves, and lack the wisdom, power, and capacity to effectively guide and manage their own lives. The “I am weak, He is strong”-mentality corrodes a person’s belief in themselves. We come to believe we are desperately dependent upon God at every moment. We see ourselves as lacking, inadequate, and powerless, and believe that only God can rescue us.

For a human being to effectively direct their lives they must have a strong sense of self-worth, self-trust and self-reliance. But these are the exact qualities that religion too often strips away from a person. Throughout history, religion has repeatedly discouraged people from thinking for themselves, dissuaded them from questioning what they’ve been told, and discredited their ability to direct their own lives. Religion weakens

people's relationship with themselves, and replaces it with a dependency on a particular belief-system, and the leaders and organization that represents it.

The effect of the original sin doctrine is human repression. Human repression is a state in which a person is prevented from validating and expressing his or her humanity. What I mean by "humanity" are one's natural thoughts and feelings that occur spontaneously in response to the world around us. Since its inception Institutional Christianity has been vilifying people's humanity. It has cast a wide shadow of shame, leaving the masses with the belief that there is something fundamentally and intrinsically wrong with who we are. We doubt ourselves. We fear ourselves.

There are several characteristics of religion that can hinder the process of personal growth, maturation, and self-actualization:

1. The "old is gone and the new has come"-mentality can be used as permission to not squarely confront, face, and address the painful or unresolved issues of your past that continue to impact your present life and relationships.
2. The premise that people are inherently bad, born "sinners," and rejected by God can greatly diminish one's worth and value, and relationship with self.
3. The tendency to focus on externals, appearances, and change as behavior modification/morality can distract a person from digging deep enough into the layers of who they are, which is necessary for growth and transformation.
4. Seeking/expecting God's "intervention" in one's life can cause a kind of passivity where a person doesn't take responsibility or action in ways they are necessary for growth and transformation.
5. Meeting-based and surface-level relationships, which sometimes characterize institutional church, can often lack the depth, honesty, authenticity and vulnerability that we need in our relationships to support our growth and transformation.
6. The separatist mentality of religious subculture can cut people off from connection and relationship with others outside that subculture, which significantly limits the people who could be contributing to our journey of growth and transformation.

Shifting the focus in your post-religion life

Consider the possibility that the theological questions that religion got you absorbed in are not the most important questions for you to answer or focus on in life. The goal here is not to come up with better answers to the same questions, but to discard these questions entirely, and ask a whole new set of questions altogether.

Here are a few questions worth considering:

- Who am I being in life and why, and is this who I want to be?
- What matters most to me in life, and are my daily mindsets, actions and choices an expression of that?
- What am I holding onto that I need to let go of?
- What limiting beliefs, self-sabotaging mindsets, or false stories am I carrying that are preventing me from living life fully?
- What fear do I need to face, what resistance do I need to push through, or what comfort zone do I need to break out of, in order to take the next step on my journey?
- How do I need to make peace with my past, and move on with my life?
- Am I doing the deep personal work to address the root causes of my chronic unhappiness and disharmony?
- Am I cultivating a healthy relationship with myself through self-acceptance, self-care, self-compassion, self-confidence and self-actualization?
- Am I leaving a legacy of compassion, courage, integrity, and happiness?

Your relationship with you

The focus of religion tends to be having a “right relationship with God”. Consider the possibility of shifting your focus to having a healthy relationship with yourself.

There are no secrets or shortcuts when it comes to cultivating a life of well-being, wholeness, happiness, meaning and fulfillment. The foundation for this kind of life is forging a certain quality of relationship with yourself.

A few important areas of relationship with yourself include:

- Self-awareness (exploring your authentic and innermost thoughts, feelings, beliefs, needs, desires, fears, motivations, patterns, habits)
- Self-love (regard for one's own worth, wellbeing and happiness)
- Self-acceptance (seeing the totality of yourself without judgment)
- Self-compassion (extending compassion to one's self in instances of perceived inadequacy, failure, or general suffering)
- Self-care (actions and attitudes which contribute to the maintenance of wellbeing and personal health and promote your personal growth)
- Self-trust (following what your own thoughts, feelings, beliefs, intuition, judgment, insights, and body tells you)
- Self-confidence (empowered to rise to new challenges, seize opportunities, deal with difficult situations, and take responsibility if and when things go awry)

- Self-reliance (reliance on one's own abilities, capacities, powers and resources rather than those of others.)
- Self-efficacy (confidence in one's own ability to achieve intended results)
- Self-actualization (the realization of one's own maximum potential and possibilities)
- Self-expression (giving expression to your unique thoughts, feelings, gifts, personality and individuality)
- Self-respect (feeling a sense of harmony, dignity and gratification in life as a result of taking consistent actions that are aligned with your values and convictions)
- Self-responsibility (taking personal responsibility for your life and your happiness and wellbeing, and doing the personal work to address the root causes of your chronic unhappiness, disharmony, anxiety and fear)
- Self-inquiry (Going deeper into yourself to investigate what you are and what your true being and nature is, beyond our conventional identification of ourselves as a body and mind)

Day-7 Investigation

The Day-7 Investigation is taking a step in the direction of prioritizing your relationship with yourself. Here are two questions to assist you:

- What three areas from the above list do you feel would be the most significant and meaningful to cultivate in your life right now?
- What two or three choices, actions, mindsets or commitments do you feel would be most useful and beneficial in cultivating these areas of relationship with yourself?

Feel free to share in a comment any Day-7 discoveries, realizations or insights you had.

Day-8: Exploring Non-Religious Spirituality

“Science is not only compatible with spirituality; it is a profound source of spirituality.” - Carl Sagan

What is spirituality?

A reasonable place to begin is to define spirituality. A basic dictionary definition states, “Spirituality is the quality of being concerned with the human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things.” I would call your attention to that part of the definition that contrasts "spirit/soul" with "material/physical." Spirituality is a realm or area of inquiry that is non-material.

Spirituality is a broad concept with room for many perspectives. In general, it includes a sense of connection to something bigger than ourselves, and it typically involves a search for meaning in life. As such, it is a universal human experience—something that touches us all. People may describe a spiritual experience as sacred or transcendent or simply a deep sense of aliveness and interconnectedness.

Non-Religious Spirituality

In the non-religious community there are different ways people relate to the word and concept of spirituality. Atheist neuroscientist Sam Harris describes spirituality as, “.... inhabiting the far end of the positive side of the continuum of human psychology and human well-being... radical insight into the nature of consciousness by virtue of a disciplined practice like meditation.”

Harris also mentions words such as awe, well-being, love and happiness as experiences that do not require the framework of religion, belief in God or the supernatural. He states there is no sufficiently adequate word or term to replace the term “spiritual” or “spirituality,” and instead calls for a reclaiming and redefining of these words. Words such as ‘Yugen’ and ‘Satori’ are sometimes mentioned in such conversations. Sam Harris sees the mystery of consciousness as one of the primary scientific and spiritual areas of inquiry in the non-religious community.

There are many voices in the non-religious community who speak of spirituality.

In an article about spirituality in *Psychology Today*, David Elkins, author of the book: *Beyond Religion: A Personal Program for Building a Spiritual Life Outside the Walls of Traditional Religion*, remarks that "... the word spirituality derives from the Latin root *spiritus*, which means 'breath'—referring to the breath of life." To Elkins, spirituality involves "opening our hearts and cultivating our capacity to experience awe, reverence, and gratitude. It is the ability to see the sacred in the ordinary, to feel the poignancy of life, to know the passion of existence and to give ourselves over to that which is greater than ourselves."

Robert C. Fuller in *Spiritual But Not Religious* writes:

"Spirituality exists wherever we struggle with the issues of how our lives fit into the greater scheme of things. We encounter spiritual issues every time we wonder where the universe comes from, why we are here, or what happens when we die. We also become spiritual when we become moved by values such as beauty, love, or creativity that seem to reveal a meaning or power beyond our visible world. An idea or practice is 'spiritual' when it reveals our personal desire to establish a felt-relationship with the deepest meanings or powers governing life."

The planetary scientist, Carolyn Porco, writes,

"At the heart of every scientific inquiry is a deep spiritual quest to grasp, to know, to feel connected through an understanding of the secrets of the natural world, to have a sense of one's part in the greater whole. It is this inchoate desire for connection to something greater and immortal, the need for elucidation of the meaning of the 'self,' that motivates the religious to belief in a higher 'intelligence.' But the same spiritual fulfillment and connection can be found in the revelations of science. I consider myself a spiritual person, meaning that I'm someone who seeks the extraordinary in the ordinary; someone who wants to know the underlying meaning of everything; someone who looks around them at everyday life and asks, "Is there a purpose to this? Where is this leading? What lies beyond? And how do I fit into this whole picture?"

Unitarian Universalist minister and author Doug Muder, in an article called, "A Humanistic Perspective on Spirituality", poses the question: "What if we had an authentically Humanist spiritual vocabulary that didn't have to be borrowed or transplanted or reinterpreted?" According to Muder, "The people who invented Humanism already had an advanced spiritual practice consistent with their Humanism." Examining each of the four Greek schools of the Hellenistic era - the Cynics, Epicureans,

Skeptics, and Stoics - Muder concludes that they "...represent the birthplace of modern western humanism." Muder sees the ideas of the Stoics particularly as best embodying "the full Humanist complex of ideas."

Because the word "spirituality" is often associated with religion, supernatural or metaphysics, there is the distinction of secular spirituality. Secular spirituality is the adherence to a spiritual philosophy without adherence to a religion. Secular spirituality emphasizes the personal development of the individual, rather than a relationship with the divine. Secular spirituality is made up of the search for meaning outside of a religious institution; it considers one's relationship with the self, others, nature, and whatever else one considers to be the ultimate. Often, the goal of secular spirituality is living happily and/or helping others.

Science and spirituality

In the non-religious community a link has also been made between science and spirituality.

Particle physicist Jeff Forshaw writes,

"I am struck by the astonishing beauty of the central equations in physics, which seem to reveal something remarkable about our universe... the natural world operates according to some beautiful rules... We are discovering something at the heart of things... It feels like a personal thing – like we are relating to something very special."

And of course there are the well-known words of Carl Sagan,

"Science is not only compatible with spirituality; it is a profound source of spirituality. When we recognize our place in an immensity of light years and in the passage of ages, when we grasp the intricacy, beauty and subtlety of life, then that soaring feeling, that sense of elation and humility combined, is surely spiritual. So are our emotions in the presence of great art or music or literature, or of acts of exemplary selfless courage such as those of Mohandas Gandhi or Martin Luther King Jr. The notion that science and spirituality are somehow mutually exclusive does a disservice to both."

As mentioned previously spirituality belongs to the realm of the non-material, which is increasingly becoming a matter of scientific interest. Dr. Gary Schwartz, professor of psychology, medicine, neurology, psychiatry and surgery at the University of Arizona, writes:

“Non-material science began to emerge at the turn of the nineteenth century when physicists started to explore the relationship between energy and the structure of matter. When they did this, the belief that a physical, Newtonian material universe was at the very heart of scientific knowledge was abandoned, and the realization that matter is nothing but an illusion replaced it. The very make-up of an atom comprises what we believe to be empty space. At this point, scientists began to recognize that everything in the universe is made out of energy, and this has been known in the scientific community for more than one hundred years.

Some materialistically inclined scientists and philosophers refuse to acknowledge these phenomena because they are not consistent with their exclusive conception of the world. Rejection of post-materialist investigation of nature or refusal to publish strong science findings supporting a post-materialist framework are antithetical to the true spirit of scientific inquiry, which is that empirical data must always be adequately dealt with. Data which do not fit favored theories and beliefs cannot be dismissed a priori. Such dismissal is the realm of ideology, not science.”

Spirituality and psychology

There is a connection between spirituality and psychology. Abraham Maslow created a theory of psychological health known as Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which he believed applied to all human beings. He portrayed this in the shape of a pyramid with our most basic needs at the bottom, and the need for self-actualization at the top. The theory states that our needs as human beings begins with survival needs for food, water, safety, and shelter. Next, we have psychological needs for belonging and love, as well as the need for self-esteem and self-respect. According to Maslow's theory, if you have these needs fulfilled, then you can explore the cognitive level of ideas, the aesthetic level of beauty and, finally, experience what he called “self-actualization”, which is realizing one's fullest potentialities and possibilities in life.

What is less well-known is that Maslow amended his model near the end of his life, and therefore the conventional portrayal of his hierarchy is inaccurate, as it omits a description of this later thought. In his later thinking, he argued that we can experience the highest level of development, what he called self-transcendence, by focusing on some higher goal outside ourselves. Examples include altruism, or spiritual awakening or liberation from egocentricity. Here is how he described it in *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, "Transcendence refers to the very highest and most inclusive or holistic levels of human consciousness, behaving and relating, as ends rather than means, to

oneself, to significant others, to human beings in general, to other species, to nature, and to the cosmos."

I have often wondered about the possibility that "transcendence" or "spirituality" could have been an acquired trait through natural selection because it instilled a sense of being part of something beyond and bigger than simply oneself and one's own individual potential. In other words, it was a necessary trait for advancing the human species to be aware, mindful, meaningfully connected to and in active relationship with a larger framework that included other species, nature, the cosmos, and the interdependent web of all existence, and that this connection was forged by nonmaterial dynamics such as the emotions of awe, gratitude, empathy, service, compassion and beauty.

There is also a strong connection between spirituality and psychology in the work of Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, Carl Jung. Areas such as archetypes, the individuation process, and shadow work are a few. We will explore the work of Carl Jung in a later post.

Spiritual but not religious

There are two terms that are common descriptors of the non-religious community. The first is "nones," which are those who do not identify with any religion. The term comes from what is typically the last choice on questions about religious affiliation - "none of the above." There is also the SBNR distinction - "spiritual but not religious." These are people who discard religious structures for a more personal spirituality.

A recent survey reports that as many as 33 percent of the population identify themselves as SBNR. One of the most interesting statistics here is from USA Today, which in 2010 claimed that no fewer than 72 percent of Generation Y identify themselves as "more spiritual than religious."

I have discovered in many cases that when individuals declare themselves "spiritual but not religious," they are adhering to principles of humanism. Many people who aren't self-identified humanists are de facto humanists. An article aptly titled "The Spiritual Perspective and Social Work Practice", author Patricia Sermabeikian talks about the spiritual dimension of life as expounded by such humanistic and existential theorists as Viktor Frankl, Eric Fromm, and Abraham Maslow. Her quotation from Maslow is particularly instructive: "The human being needs a framework of values, a philosophy of life, a religion or religion-surrogate to live by and understand by, in about the same sense he needs sunlight, calcium, or love."

Spiritual versus secular

The word "spiritual" often stands in contrast to "secular," and both terms are often viewed in quite a narrow-minded sense. Religious/spiritual people tend to have an

inadequate understanding of the word "secular," and non-religious people return the favor with an insufficient view of the word "spiritual." The words are often thought of antithetical - in other words, what is "secular" cannot be "spiritual" and what is "spiritual" cannot be "secular." Part of the confusion is that the word "secular" implies to some the absence of things like any kind of deep sense of aliveness and interconnectedness or feelings of awe, well-being, love, beauty and happiness or transcendent experiences of knowing oneself as part of and belonging to a greater, mysterious and beautiful whole. And then on the other hand, the word "spiritual" implies to some the belief in God and religion or a bunch of woo-woo and supernatural/metaphysical mumbo-jumbo and irrational nonsensical quackery.

That many humanists themselves disparage the term spiritual as mumbo-jumbo—as little more than outdated pre-scientific superstition—doesn't much help the matter either. For it inflicts the word with negative meanings similar to what Christian conservatives have done to the tag "secular." I think humanists would want to claim all the positive, non-supernatural aspects of spirituality, and leave the heavily biased, parochial derision of the term secular to those too narrow-minded, or prejudiced, to appreciate how they're using it.

In the article, "Humanism and Spirituality: A Spiritual Perspective," Humanist psychologist Judith Goren writes, "Humanism, to be a viable movement in the 21st century, needs to expand its parameters to explore, address and include the spiritual dimension of human experience." With respect to the Humanist Manifesto of the American Humanist Association, I think that according to all the secular definitions of spirituality I've seen—Humanism's philosophy, ethics, and its principles and practices makes humanism a spiritual movement, and one to be reckoned with. Some hope that future humanists will come to recognize their essential identity and reclaim a word that actually reflects the very heart of what they're all about. Which is to say their aspiration to lead virtuous, morally responsible lives that are at once rational and—emotionally—rich, passionate, exciting . . . and deeply fulfilling.

There are many examples of people expressing non-religious spirituality such as this [Atheist Superbowl Commercial](#) and this compelling and inspiring video entitled, [My spirituality as an atheist](#).

Religion can often be a barrier to nurturing spirituality to the extent that it assumes that it has already answered all the deepest questions of life, systematizes the spiritual realm into an approved set of beliefs, practices, do's and don'ts, and rules and rituals, uses the construct of divine reward and punishment to engender good or moral behavior, and discourages skepticism, questioning and exploration beyond its own beliefs and conclusions.

As you know, in my work as a Spiritual Director, I am often working with people who have been damaged or suffered spiritual abuse through their involvement in religion. I also have many clients who are humanists and non-Theists. In my spiritual direction work I utilize a spectrum of non-religious perspectives and insights from philosophy, depth psychology, science and the arts.

To explore the topic of non-religious or humanist spirituality, check out these books:

[The Good Book: A Humanist Bible, A.C. Grayling](#)

[Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion, Sam Harris](#)

[Astrophysics for People in a Hurry, Neil deGrasse Tyson](#)

[The Meaning of Human Existence, Edward O. Wilson](#)

[Confession of a Buddhist Atheist, Stephen Batchelor](#)

[Christianity without God, Lloyd Geering](#)

[Reason and Reverence, William R. Murry](#)

[Christianity without God, Daniel C. Macguire](#)

[Betraying Spinoza, Rebecca Goldstein](#)

[Humanist in the Hood, Sikivu Hutchinson](#)

Day-8 Investigation

Today's investigation involves examining your own thoughts and interests in the area of spirituality. Here are a few questions for consideration toward that end:

- If you were to define "spirituality" in a way that is most meaningful, liberating, and inspiring for you, what would your definition be?
- What area, aspect, practice, mindset or expression of spirituality are you most interested in exploring right now in your own life?
- Out of the books mentioned above, is there one you feel you'd have an interest in reading?

Day-9: The Meaning Making Game

“For the meaning of life differs from man to man, from day to day and from hour to hour. What matters, therefore, is not the meaning of life in general but rather the specific meaning of a person's life at a given moment.” - Viktor Frankl

What life means after religion

The meaning of life is one of those questions that people often struggle with after leaving religion. It's common for a person's understanding of life's purpose or meaning to be governed by their belief in God and the belief-system they followed. Questioning, scrutinizing, and discarding one's long-held religious beliefs can leave many existential questions like the meaning of life unanswered.

It can be useful to deconstruct the questions we assume we must answer. For example, think of all the assumptions implied in the question: What is the meaning of life? Some of them would be:

- The assumption that this question can be answered conclusively
- The assumption there is one answer to the question
- The assumption that the question is of critical importance
- The assumption the question can be answered with words and explanations
- The assumption that life has a singular meaning
- All that is implied by our understanding of the words “meaning” and “life”

Life has no meaning?

French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre wrote, “Life has no meaning a priori. It is up to you to give it a meaning, and value is nothing but the meaning that you choose.”

At first glance, a person may see Sartre's statement as a real downer and even downright depressing. But that might be because you're looking at it from just one point of view.

We tend to think very highly of the idea of being free and having freedom. Sartre said this is nonsense and we're only masking the fact that we are terrified of it. He said the reason why religion is so popular among the masses is because we like to derive our sense of meaning and direction in life through some external source, which we imbue with truth and authority. That's why we become so attached to them - they give us a sense of security, certainty and identity in the world, and stave off existential angst. The problem with this, according to Sartre, is that we become subservient to whatever external system or authority we become attached to, which prevents our full maturation as human beings.

Sartre identifies what he believes to be the most fundamental truth about the human condition, which is that we are responsible for everything. You are responsible for giving life meaning. You are responsible for all your beliefs and actions in the world. You are responsible for what your life is or isn't. You (we) are responsible for the condition of our world. You (we) are responsible to solve whatever problems exist in the world.

This may all sound quite bleak and grim, but Sartre said all of this can be taken as a blessing and an invitation into the fullest possibilities of what it means to be human. In fact, Sartre thought that until you front these essential facts of life you can never be truly "free" and experience the greatest rewards of being so.

The idea that there is no inherent meaning or purpose to life can be a frightening proposition. We'd like to believe that there is an absolute meaning and purpose to which we can stop at any moment and reorient our lives, especially in times when we feel we've lost our way. In many ways the idea of "God" is an abstraction of the ideal of ultimate and absolute meaning. We ascribe ultimate and absolute meaning to God, and therefore we find our path forward by orienting our lives in the world to the existence of God and our relationship to God.

What if I said to you something like, "There is no inherent or absolute meaning or purpose to life and there's nothing or no one who can definitively tell you what it is or should be; you're gonna have to just figure it out yourself." A lot of people would not like this explanation. Determining the meaning and purpose of life is quite a daunting task. We feel unqualified for such an undertaking. I still can't figure out how to properly program my sports watch, much less resolve the meaning of life. At least the watch has instructions.

That a person must determine and forge their lives according to a meaning and purpose they create for themselves feels like a great burden to bear.

Stop searching for meaning, start creating meaning

The idea that life is meaningless or void of absolute meaning is vexing to many people. They assume that the only other alternative is that life must be random, absurd and pointless. In philosophy, “the Absurd” refers to the conflict between the human tendency to seek inherent value and meaning in life and the human inability to find any. Hence, “Absurdism” is a philosophical school of thought stating that the efforts of humanity to find inherent meaning will ultimately fail.

Consider that the problem here is not that life has no meaning; it’s the notion that the meaning of life is something you “find.”

“Finding meaning” is an empty proposition. We are not here to find meaning, we are here to live meaningfully. The meaningless of life is not a curse but an invitation. It's not a matter of searching for meaning, but creating it. Human beings are not born into a world of inherent meaning, we are born into the world as meaning makers.

You are the answer to your question

Creating meaning for your life is not simply immersing yourself in books of philosophy. The meaning of life is not something you work out entirely in your head, you must experience yourself living a meaningful life through your choices and actions. The question is: Are your daily actions, choices, habits, relationships and endeavors aligned with and an expression of what you deeply value, believe and hold to be meaningful about your life? Without marshalling your daily life according to the ideas, values and beliefs you fancy in your mind, you will suffer a nagging and vexing cognitive dissonance and disharmony. It's easy to get lost in the existential quest and quagmire of determining the meaning of life rather than take responsibility for what we do with the life we've got.

It's true that life has no inherent or absolute meaning, than life has the meaning we create and bring to it. It makes no sense to spin your wheels asking a question to which you are the only answer.

Within the context of belief in God, rather than think of life's meaning as something God gives you or imposes universally upon all human beings, consider the possibility that one of God's greatest gifts is the freedom God gives us to create, cultivate, choose and live a meaningful life.

Day-9 Investigation: The Meaning Making Game

Today's daily investigation is NOT about determining a singular meaning to life or your life. Today's investigation is about investigating what it means for you to live life meaningfully.

There are four questions to ask yourself in today's daily investigation:

- What three values best capture or express the person I most deeply know myself to be and want to be?
- What three values are essential to living the life I most envision as meaningful and fulfilling?
- What three values am I most compelled to uphold, whatever the risk or cost?
- What three values are essential to supporting my inner self?

Look through your answers and see where the overlap is and determine your final three values that best capture what matters most to you in your life if you could only choose three.

Next, choose or identify a significant development, difficulty, challenge, opportunity, struggle, situation or circumstance in your life, and envision what it might look like for you to be your three values in it. In other words, to approach or be in your significant development, difficulty, challenge, opportunity, struggle, situation or circumstance AS your three values.

Lastly, write out a statement that completes the following idea: "What it means for me to live meaningfully in this situation is to ..."

Day-10: Escaping the Prison of Self-Judgment

“The acceptance of oneself is the essence of the whole moral problem and the epitome of a whole outlook on life.” - Carl Jung

If you must have something to aspire to on your path, make it that you will no longer sit in judgment of yourself. Self-judgment is viewing yourself through eyes of condemnation and disapproval. Self-judgment and shame go together. You have thoughts and feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness, and they become the basis of your self-image. For some people, fear-based religion or childhood emotional wounds foster shame and self-judgment. People can become self-hate junkies. The running commentary in the background of your life is perpetual self-condemnation.

What is the solution? It's common to assert that self-acceptance is the antidote to self-condemnation. However, typically the kind of self-acceptance we are familiar with does not go far enough and therefore does not solve the problem and set us free.

In my own life journey, and the personal and spiritual growth work with people over the years, I have learned there are 4 levels of self-acceptance:

Level 1 Self-Acceptance: Universal Imperfection

This level of self-acceptance involves the realization that one's imperfections are not unique to them but universally true of every human being. You cannot judge yourself as bad, inadequate and unworthy on the basis of your imperfections unless you are prepared to assert that every human being is bad, inadequate and unworthy since every human being also has imperfections. Level 1 self-acceptance is an acknowledgement that every human being is an assortment of characteristics, mindsets and behaviors of which some are constructive toward wholeness, well-being, and flourishing, and some

that are harmful to ourselves and others. This is true of every human being, including those you imagine to be better than you.

Level 2 Self-Acceptance: Deconstruction of Causes

The root of self-judgement and shame is often false beliefs and stories we believe about ourselves, which govern our self-image. As mentioned above, shame-based religious messages, childhood trauma, and the absence of adequate love, validation and affirmation during our formative years of development, are some sources of a toxic self-image. The personal work to be done at this level of self-acceptance is to investigate and deconstruct these false beliefs and stories. This involves gaining greater understanding of the seed sources and life experiences that produced these self-condemning views of yourself. Level 2 self-acceptance is important because it enables you to shift your self-condemning judgments from “this is what I am” to “this is what I learned.” There is nothing that can be done about an item in the “this is what I am”-category. For example, your height, eye color, and core personality pattern is in this category - “this is what I am.” But your self-condemning thoughts, mindsets, beliefs and stories are in the “this is what I learned”-category, and these can be unlearned.

Level 3 Self-Acceptance: Hospitality and Curiosity

The third level of self-acceptance is cultivating an inner disposition or space of hospitality within yourself for every thought or feeling about yourself that arises. Offering hospitality to every thought and feeling that arises is being an impartial, accepting and compassionate witness to your thoughts and feelings about yourself as they come and go. Offering hospitality is the absence of all judgment, resistance, and condemnation. This inner disposition of hospitality allows these thoughts and feelings to arise and dissolve, you neither grab ahold or resist them when they come. This space of hospitality is also one of curiosity. Rather than grab ahold of disapproving thoughts and feelings and fueling them into strongholds of self-condemnation and shame, just be curious about them. What triggered the thought or feeling? What is the false belief or story at the root of it? What is the truth that is being obscured by your emotions of self-condemnation? What can you learn from this?

Level 4 Self-Acceptance: Answering the “What am I?” question

In my view, Level 4 Self-Acceptance is the most critical aspect of self-acceptance. Shame is internalizing a false and condemning belief about who you are. Shame says: “I AM bad”, “I AM worthless”, “I AM inadequate”, “I AM inferior”, “I AM pathetic”, “I AM a loser”, “I AM a failure”. The investigation of what you are is a critical stage of self-acceptance. Most people assume that the totality of what they are is a human body and mind, and their lived human experience. This is a highly materialistic view of the Western world. Eastern spirituality and philosophy posits the view of a “witness” or

“observer”, which is not synonymous with or contained within the body and mind. Buddhism, for example, teaches that through meditative inquiry, one can have direct experience of the true nature of reality, which constitutes the primordial essence of all things including yourself. This essence is described as having qualities such as wholeness, serenity, equanimity, timelessness, vastness, and harmony.

Shame is an attachment to an idea of what you think you are, which are all your thoughts and feelings floating around in your head. The content of these thoughts and feelings that come and go in your head are always shifting and changing, progressing and digressing, arising and dissolving, and is subject to many different factors, conditions, circumstances and variables. Even on your best day, your shifting thoughts and feelings are not a stable and reliable source or bases for your sense of identity and self. This can only be found in that whole and complete part of you that never changes. That you is a witness to every thought and feeling, and every false belief and story that arises. You think you are the false belief and story, but your true self is unaffected and untainted by them all. This is why the fundamental question in life to be answered is always: What am I?

We will come back to these ideas later in our thirty days.

The absence of self-judgment is liberation

Until you can look upon the entirety of yourself without judgment, you may never find complete freedom in life. This doesn't mean we turn a blind eye or refuse to take responsibility for our flaws and shortcomings, and the consequences. It means stepping back and seeing yourself from a more constructive viewpoint.

We often judge ourselves through a binary lens of “good” or “bad”. We take our thoughts, actions, choices, idiosyncrasies, habits and feelings, and label them one or the other. What's worse, is that we take these micro-judgments and make a sweeping conclusion about ourselves as a whole. This thought, choice, feeling or habit is bad, THEREFORE, I am bad.

The good and bad binary lens is problematic. It's too simplistic. Stretch out a continuum with "good" on one end, and "bad" on the other. Take this continuum as a straight line that is infinitely long with millions of plot points along the way.

When does an action, choice, characteristic, habit, pattern, mindset or feeling move from the "good" column to the "bad" column? Are there degrees of "good" and "bad" like “kinda good” and “super good” and “sorta bad” and “really, really bad”? At what point are you a “bad” person and when do you become “good”? How “good” or “bad” exactly are you? How often does it change and on what basis? See how nebulous this can be?

The good/bad binary lens isn't helpful. It doesn't contribute to your personal growth. Consider looking upon yourself and your life in a different way.

For example, you could approach your life by asking questions like: Does this action, choice, characteristic, habit, pattern, mindset, or feeling...

... contribute to my well-being or is it a source of personal suffering?

... line up with what really matters most to me in life?

... represent the kind of person I want to be and the kind of life I want to live?

... reveal something about myself that is useful in my continuing growth and development?

... point to a deeper set of dynamics I need to address more seriously?

Do you see the difference? It's not a black and white (good/bad) indictment against yourself, it's constructively focused on the individual action, choice, characteristic, habit, pattern, mindset, or feeling. Condemnation does not liberate, but approaching our lives more constructively allows you to properly integrate the totality of yourself and your life into a meaningful and healthy whole.

The foundation of self-acceptance is realizing that your worth is not conditional upon your mastery of life, and that we all are engaged in a lifelong process toward wholeness, not perfection. A more empowering lens through which to view yourself would be:

- I am a human being who is in a perpetual process of becoming.
- I am a human being of worth and value at every moment, regardless of where I am in the process at any given time.
- I am a human being, deserving of my own acceptance, patience, kindness and compassion.
- It's okay not to be perfect and to make mistakes.
- I am a human being, endowed with the abilities to cultivate a life of meaning, virtue, well-being and fulfillment.

The most important freedom is freedom from your own self-judgment.

You can also collapse this good/bad judgment system with respect to your relationship to the world. Rather than judge or label people, circumstances, and experiences as "good" or "bad", you can see the world through a different lens. Rather than come at the world with a black and white system of judgment, you can approach the world in a spirit of non-judgment, appreciating the complexities, nuances, and variables that come into play.

Day-10 Investigation: Escaping the Prison of Self-Judgment

Today's investigation involves freeing yourself from the prison of self-judgement. The investigation involves the following:

- Identify a specific quality, characteristic, or trait about yourself that you typically judge as "bad" (undesirable, inferior, unwanted, unwelcome). What would it mean for you to look upon this aspect of yourself with compassion, understanding, and critical thinking, which would transform your relationship to that aspect of yourself to be more accepting, constructive, and empowering?
- Identify a past event, circumstance, choice, action, mistake, decision or experience from your life that you typically judge as "bad" (regrettable, shameful, grievous, etc), and that you hold against yourself. What would it mean for you to look upon this past event or experience from your life with compassion, understanding, and critical thinking, which would transform your relationship to that aspect of yourself to be more accepting, constructive, and empowering?
- Identify a person in your life that you typically judge as "bad" - a person you don't like, annoys you, rubs you the wrong way, gets under your skin, etc. What would it mean for you to look upon this person in your life with compassion, understanding, and critical thinking, which would transform your relationship to that person to be more accepting, constructive, and empowering?

Record your thoughts, insights, discoveries and realizations in your personal journal.

Day-11: Simone de Beauvoir

“I tore myself away from the safe comfort of certainties through my love for truth - and truth rewarded me.” Simone de Beauvoir

There are a few days in our 30-Day journey in which I'll be introducing you to notable non-religious people who had a profound impact on modern intellectual history. Today we will explore Simone de Beauvoir.

Simone de Beauvoir was a French writer, intellectual, existentialist philosopher, political activist, feminist and social theorist. Though she did not consider herself a philosopher, she had a significant influence on both feminist existentialism and feminist theory.

Simone de Beauvoir was born on January 9, 1908. She died seventy-eight years later, on April 14, 1986. At the time of her death she was honored as a crucial figure in the struggle for women's rights, and as an eminent writer, having won the Prix Goncourt, the prestigious French literary award, for her novel *The Mandarins*. She was also famous for being the life-long companion of Jean Paul Sartre, a notable French philosopher, playwright, novelist, political activist, biographer, and literary critic.

Simone, the intellectual

Simone was active in the French intellectual scene all of her life, and a central player in the philosophical debates of the times both in her role as an author of philosophical essays, novels, plays, memoirs, travel diaries and newspaper articles, and a founder and editor of a political French Journal, *Les Temps Modernes*.

Beauvoir's intellectual zeal was nourished by her father who provided her with carefully edited selections from the great works of literature and who encouraged her to read and write from an early age.

Simone, the Catholic turned Atheist

She began her education in the private Catholic school for girls, where she remained until age 17. Beauvoir had been a deeply religious child as a result of her education and her mother's training; however, at the age of 14, she had a crisis of faith and decided definitively that there was no God. She remained an atheist until her death.

People say that Simone was inspired to become an intellect because she was caught between her father's pagan morals and her mother's rigid religious standards.

Simone, the Feminist

Beauvoir's most famous work was *The Second Sex* from 1949, a profoundly influential book which laid the groundwork for second-wave feminism. Whereas first-wave feminism was concerned with women's suffrage and property rights, the second wave broadened these concerns to include sexuality, family, the workplace, and reproductive rights. In Beauvoir's book *The Second Sex*, she outlines the ways in which woman is perceived as "other" in a patriarchal society, second to man, which is considered—and treated as—the "first" or default sex.

One of the most famous lines from that work is: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." In other words, the roles we associate with women are not given to them in birth, by virtue of their biology, but rather are socially constructed. Women are taught what they're supposed to be in life, what kind of roles they can or can't perform in virtue of being of "the second sex." Today we might express this idea using the distinction between sex and gender, where one's sex is just a biological fact, but one's gender identity is socially constructed. In 1949, this was a truly radical idea.

Simone de Beauvoir Explains "Why I'm a Feminist" in a Rare TV Interview (1975), which you can watch here in French with subtitles ->

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1214&v=VmEAB3ekkvU

Simone, the Philosopher

De Beauvoir published several works of fiction, and four books of philosophy. I will especially focus upon her book *The Ethics of Ambiguity* to flesh out her central philosophical ideas.

Simone de Beauvoir asks what ethics looks like from the perspective of the existentialist philosophy. *The Ethics of Ambiguity* begins with the central existentialist premise that "existence precedes essence". Basically, this means that we humans create our own

essence or nature through our choices and actions. De Beauvoir rejects any notion of an absolute goodness or moral imperative that exists on its own.

Whereas most ethical systems try to determine what people ought to do based on abstract principles of morality, existentialists believe that it makes no sense to talk about such absolute ethical principles, because morality is actually something that people develop in and through their lives, rather than something woven into the timeless fabric of the universe. Instead of starting with a picture of the good, right, or just, de Beauvoir starts with the basic fact of human freedom, which she argues must be the foundation of all morality because it is the fact in virtue of which people can make moral decisions at all.

Quotes by Simone de Beauvoir

"This has always been a man's world, and none of the reasons that have been offered in explanation have seemed adequate."

"Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with the absolute truth."

"I wish that every human life might be pure transparent freedom."

"One's life has value so long as one attributes value to the life of others, by means of love, friendship, indignation and compassion."

"Each of us is responsible for everything and to every human being."

"I tore myself away from the safe comfort of certainties through my love for truth - and truth rewarded me."

"It is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our lives that we must draw our strength to live and our reasons for living."

Simone de Beauvoir and Feminism

Simone de Beauvoir was an instrumental figure as a feminist. Her book, *The Second Sex* (1949), laid the groundwork for second wave feminism. She wrote, "Humanity is male, and man defines women, not in herself, but in relation to himself." In other words, she exposed the fact that the identity of women was largely governed by men and defined primarily in relation to men. Beauvoir asserted that what it commonly means to be a woman is merely a social construct, conveniently and fortuitously advanced by men.

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir famously stated, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." This line is credited by many as alerting us to the sex-gender distinction. The distinction between sex and gender differentiates a person's biological sex (the anatomy of an individual's reproductive system, and secondary sex

characteristics) from that person's gender, which can refer to either social roles based on the sex of the person (gender role) or personal identification of one's own gender based on an internal awareness (gender identity).

The Second Sex gave us the vocabulary for analyzing the social constructions of femininity and a method for critiquing these constructions. By not accepting the common sense idea that to be born with female genitalia is to be born a woman this most famous line of *The Second Sex* pursues the first rule of phenomenology: identify your assumptions, treat them as prejudices and put them aside; do not bring them back into play until and unless they have been validated by experience.

Simone de Beauvoir placed a spotlight on women's socialization and the ways that the norm of masculinity remains the standard of the human. She said that the liberated woman must free herself from two shackles: first, the idea that to be independent she must be like men, and second, the socialization through which she becomes feminized. The first alienates her from her sexuality. The second makes her adverse to risking herself for her ideas/ideals. Beauvoir sets two prerequisites for liberation. First, women must be socialized to engage the world. Second, they must be allowed to discover the unique ways that their embodiment engages the world. In short, the myth of woman must be dismantled.

Additional quotes of interest from the book include:

"Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth."

"It is perfectly natural for the future woman to feel indignant at the limitations posed upon her by her sex. The real question is not why she should reject them: the problem is rather to understand why she accepts them."

"One is not born a genius, one becomes a genius; and the feminine situation has up to the present rendered this becoming practically impossible."

"On the day when it will be possible for woman to love not in her weakness but in strength, not to escape herself but to find herself, not to abase herself but to assert herself — on that day love will become for her, as for man, a source of life and not of mortal danger."

"Man is defined as a human being and woman as a female — whenever she behaves as a human being she is said to imitate the male."

"Her wings are cut and then she is blamed for not knowing how to fly."

Existence precedes essence

It's useful to remember that Beauvoir's views of what it means to be a "woman" is a manifestation of a philosophical concept that she embraced, which says that "existence precedes essence."

The proposition that existence precedes essence is a central claim of existentialism, which reverses the traditional philosophical view that the essence (the nature) of a thing is more fundamental and immutable than its existence (the mere fact of its being). To existentialists, human beings—through their consciousness—create their own values and determine a meaning for their life because the human being does not possess any inherent identity or value. That identity or value must be created by the individual.

"Existence precedes essence" means that a personality is not built over a previously designed model or a precise purpose, because it is the human being who chooses to engage in such enterprise. To claim that existence precedes essence is to assert that there is no such predetermined essence to be found in humans, and that an individual's essence is defined by the individual through how that individual creates and lives his or her life. And to Beauvoir this included what it means to be a woman.

In a lecture in 1946, Jean-Paul Sartre (a lifelong partner of Simone de Beauvoir) described atheist existentialism as follows:

"Atheistic existentialism, of which I am a representative, declares with greater consistency that if God does not exist there is at least one being whose existence comes before its essence, a being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it. That being is man or, as Heidegger has it, the human reality. What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature, because there is no God to have a conception of it. Man simply is. Not that he is simply what he conceives himself to be, but he is what he wills, and as he conceives himself after already existing – as he wills to be after that leap towards existence. Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism....

Thus, the first effect of existentialism is that it puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders. And, when we say that man is responsible for himself, we do not mean that he is responsible only for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men. The word "subjectivism" is to be understood in two senses, and our adversaries play upon only one of them. Subjectivism means, on the one hand, the freedom of the individual subject and, on the other, that man cannot pass beyond human subjectivity. It is the

latter which is the deeper meaning of existentialism. When we say that man chooses himself, we do mean that every one of us must choose himself; but by that we also mean that in choosing for himself he chooses for all men."

Day-11 Investigation

Based upon the views and ideas of Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, here are a few questions to consider asking yourself:

- How do you feel about the idea of "existence precedes essence"? Is it inspiring, hopeful, discomfoting, frightening, etc.? What about the idea makes you feel this way?
- Simone de Beauvoir wrote, "I tore myself away from the safe comfort of certainties through my love for truth - and truth rewarded me." In what ways do her words resonate with you and your journey of shedding religion? How has leaving religion pulled you out of your comfort zone of certainty? In what ways have you been rewarded by leaving religion?

Day-12: Investigation: Being Authentic

“We have to dare to be ourselves, however frightening or strange that self may prove to be.”

- May Sarton

Inauthenticity is a lie. The lie includes...

- masking who you really are
- hiding what you really think and feel
- compromising your true self to appease others
- withholding your full self-expression
- pretending something that is not true
- being someone you're not
- perpetuating a persona that is not real
- saying yes when you mean no
- seeking approval at the expense of self-abnegation
- repressing your needs and desires

Religion is often a breeding ground for inauthenticity. People often feel pressure to portray an aura of spirituality, put a smile on their face, say all the right things, and pretend they are full of faith and joy. They are too fearful to share or disclose their personal struggles, broken relationships, and inner suffering. Meeting-based and surface-level relationships, which sometimes characterize institutional church, can often

lack the depth, honesty, authenticity and vulnerability that we need in our relationships to support our growth and transformation.

Authenticity as integrity

"Authenticity" is a buzzword these days, and has become a sort of Holy Grail or personal development. But what is "authenticity" exactly?

Brene Brown wrote, "Authenticity is a collection of choices that we have to make every day. It's about the choice to show up and be real. The choice to be honest. The choice to let our true selves be seen."

I want to interject another word into the discussion of authenticity. It's the word "integrity".

Consider a new way of thinking about "integrity." What I mean by "integrity" is not about "good" or "bad" or "right" or "wrong". The integrity I am referring to is about being in tune and aligned with your authentic and highest self. This kind of integrity involves being true to what lies within you - your deepest thoughts and feelings, your inner voice and intuition, your values and convictions, your authentic self-expression, your true and fundamental nature.

Authenticity is being faithful to your inner self rather than an external code. Authenticity is the degree to which we are true to our own nature, personality, heart, spirit, values, character and commitments, despite external pressures. Shakespeare wrote, "To thine own self be true." This kind of integrity must be the engine that generates your life.

In the personal development work I do with people we discuss what it would mean for them to create, choose and live a life of this kind of integrity. This is the basis for true liberation and wholeness, and living a meaningful, fulfilling and purposeful life.

The journey of being authentic people involves the resolve to stop pleasing others at the expense of your own integrity of self. Oscar Wilde wrote, "It is tragic how few people ever possess their souls before they die. Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation."

What would it mean to live integrity as authenticity?

- It's you owning, inhabiting and expressing who you are most naturally.
- It's you aligning yourself with your values, convictions and what most matters to you in life.
- It's you committing to cultivate your fullest potentialities and possibilities.
- It's you standing your ground in your own critical thinking.
- It's you choosing the path that fosters your growth and well-being.

- It's you resolving to live according to your truth.
- It's you refusing to allow the abuse, manipulation, harm or toxicity of others.
- It's you not allowing others to make you responsible for their happiness.
- It's you believing in yourself and your ability to direct your own life.
- It's you taking responsibility for doing your own personal and inner work.

If others in your life want you to be someone you are not, you must surrender your impulse to keep living your life for them. You will have to let go of your need to take care of them emotionally or win their approval. You must be true to yourself. Authenticity must become more essential in your life than pleasing others and social acceptance. This is true integrity.

It's not necessary to...

- * pretend to agree with everyone
- * take responsibility for how others feel
- * apologize often
- * always say yes
- * feel uncomfortable if someone disapproves of you
- * act like the people around you
- * need praise to feel good
- * go to great lengths to avoid conflict
- * succumb to the pressure of fitting in
- * believe you are less than others
- * fear letting others down
- * tolerate toxic people

Some people will live their entire lives denying their true self and being a people-pleaser. They will live someone else's life and not their own.

Authenticity as spontaneity

Consider the possibility that being “authentic” isn’t necessarily about determining the fixed and static content of who you are and only being that in a closed, limiting, or restrictive way. Authenticity is stepping into life as an open field of possibility and potential, and what you create as you actively participate in how life is arising. In other words, “authenticity” isn’t sitting in your room with a notebook and writing down who you think you are and then steamrolling through life as that fixed and defined self, rather

“authenticity” is a participatory and co-emerging dynamic in life based upon your openness to the moment and what is unfolding in your experience. It’s not going through life and telling the world “this is who I am”, it’s showing up to each moment and circumstance not knowing who you are yet but allowing the experience to evoke you into being. Being “authentic” is being one thing or five things or ten things, it’s an open field of possibility and potential, which means it could be 10,000 things. Authenticity is not fixed and static, but dynamic and engagement.

Persona and Individuation

In Jungian psychology, the "persona" is the mask the ego wears as we move about the world. It is the partially calculated public face an individual assumes in relating to others. It is derived from the expectations of society and the early training by parents, teachers, religious leaders and others. The personal is the bridge from the ego to the outer world. It is useful both in facilitating contact with others and as a protective covering, but identification with a particular persona (doctor, athlete, scholar, artist, etc.) inhibits psychological development. We are not fundamentally our personas.

Some things Jung said about the persona:

"The persona is a complicated system of relations between individual consciousness and society, fittingly enough a kind of mask, designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and, on the other, to conceal the true nature of the individual."

"Whoever looks into the mirror of the water will see first of all his own face. Whoever goes to himself risks a confrontation with himself. The mirror does not flatter, it faithfully shows whatever looks into it; namely, the face we never show to the world because we cover it with the persona, the mask of the actor. But the mirror lies behind the mask and shows the true face."

"When we analyse the persona we strip off the mask, and discover that what seemed to be individual is at bottom collective; in other words, that the persona was only a mask of the collective psyche. Fundamentally the persona is nothing real: it is a compromise between individual and society as to what a man should appear to be. He takes a name, earns a title, exercises a function, he is this or that. In a certain sense all this is real, yet in relation to the essential individuality of the person concerned it is only a secondary reality, a compromise formation, in making which others often have a greater share than he."

"To develop one’s own personality is indeed an unpopular undertaking, a deviation that is highly uncongenial to the herd, an eccentricity smelling of the cenobite, as it seems to the outsider. Small wonder, then, that from earliest times only the chosen few have embarked upon this strange adventure."

Most people suffer from inflation of the persona, meaning that they over-identify with their “social mask” to the detriment of other important areas of the psyche. In the course of the individuation process one must come to the realization that the persona is not the totality of their being, but rather only a small component of a much larger personality.

Jung wrote, "The aim of individuation is nothing less than to divest the self of the false wrappings of the persona... the goal of the individuation process is the synthesis of the self... wholeness."

Day-12 Investigation: Being Authentic

Spend some time today in self-reflection and introspection and consider the following questions:

- Who is the person I am being in my life and showing the world, and how much of that person is the truth of who I really am?
- How am I using my public persona to hide my authentic self, and why do I feel the need to hide it?
- Do I feel a cognitive dissonance in my life between the person I perform in the world, and the person I connect with more deeply inside myself?
- What would it look like for me to take off the mask, and live more authentically?

Record your insights, discoveries and realizations in your personal journal.

Day-13: Self-Care

“We should consider every day lost on which we have not danced at least once.”

- Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche

Self-denial gone bad

A common religious pathology is a twisted understanding of “self denial.” Bible verses often used include the words of Jesus, “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself.”

Let's start with how the concept of "self-denial" is hijacked by religion in a destructive way.

The religious understanding of “self-denial” is based on the false notion that our humanity and natural desires are bad, and must be denied to be right with God. Being devoted to God means forsaking your "carnal" appetites, and surrendering to what the preacher says that God wants.

This view also tends to shame the body. Hence the rampant toxic religious views about sexuality. This is why in many religious traditions, the mortification of the flesh is viewed as a sign of being holy. Contrary to this false view of "self denial," spiritual maturity is not an obliteration of your body, identity, individuality, sexuality, interests, needs, or desires.

The whole notion of denying yourself to please others, including God, is misguided. Is it any wonder that codependency is so widespread in human relationships when the

underlying premise of religion's "relationship with God" is denying and losing yourself in order to keep God happy.

Of course, temperance, self-restraint and self-sacrifice can be worthwhile virtues when practiced in a healthy way, but "pick up your cross and follow me" should never mean killing off your needs, desires, and individuality to please someone else, even God.

When entitlement is good

The word "entitlement" often has a negative connotation. We sometimes say condemningly about people that they have a "sense of entitlement." This typically means a person believes they deserve certain privileges and has highly unreasonable expectations. There is often a sense of arrogance or smugness about people who are labeled as "entitled."

However, consider this word "entitlement" in a different light. The word actually means: "the condition of having a right to have, do, or get something."

Religion did a disservice to many people by mis-teaching the idea of "self-denial." In the name of "God," people have rejected and disowned themselves - their own inner thoughts and deep feelings, their humanity, their individuality, and their personality.

There is a healthy application of entitlement.

For example, you are entitled to...

- acknowledge and honor your needs and desires
- make your own choices
- say "yes" or say "no"
- cultivate and maintain your mental and physical health
- set and implement personal boundaries
- pursue your interests, dreams and goals
- do what brings you joy
- determine the priorities of your life
- invest in mutually enriching relationships
- not tolerate toxic relationships
- take time for yourself

What is self-care?

"Self-care" has practically become a buzzword in the world of personal growth and development, but in some cases the idea has become trivialized or shallow. Here are some distinctives to self-care to keep in mind:

1. Self-care isn't the same as "pampering yourself". Self-care is not concerned with feeling good for an hour or two, or even a week or two – it's the lifelong and daily care of self. Eating a box of chocolates doesn't count as self-care, given the sugar low and potential mood swings that will inevitably follow.
2. Self-care is a deliberate choice to cultivate and sustain your mental, emotional, physical and spiritual health.
3. Self-care is not a selfish act. Self-care is not indulgent. Without proper self-care a person will suffer in every aspect of their lives and relationships.
4. Self-care includes seemingly small things such as getting ample sleep, leaving enough time to get ready for work so you don't have to rush, or going for a walk at lunch time simply to enjoy the fresh air.
5. Self-care is a way of life. It's an active choice and something you plan, rather than something that just happens, or a one-off activity when you are at your wit's end.

Cultivating self-care in your life could mean:

- creating a daily rhythm, routine, and pace of life that aids and supports your mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual health
- a daily or weekly practice that energizes and vitalizes you
- activities that you plan and put on your calendar
- small ways you are patient, kind and compassionate with yourself

Additional self-care resources:

- a [self-care wheel](#) that touches upon many self-care areas
- a [self-care assessment](#)
- [*Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself*](#) by Dr. Kristin Neff

Day-13 Investigation

There are four questions to ask yourself about self-care for today's investigation:

1. What would it look like for you to implement a self-care plan into your daily life?
2. What will be your biggest challenge or resistance to cultivating a life of self-care?
How can you address these challenges?
3. What is a self-care choice, activity, or mindset that you can begin to implement in your life right away?

Day-14: Introduction to Jungian Psychology

“The privilege of a lifetime is to become who you truly are.”- Carl Jung

There are many fields of inquiry outside the framework of religion that are useful and necessary for personal growth. One of them is psychology. Today’s investigation is an introduction to Carl Jung and Jungian psychology.

Carl Jung

Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) was one of the pioneers of modern depth psychology and psychoanalysis. Born in Switzerland, he first became a physician and then entered the emerging field of psychoanalytic psychiatry. Through his personal experience, his work with patients, and copious research, Jung developed ideas and methods of inquiry that have deepened and broadened our understandings of personality, psychodynamics, and the shaping energies of social history. Over time, his ideas and methods of investigation have profoundly influenced the humanities, the arts, psychotherapy, religious studies, and many other fields. Many of Jung’s concepts have entered the mainstream of our language and culture: complex, archetype, persona, shadow, introvert, extravert, typology, collective unconscious, and others.

Investigating Carl Jung and Jungian Psychology

What follows are some useful resources for exploring the central concepts in Jungian psychology, which I think you would find useful:

Videos:

- [Introduction to Carl Jung Part 1- The Psyche, Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious](#)
- [Introduction to Carl Jung Part 2 - Individuation, the Persona, the Shadow, and the Self](#)
- [Carl Jung and the Spiritual Problem of the Modern Individual](#)
- [Carl Jung - What are the Archetypes?](#)
- [Carl Jung and The Achievement of Personality](#)
- [This Jungian Life: Individuation](#)
- [This Jungian Life: What's Unique about Jungian Analysis?](#)

Article:

- [The Jungian Model of the psyche](#)

Jung books to consider reading:

- [Modern Man in Search of a Soul](#)
- [The Archetypes and The Collective Unconscious](#)
- [Man and His Symbols](#)

Day-14: Investigation

Spend some time investigating the above resources related to Carl Jung and Jungian psychology. Consider the concepts and principles put forth by Jung and reflect upon the following questions:

- What concepts of Jungian psychology are most interesting to you that you would like to explore further?
- What aspects of Jungian psychology do you feel are most useful for you currently as you continue cultivating a new direction in life after religion?
- Do you see a connection between any of Jung's ideas and the way religion was damaging to you and sabotaged your personal growth and development.

Day-15: Camel, Lion, Child

“And those who were seen dancing were thought to be insane by those who could not hear the music.”

— *Friedrich Nietzsche*

Friedrich Nietzsche

Friedrich Nietzsche was German, born into a family that was religious and Christian, which he would later denounce. His father was a Lutheran pastor and there had been hopes Friedrich would have followed in those same steps. For a season, Nietzsche pursued this course and studied theology academically, but ultimately abandoned his interests in religion. Consider how similar some of you are to Nietzsche in this regard:

- Nietzsche was raised in religion
- had doubts
- deconstructed his beliefs
- underwent a process of deconversion
- became a critic of institutional Christianity and denounced orthodox Christian theology
- cultivated different avenues of spirituality through his humanness

Any of this sound familiar?

Nietzsche had a great love of science and art, and of course, philosophical thought. But in his time, he was not known to the masses and considered a loose cannon by many. Yes, Nietzsche was a deep-thinking and brilliant individual. Freud said about him: "The degree of introspection achieved by Nietzsche had never been achieved by anyone, nor is it ever likely to be achieved again." And yet, he was also just this guy in the 19th century – born to a preacher – trying to figure it out.

Nietzsche and self-actualization

Nietzsche wrote in the Prologue to Thus Spoke Zarathustra, "Man is a rope, fastened between animal and Übermensch – a rope over an abyss."

The translation of Übermensch is "overman" or "superman" or "superhuman." Not "superman" in terms of a caped hero, but as a fully actualized human being. What's frustrating is that Nietzsche doesn't ever really clearly define what he means by the term.

Think about Nietzsche's line in the Prologue: "Man is a rope, fastened between animal and Übermensch – a rope over an abyss." There are a few things we could reasonably extract from these words of Nietzsche:

- Nietzsche understands the human being, not as a static thing, but an ever-evolving process (Darwinian influence). The human being, Nietzsche says, is like a rope. Essentially, a rope is a length of strong cord made by twisting together strands of natural fibers. To Nietzsche, the human being is a long and never-ending chord – a process of twisting together DNA, natural selection, the metabolization of life experiences, actualization of one's potentialities, and so on.
- And he says that rope – that process of being a human being – is an evolutionary journey from "animal" to "Übermensch." It's an evolutionary process from a very rudimentary being (animal) to a highly developed being (Übermensch).
- The process is unfolding, according to Nietzsche, "over an abyss." What is this "abyss"? He doesn't define it. The possibilities are:
- He could be referring to the nature of the process in terms of it being a challenging, formidable, daunting, perhaps even frightening, journey. (Perhaps addressed in a different way by the story of Adam and Eve, eating from the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, in which it says their eyes were open to see for the first time, the full truth of the world and their place in it.)
- He could be referring to death. The evolutionary process is always unfolding in the shadows of our mortality. It's a race against time. Death is always looking over

our shoulder. You could take that in a despairing way, or it could be used for inspiration to embrace the process more urgently, vigorously and courageously.

To Nietzsche, being transformed into this *Übermensch* (the "Overman", the "Superhuman"), was the ultimate goal of civilized existence. The sources of this Nietzschean idea were several. Darwin's theory of evolution suggested to Nietzsche the notion of humanity as an evolving species. Although Nietzsche emphatically rejected the concept of the superhuman as the outcome of a biological process; in a sense, the *Übermensch* is a spiritualized form of Darwinism.

So, what is the process of evolving from an animal to the *Übermensch*? How do we consciously participate in our evolutionary journey of becoming fully what we are? How do we harness the "will to power" to actualize our highest potentialities and possibilities?

Nietzsche lays out the process in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. He does this by describing a metamorphosis that is symbolized by a camel, a lion, and a child. Through the character of Zarathustra, Nietzsche writes, "Three metamorphoses of the spirit do I designate to you: how the spirit becometh a camel, the camel a lion, and the lion at last a child."

Camel, Lion, Child

Camel

Nietzsche says that the first metamorphosis is when the "spirit becometh a camel." The first stage of our journey of self-actualization is when we become camels.

Nietzsche writes, "What is difficult? asks the spirit that would bear much, and kneels down like a camel wanting to be well loaded. What is most difficult, O heroes, asks the spirit that would bear much, that I may take it upon myself and exult in my strength?"

The camel is a carrier and represents the "strong" spirit within us who, unlike the herd animal, is happy to take on burdens. Nietzsche goes on to list several items that may be considered among the most difficult or trying of life's possible experiences. He indicates that the camel must invite these burdens. For example, he writes, "Or is it this: loving those who despise us and offering a hand to the ghost that would frighten us?"

But there's another aspect to the load the camel carries. We become a beast of burden, dutifully hauling around in the heat and sun of the desert, heavy loads that are strapped to our backs by others. It is the heavy weight of all the expectations, demands, pressures, rules, beliefs, shoulds, thou shalts, laws, regulations, creeds and burdens loaded on our backs by family, culture, society, education, religion and so on. If we're not careful, we can live our entire lives as camels, carrying all these heavy loads.

Lion

Which is why we need the second metamorphosis – the spirit becomes a camel, and now it must become a lion.

Zarathustra says:

“All these heaviest things the load-bearing spirit taketh upon itself: and like the camel, which, when laden, hasteneth into the wilderness, so hasteneth the spirit into its wilderness. But in the loneliest wilderness happeneth the second metamorphosis: here the spirit becometh a lion; freedom will it capture, and lordship in its own wilderness. Its last Lord it here seeketh: hostile will it be to him, and to its last God; for victory will it struggle with the great dragon. What is the great dragon which the spirit is no longer inclined to call Lord and God? "Thou-shalt," is the great dragon called. But the spirit of the lion saith, "I will." "Thou-shalt," lieth in its path, sparkling with gold - a scale-covered beast; and on every scale glittereth golden, "Thou shalt!" The values of a thousand years glitter on those scales, and thus speaketh the mightiest of all dragons: "All the values of things glitter on me. All values have already been created, and all created values do I represent. Verily, there shall be no 'I will' any more. Thus speaketh the dragon.”

My brethren, wherefore is there need of the lion in the spirit? Why sufficeth not the beast of burden, which renounceth and is reverent? To create new values that, even the lion cannot yet accomplish: but to create itself freedom for new creating, that can the might of the lion do. To create itself freedom, and give a holy Nay even unto duty: for that, my brethren, there is need of the lion.”

So, in the lonely wilderness the second metamorphosis happens: to fulfil its destiny, the spirit must rule over the wilderness, to become lord of the wilderness to capture freedom. In order to do so, the lion, Nietzsche tells us, must struggle with the existing lord. The existing lord is a dragon called “thou shalt”, and that dragon is the great barrier to true freedom.

“Thou shalt” is permission; it’s all the moral laws and societal values that have come before that tell us who we are and how we should act. The dragon is seductive, it sparkles with golden scales and on each scale glitters a “thou shalt”.

The thousands of scales represent thousands of years of the “thou shalt” that have come before us, the centuries of codes of how you ought to think and act. The dragon is the enemy of true self-mastery.

The “sacred “No”” represents the utter rejection of external control and all traditional values. Everything imposed by other individuals, society, churches, governments, families, and all forms of propaganda must be denied in an empowered roar.

The lion is the "king of the beasts." The lion courageously and fiercely rises up and slays the dragon, which are all the rules, limitations and shoulds. In this moment, the individual realizes that there is nothing to forbid them from creating their own life and values. They are free to impose their own will upon the world. This metamorphosis evokes the spirit of the lion to defeat the law of "Thou Shalt" and affirm the conditions of one's own flourishing.

This is not the final stage, however. There is no happiness in fighting dragons all one's life.

Child

Nietzsche identified the third metamorphosis as a transformation of the spirit to the "camel", to the "lion", and finally to the "child".

Zarathustra says:

"But tell me, my brethren, what the child can do, which even the lion could not do? Why hath the preying lion still to become a child? Innocence is the child, and forgetfulness, a new beginning, a game, a self-rolling wheel, a first movement, a holy Yea. Aye, for the game of creating, my brethren, there is needed a holy Yea unto life: its own will, willeth now the spirit; his own world winneth the world's outcast." The spirit now wills his own will, those who have relinquished the world that came before them, now have the power to conquer.

Imagine a state of the pure individual who is unburdened of the rules, customs and conventions of society. Imagine the person who wills their own destiny, makes up their own values (that they do not impose on anybody else), and exists in a liberated state of free creativity and play. What does that state resemble that is right under our noses? Of course, it's the child. The child is innocence and forgetfulness, a new beginning, a game, a self-propelling wheel, a first motion, a sacred Yes."

Nietzsche believed that the truly free spirit will resemble children at play, who discover the world for the first time, unburdened by what came before (hence the "forgetting"). The child is curious and filled with wonder. The child is not weighed down by rules and values, the child discovers for themselves the meaning in things.

Having uttered the "sacred No" to reject everything that came before, the child shouts the "sacred Yes" that affirms life.

We can create our own values, to take the risks to find what we want from life. The sacred Yes, Nietzsche tells us, is the for the game of creation. The spirit becomes its own will, it wins its own world.

Life is no longer a reactive struggle to defeat other forces. Life is a celebration of one's powers – a sustained act of pure affirmation and self-actualization. The child-like spirit knows the joy of life and the innocence of perpetual creation and flourishing.

In my work with people who have left religion, I see a lot of people getting stuck in the lion stage. For many years of their lives, they are the camels who are hauling around all the demands, expectations, doctrines, rules and thou shalts of religion. They rise up and slay the dragon by leaving religion but the energy of their daily lives is perpetually fighting and slaying the religion dragon over and over and over again. In either case, religion is their central life reference point; they only shifted from being for religion to being against it. The critical stage they never get to is the "child" - celebrating and using their powers to be the person they want to be and for actualizing the full extent of their highest potentialities and possibilities.

Summary

- Nietzsche believed that life's meaning and purpose is closely tied to the evolutionary process of self-actualization from an animal to Übermensch.
- The Nietzschean concept of camel, lion, child describes the metamorphosis involved in realizing our fullest potentialities and possibilities in life.

Day-15 Investigation

Spend some time in self-reflection and introspection today about how the camel, lion, and child themes relate to your life. Here are some questions to help guide your introspection:

- The problem with the camel is how it becomes a beast of burden, bearing and hauling the weight of the load placed upon it by others. What are the beliefs, mindsets, attitudes, demands, expectations, rules, limitations, shoulds, rules, pressures, and narratives that have been placed upon you through society, culture, tradition, conditioning and conformity? Are there some that no longer serve you, that you need to let go of?
- Thinking of the lion, what would you say is the "dragon" that most needs slayed in your life?
- There is something redeeming about both the "camel" (it's strength) and the "lion" (slaying the dragon), but the "child" represents complete metamorphosis. How does becoming and being the "child" relate to your current journey and life?

Day-16: Driving in the I-don't-give-a-damn gear

People pleasing is not love

It's a delicate balance to have goodwill toward others, AND live your own life freely. Choosing not to live your life, hiding, denying yourself, constantly seeking the approval, and trying to please everyone is NOT "loving others" but it IS not loving yourself.

You can be a kind and good person, AND still stop caring what other people think of you. Don't confuse the two. Don't be an asshole. Be a kind and caring person. AND stop caring what others think of you. You can do/be both without contradiction. You can't be you and live your life, and be trying to please, placate, and accommodate everyone else.

Whose life are you living anyway?

It's scary to think of how much of life we forfeit for all the mental and emotional energy we expend, worrying about what others think of us or being misunderstood. It can be paralyzing. There are some days we'd rather just stand still and not move because taking a step forward is risking the rejection, judgment and misunderstanding of others. In order to live life, one needs a I-don't-give-a damn gear.

Truly living OUR lives (and not someone else's) requires that we shift into what I call the "I-don't-give-a-damn gear!" Living OUR lives involves risking the disapproval and rejection of others, choosing a path that challenges "the way it's supposed to be," or just facing the fear of making mistakes and not being perfect.

You need to add an I-don't-give-a-damn gear to your repertoire. Don't expect everyone to line the streets to cheer your new-found freedom, personal evolution, and milestones in your individuation process. Unless one is unconcerned by other people's judgments, has no fear of being disliked by other people, and pays the cost that one might never be recognized, one will never be able to follow through in one's own way of living. That is to say, one will not be able to be free. Being disliked by someone is proof that you are exercising your freedom and living in freedom, and a sign that you are living in accordance with your own principles. There's always going to be people who aren't happy with you. The main thing is for you to be happy with you. The way to do this is to be in integrity with yourself, which simply means listening to you, being you, living you, expressing you - the real and authentic you, without apology.

Doing you

There are many aspects of our lives that are critical to uphold, regardless of the expectations or disapproval of others such as:

- be authentic and true to your unique self
- actualize your fullest potentialities and possibilities
- follow your own inner guidance and intuition
- think for yourself and form your own beliefs and views
- take responsibility for your well-being and happiness
- invest time and energy in what matters most to you in life
- act with the courage of your convictions;
- do what brings you joy
- choose our relationships
- say no and set boundaries for our well-being
- practice self-care
- act of our own free-will and not fear, shame or coercion
- terminate destructive, toxic, or oppressive relationships
- manage our own needs and desires
- seek support and help when we need it

- be kind, patient and compassionate with ourselves

Day-16 Investigation

Today's investigation is about freeing yourself from the need to be governed by the approval and acceptance of others.

- Spend some time today in self-reflection and introspection and deconstruct your approval-seeking and fear of rejection. Ask yourself this question: In what way does seeking approval or the fear of disapproval and rejection most show up in my life currently? Who is involved, what does it entail, what are the internal dynamics that have you hooked?
- The silent and unconscious mantra we often have at the core of our lives is: "I must have your approval", "people-pleasing at any cost", "I cannot risk disapproval and rejection", "I must make you happy", "I must be liked". What are 2-3 empowering declarations you could make about your life and way of being in the world to replace these self-sabotaging people-pleasing mindsets?
- Looking at the list above of the various aspects of your life that pull rank over pleasing others, what 2-3 of them do you most need or want to apply the I-don't-give-a-damn gear? What specifically would it mean for you to drive in that gear for each of them?

Record your thoughts, reflections, insights, realizations and discoveries in your personal journal.

Day-17: Shadow Work

“There is no coming to consciousness without pain. People will do anything, no matter how absurd, in order to avoid facing their own soul. One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious.”

- Carl Jung

In a previous post we investigated Carl Jung and Jungian psychology. Today’s post focused upon one aspect of Jungian psychology - shadow work.

The shadow is the “dark side” of our personality because it consists chiefly of destructive human emotions and impulses like rage, envy, greed, selfishness, desire, and the striving for power. All we deny in ourselves—whatever we perceive as inferior, evil, or unacceptable—become part of the shadow. The personal shadow is the disowned self. These unexamined or disowned parts of our personality don’t go anywhere. Although we deny them in our attempt to cast them out, we don’t get rid of them. We repress them. Ignore the shadow at your own peril. This shadow sabotages our lives at every turn until we become conscious of it and face and address it.

Jung wrote, "Everyone carries a shadow, and the less it is embodied in the individual's conscious life, the blacker and denser it is. At all counts, it forms an unconscious snag, thwarting our most well-meant intentions." Soul work is a journey toward wholeness, which includes the integration of all facets of our authentic self. The concept of "shadow work" is that we are influenced at a young age to suppress parts of ourselves that we learn and conclude are bad or undesirable. They are locked away in our unconscious, governing our lives from the shadows, until we become conscious of this and learn to relate to these parts of ourselves differently.

Jung wrote, "The shadow is a moral problem that challenges the whole ego-personality, for no one can become conscious of the shadow without considerable moral effort. To become conscious of it involves recognizing the dark aspects of the personality as present and real. This act is the essential condition for any kind of self-knowledge."

Exploring Shadow Work More Deeply

Here are a few useful resources for exploring shadow work further by Carl Jung, Alan Watts, and This Jungian Life podcast.

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7bY-TogxxdY&t=3205s>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uhAeXyVDDTc>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tWXNsEM-Sd8>

Doing Shadow Work

All we deny in ourselves—whatever we perceive as inferior, evil, or unacceptable—become part of the shadow. Shadow work is "coming out of hiding." A simple way to begin shadow work would be steps such as:

a. Concealment/Masking Inventory

This step involves identifying those ways you are aware that you hide or conceal parts of yourself. Or another way to look at it would be to identify those times you are being, behaving, speaking, acting, relating... as someone that you're not - being someone that doesn't feel real or authentic. It would be a feeling of cognitive dissonance as a result of being someone that doesn't feel good, right, whole, genuine or lacks integrity with your deepest sense of self. Some examples would include being the "nice person" or being the Chameleon to appease, accommodate and fit in. Children are often scolded at an early age for being silly and imaginative, and they learn to repress their playful and creative side. Other children are shamed for talking too much or having strong opinions or being overly curious, and they suppress the expressive, inquisitive, assertiveness, or intelligence.

b. Exploring the Suppressed Side

Is there a core message about yourself that you internalized somewhere in life, which may have played a central role in suppressing aspects of who you are? Is it necessary to believe or hold onto that message anymore? What would you choose to believe about yourself instead?

c. Inviting your concealed self back into the whole

What part of your repressed self needs to come out of hiding and be integrated into your life? What would it look like for you to give that part of you a place in your life?

Here are a few examples:

What part of you is your "nice person" persona suppressing that needs to come out of hiding and be integrated into your life? What would it look like for you to give that part of you a place in your life?

What part of your repressed expressive, inquisitive, assertiveness, or intelligence self needs to come out of hiding and be integrated into your life? What would it look like for you to give that part of you a place in your life?

What part of you is your chameleon persona suppressing that needs to come out of hiding and be integrated into your life? What would it look like for you to give that part of you a place in your life?

Day-17 Investigation

- Spend some time today in personal reflection and introspection. Have your journal handy to record your thoughts, insights, discoveries, and realizations. Identify one place in life where you feel a cognitive dissonance about who you are being in life, which you suspect is a suppressed part of who you are, and has been hidden away in the shadows.
- Press deeper into reflection and introspection, and identify a message about yourself that you learned from others perhaps as a child or that you told yourself, which is the power that holds that suppressed part of yourself in the shadows.
- Reflect upon and answer this question: What part of your suppressed self needs to come out of hiding and be integrated into your life? What would it look like for you to give that part of you a place in your life?

Day-18: The Path of Non-Resistance

“For after all, the best thing one can do when it is raining is let it rain.” - Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

An aspect of this Life After Religion group is exploring new mindsets, tools, practices and way of life for cultivating a life of meaning, peace, happiness and wellbeing. Today we are investigating the path of non-resistance.

"I don't care what happens."

A great guru was once asked what the secret was to his peace and happiness. He responded, “I don’t care what happens.” This was his secret.

What did he mean? These words were his way of saying that he lived his life without resistance. His way of living was complete acceptance, saying “yes” to everything. He had no preferences for what did or didn’t appear in his world, he put up no resistance and accepted it all equally and impartially.

Some will view this as apathy and indifference, and even selfishness and cruelty because we believe that we should care what happens and resist things such as injustice, wrongdoing, poverty, and oppression. But you have to look more deeply into his words to properly understand them.

What we think about happiness is flawed

When the guru said, “I don’t care what happens”, he was saying that the disposition of resistance is itself the source of suffering and an unnecessary posture in life. Virtually all human beings are falsely taught that the secret to peace and happiness is circumstantial, and a matter of seeking and welcoming good things in our lives, and avoiding and averting bad things. In a nutshell, our formula for happiness is stockpiling those things we like and want, and protecting ourselves from or fending off the things we don’t like and don’t want.

This strategy is fundamentally flawed and always doomed to fail. Everything in the world and our lived human experience is characterized by impermanence, change, fragility, contingency, conditionality, and instability. For example, let’s say that you depend upon good health, financial independence, stable and fulfilling employment, fulfilling relationships, and a predictable daily routine to feel good and happy in life. This is a tenuous, unsound, and fragile foundation for your well-being. All those items mentioned are subject to change and contingent upon many factors that are entirely out of your control. Health, finances, employment, relationships, and routines are all subject to change.

Consider how the coronavirus pandemic magnifies this fact. Professional athletes are distinguished by the exceptional health, fitness, stamina and strength of their body, and yet many of them have had their health compromised and ravaged by the virus. The fragility of the world is abundantly clear as you consider that a microscopic infectious agent on the other side of the world has reaped havoc in our economy and shut down entire cities. The truth is that either attaching ourselves to or escaping from anything in the world, as our strategy for happiness, will never work and will only cause more unhappiness and suffering.

When the guru said, “I don’t care what happens”, what he was indicating is that he had discovered that true peace and happiness has nothing to do with what does or doesn’t happen in the world or in circumstances. His life-changing discovery was that peace and happiness were inherent qualities of his true self and nature. In other words, he realized that peace and happiness is not a thing you seek, but the reality of what you fundamentally are. It is not necessary to seek peace and happiness, because you ARE peace and happiness. This peace and happiness that you are, is not contingent upon any factors outside itself. Nothing needs to be added. Nothing can be taken away from it.

This true peace and happiness is never threatened. It is absolute, unchanging, timeless, infinite, untroubled and undisturbed in every moment.

It only compounds our suffering to approach the world with resistance. It is our resistance that creates the drama, upset and turmoil of our lived experience.

Where would I apply non-resistance?

To apply the idea “I don’t care what happens” would go as follows. Rather than put up resistance to what appears in your life, embrace it with acceptance. Accept anything and everything that shows up in your life with complete impartiality. Say “yes” to everything.

For example...

- Bodily illness, disease or pain occurs; do not put up resistance, but say “yes” and accept it.
- You are struggling with depression; do not put up resistance, but say “yes” and accept it.
- You have been hurt and destabilized by a failed relationship; do not put up resistance, but say “yes” and accept it.
- You have lost your job, and are having financial difficulties; do not put up resistance, but say “yes” and accept it.
- Feelings of fear and loneliness arise; do not put up resistance, but say “yes” and accept it.
- You have suffered a great loss; do not put up resistance, but say “yes” and accept it.
- You have become aware of a great tragedy, crisis, or injustice that has occurred nearby; do not put up resistance, but say “yes” and accept it.

What does this actually mean? It would mean responding to whatever arises with something like this:

1. This is what has appeared in my life at this moment.
2. Denying, repressing, resisting, avoiding or wishing it away is irrelevant, it is now an experience in my life.
3. This occurrence or experience does not determine, dictate, threaten, diminish or limit my peace and happiness because peace and happiness is what I am, and not contingent upon anything outside my absolute nature.
4. I don’t need this thing that has appeared in my life to change or go away in order to have peace and happiness.

5. I can choose to respond to what has arisen in my life with love, wisdom, reason and critical thinking, without the drama of resistance or attachment.
6. My response could include any number of feelings, actions, and choices, but none of them are driven by my need to control life in order to have peace and happiness.
7. Saying “yes” to everything means that my fundamental and impartial disposition toward everything in life is acceptance, and this empowers me to respond with composure and wisdom rather than drama and desperation.
8. I can respond to the actual experiences themselves, rather than all the mental commentary and dramatization I interject into it.
9. Physical illness and disease, depression, financial challenges, failed relationships, feelings of fear and loneliness, societal injustice, and anything else that arises in my field of experience are all things I can respond to as each situation requires. I do not approach the world needing to extract peace and happiness from it, I approach the world as peace and happiness.

To say, “I don’t care what happens” is not a statement of indifference and detachment, it is an acknowledgement that I can address life in every moment as it is from a place of true peace and happiness. This is true wisdom and liberation.

Day-18 Investigation: The Non-Resistance Game

Today we are playing the Non-Resistance Game:

1. In order to play this game, choose a word that inspires you in terms of a way of being in your life that feels empowering and liberating. Perhaps your word would be: courageous, composed, joyful, grateful, loving, wise, curious, compassionate, etc.
2. Choose one hour today to play the Non-Resistance Game. During that hour, everytime you feel or experience a resistance response, shift into the way of being you choose and respond as that - as courage, as composure, as joy, as gratitude, as love, as wisdom, as curiosity, as compassion - whatever word/way of being that you chose.

What I mean by an experience of resistance is anything that arises inside or outside of you in which you feel some aversion - trying to avoid it, push it away, strong dislike, not wanting it, fighting it, opposing it, fearing it, refusing to accept, adverse reaction, deny, reject, etc.

When you feel the resistance, shift into approaching it from the word/way of being that you chose. For example, let's say you choose "compassion" as your way of being. Something comes up and you feel resistance. Stop and ask yourself, "What would it

mean right now for me to approach this as compassion (or courage, courage, composure, joy, gratitude, love, wisdom, curiosity, etc)?"

Remember this is a game. Don't make it too heavy. Don't criticize or judge yourself about how you perceive it is going. There is no way to do this game wrong. It is simply something to investigate and see what comes of it. Don't go looking for resistance, whenever you notice it coming up, simply play the game. The resistance could be about very small or relatively inconsequential things. They don't have to be major and monumental things. It could be resistance that relates to your thoughts, feelings, preferences, people, circumstances, sensory perceptions, body sensations, etc.

There's nothing set in stone about it being one hour. It just seemed like a reasonable duration of time in which instances of resistance might pop up. I would recommend you set a timer only because it may be useful to heighten your mindfulness of playing the game.

Questions to ask yourself:

- Is there something to learn or take away from those things to which you felt resistance?
- What about this investigation was challenging or difficult for you, and why?
- What were the results of shifting out of resistance into your chosen way of being?
- Do you think it is possible to live a life without resistance?

Day-19: Making Space for Everything

"I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things; then I shall be one of those who makes things beautiful." - Friedrich Nietzsche

If you were to live forever

Back in my religious days I would often ask people, "If you were to die tonight, where would you spend eternity?"

Now I ask, "If you were to live the last week of your life over and over and over again for time everlasting, would you be good with that?"

This was a thought experiment that Nietzsche used to challenge people to examine the kind of life they were living. He called it "Eternal Recurrence."

Nietzsche wrote in his book, *The Gay Science*:

"What if some day or night a demon were to steal into your loneliest loneliness and say to you : 'This life as you now live it and have lived it you will have to live once again and innumerable times again; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every

joy and every thought and sigh and everything unspeakably small or great in your life must return to you, all in the same succession and sequence - even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned over again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!' Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: 'You are a god, and never have I heard anything more divine.' If this thought gained power over you, as you are it would transform and possibly crush you; the question in each and every thing, 'Do you want this again and innumerable times again?' would lie on your actions as the heaviest weight! Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to long for no thing more fervently than for this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?"

Does this thought experiment make you shudder or would it be a source of comfort and joy?

In presenting the idea of eternal recurrence, Nietzsche wants us to carefully analyze our reaction if we discovered it was true. He assumes that our first reaction would be despair. The human condition is tragic, life contains much suffering, and the thought that one must relive it all an infinite number of times seems terrible.

But what Nietzsche ultimately wants and imagines is the possibility that we would have a different reaction. Suppose we could welcome the news, embrace it as something that we desire? That, says Nietzsche, would be the ultimate expression of a life-affirming attitude - to want this life, with all its pain and boredom and frustration, again and again.

The thought experiment is also a challenge not to accept a default life. In other words, if the life you are currently living in terms of your daily choices, actions, mindsets, priorities, values, and commitments, is not something you would be inspired to live again and again and again for all eternity, maybe it's time to make a change.

The idea of eternal recurrence isn't original to Nietzsche. The theory states that the universe and all existence and energy has been recurring, and will continue to recur, in a self-similar form an infinite number of times across infinite time or space. This idea is found in Indian philosophy and in ancient Egypt and was subsequently taken up by the Pythagoreans and Stoics. With the later spread of Christianity, the theory fell into disuse in the Western world, with the exception of Friedrich Nietzsche.

Can you love all of your life?

Nietzsche connected the notion of eternal recurrence to other concepts such as amor fati, which is translated "love of fate" or "love of one's fate." The idea is meant to convey an attitude in which one sees everything that happens in one's life, including suffering

and loss, as good or, at the very least, necessary. Amor fati is characterized by an acceptance of the events or situations that occur in one's life.

Nietzsche saw it as flawed thinking to divide up one's lives into two categories of "good" (joys, comforts, successes, delight, pleasure, gratification) and "bad" (hardship, difficulty, adversity, sorrow, loss, affliction). Nietzsche said that the human journey involves all of the above, and that we should not celebrate the good and despise the bad, but cultivate an acceptance and even an appreciation for the totality of it all, and how the spectrum of all our life experiences contribute to our becoming more liberated and actualized human beings.

In the *Will to Power*, Nietzsche writes,

"The first question is by no means whether we are content with ourselves, but whether we are content with anything at all. If we affirm one single moment, we thus affirm not only ourselves but all existence. For nothing is self-sufficient, neither in us ourselves nor in things; and if our soul has trembled with happiness and sounded like a harp string just once, all eternity was needed to produce this one event—and in this single moment of affirmation all eternity was called good, redeemed, justified, and affirmed."

In *The Gay Science*, he wrote,

"I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things; then I shall be one of those who makes things beautiful. Amor fati: let that be my love henceforth! I do not want to wage war against what is ugly. I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse those who accuse. Looking away shall be my only negation. And all in all and on the whole: some day I wish to be only a Yes-sayer."

And in *Ecce Homo*,

"My formula for greatness in a human being is amor fati: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it—all idealism is mendacity in the face of what is necessary—but love it."

Nietzsche's spirit of acceptance occurs in the context of his radical embrace of suffering. For to love that which is necessary, demands not only that we love the bad along with the good, but that we view the two as inextricably linked. In the preface of *The Gay Science*, he writes, "Only great pain is the ultimate liberator of the spirit....I doubt that such pain makes us 'better'; but I know that it makes us more profound."

Amor fati describes a mindset in which a person takes everything that happens in their life from an empowering perspective. Life is filled with 10,000 joys and sorrows. Consider that each of them is an invitation to make us more profound. Rather than recoil, resent, begrudge, despise, loathe, revile our struggles, difficulties, hardships, mistakes, adversities, disappointments, and upsets, what if we insisted upon being made more profound because of them?

Stop wishing away your life

What Nietzsche was confronting was the way people are forever wishing that something different would happen in their lives - a perpetual wishing for a different fate.

The goal of amor fati is not to teach you to be a cow standing in the rain, simply enduring and hoping to survive your fate. It is not to make you feel "okay" or even "good" when terrible things happen. Amor fati is more about how you interpret and respond to what comes in your life, what meaning you ascribe to the events and happenings of your life.

Marcus Aurelius wrote, "A blazing fire makes flame and brightness out of everything that is thrown into it."

Anthony de Mello said, "Every painful event contains in itself a seed of growth and liberation."

Cheryl Strayed wrote, "You can't cry it away or eat it away or starve it away or walk it away or punch it away or even therapy it away. It's just there, and you have to survive it. You have to endure it. You have to live through it and love it and move on and be better for it."

No circumstance in life can strip you of the choice or possibility of honoring your highest truth, having a breakthrough in transformation, following the path of wisdom, or learning something valuable for your life journey. It's often in the crucible of adversity, hardship and suffering where our character is forged and liberation emerges. Hence Nietzsche's famous line, "What doesn't kill you, makes you stronger."

In the life of every human being, there will be joy, peace, beauty, fulfillment and well-being. There will also be hardship, loss, adversity and suffering. Accepting the joys and despising the sorrows is living only half a life.

Instead, Nietzsche would say, learn to accept the totality of everything that happens and unfolds in your life - past, present, and future. What it means to "accept" any particular thing in your life will look different. For example, what it means to "accept" the experience of a beautiful sunset, is different from what it means to "accept" a painful loss or experience of hardship or adversity. Only you know what it means to "accept" what comes in your life. To "accept" something is to choose to see it and respond to it in

a way that reflects your highest values, deepest desires, greatest hopes, and empowers your continuing journey of growth and self-actualization.

Amor fati means "love of one's fate." It's to love life... your life... in its entirety.

Day-19: Investigation: Making Space for Everything

Set aside some time today and ponder this question:

On what basis can I impartially accept and appreciate everything that is in my life - everything that my life has contained in its entirety to this moment, everything that is in my life right now, everything that will ever arise in my life from this day forward?

In other words, how would you frame the totality of your life (past, present and future) that would allow you to accept and love all of it, and even live it innumerable times over for all eternity?

Record an expression of this by completing the following statement:

"I will accept and love all of my life because ..."

Day-20: Exploring the true nature of reality

"We are all born from the same celestial seed." - Carlo Rovelli

A theory of everything

A "theory of everything", "final theory", "ultimate theory", or "master theory" is a hypothetical single, all-encompassing, coherent theoretical framework of physics that fully explains the entirety of the universe. In philosophy, "monism" is the concept that there exists only a single thing, the Universe, which can only be artificially and arbitrarily divided into many things, and asserts that all existing things can be explained in terms of a single reality or substance.

Today's investigation is to explore the true nature of reality. To aid in this investigation I have chosen two individuals to help us:

Carlo Rovelli (Italian theoretical physicist)

Rupert Spira (British spiritual teacher of the neo-advaita path)

Day-20 Investigation

Set aside some time to listen to two videos by Carlo Rovelli and Rupert Spira.

- <https://tinyurl.com/vngsogk> (Rovelli)

- <https://tinyurl.com/rokd2dr> (Spira)

Consider making your listening time more enjoyable by listening to them on your phone/headphones as you go on a walk, or at home in a comfy place with a cup of your favorite coffee and tea. If necessary, you could listen to the videos as you carry out some other task that isn't absorbing too much of your brain energy.

Record your thoughts to the following questions in your journal:

- What discovery, insight, realization or aha-moment most connected with you from each video?
- If you had been present on each occasion when these individuals delivered their presentation, what question would you have asked?
- Is there an area of investigation you were inspired and motivated to pursue further?
- What are the personal implications of each presentation as it relates to your personal and spiritual growth, and journey of knowing the true nature of what you are and the true nature of all things?

"All differences in this world are of degree, and not of kind, because oneness in the secret of everything." - Swami Vivekananda

Day-21: Transcending the Victim Mentality

"I am not what happened to me, I am what I choose to become." - Carl Jung

What is the victim mentality?

Most people's lives are guided along by mindsets that hinder or sabotage their intention to live life well. One of them is the victim mentality, which is seeing one's life as the result of the negative actions of others. The victim mentality is an outlook on life that blames people, society, or circumstances for the quality of our lives. We believe that the central factors relating to our happiness and well-being are outside our control.

The reason this mindset is debilitating is not because there is not some truth to the underlying premise. Of course, a person's life can be negatively and unfairly affected by other people's actions and unwanted events that befall us. An unfortunate reality about the human journey is that life is often unfair, and we suffer hardship because of the selfish, unjust, harmful, and destructive choices of others. None of us live on a deserted island; we are impacted by the people around us and the limitations of our circumstances.

I have experienced victimization myself as a survivor of childhood trauma and abuse. For a season of my life I traveled the world with an international human rights agency, investigating some of the most horrific human rights atrocities and crimes against

humanity. In both cases, learning and cultivating mindsets and tools of personal empowerment were central to the process of recovery, healing and wholeness.

The victim mentality is detrimental because it diverts our attention from the essential fact that we alone are responsible for our lives. A person who sees themselves fundamentally as a victim, may wrongly believe that there is nothing significant that he can do to affect his life.

In the endeavor to live life well, the critical factor in the equation is you. Not others, not your circumstances; you. You are at the center of what is required to cultivate a life of meaning and fulfillment. The victim mentality, however, can leave us feeling powerless to change our circumstances, and likely to place our hope and dependency upon others or good fortune for our happiness.

All people are victimized in some way, sometimes in tragic and harrowing ways. There is nothing wrong with acknowledging how you have been victimized, feeling anger, sorrow, and resentment toward those who have wronged you and how their offenses detrimentally impacted your life. Nonetheless, it is still the case that your happiness, well-being, advancement and wholeness are your responsibility. This can sound harsh and insensitive, but my aim is to dispel the wishful thinking that someone or something is going to magically swoop into your life and make everything okay. Even if others are to blame for your current demise, or if the system is rigged against you, the possibility that somebody else will rectify this on your behalf is highly unlikely. That does not mean you must do it alone or without the help, support, and intervention of others, but you are the one who must seek and request it.

Taking radical responsibility

As a personal growth mentor, I work with people in cultivating the mindset of radical responsibility in their lives. Radical responsibility is the mentality that we are responsible for everything in our world. An aspect of this is taking full responsibility for your happiness and well-being. This involves developing a strong belief and practical tools for living life well.

Radical responsibility is a place of power from which to engage life. It is the antidote against the victim mentality. True transformation begins when you take responsibility for your entire life. When you focus on your part in creating the life you want, you move from blaming others to personal action. You are not a victim but a creator. You cannot control other people and many variables in the external circumstances of your life, but you can metabolize life circumstances and experiences to advance your well-being. Life is only what happens; your experience of life is what you make of it through your mindsets, actions and choices.

It is true that every human being has experiences in life in which they were wronged or victimized. For some people, these occurrences were traumatic and caused deep suffering. Radical responsibility is not denying or minimizing these occurrences and their effects; it's saying to yourself, "I am not what happened to me, I am what I choose to become." Does that mean it is easy? No. Does it mean you do it alone? No. It simply means taking responsibility for being in the driver's seat of your life, even if it involves seeking the help, and support of others.

Day-21 Investigation: Choosing a pathway of radical responsibility

Consider the following list of ways to practice radical responsibility:

to let go

to stop hiding and pretending

to make amends

to say what needs said

to do the thing you think you cannot do

to cultivate a new relationship with yourself

to walk away

to express what you most deeply feel

to make peace with your past

to take a stand

to start anew

to say yes

to act on your passion

to break your silence

to say no

to ask for help and support

to create the life you desire

to step out in courage

to be vulnerable

to speak your mind

to establish a boundary

to address the root cause of your chronic unhappiness
to stop saying you can't
to declare what truly matters to you in life
to stop withholding love
to claim your freedom to be who you are
to stop making excuses
to stop all of that berating self-talk
to be fully all there
to push past your fears
to stop appeasing the expectations of others
to speak and live your truth
to do something about it
to move past what has been holding you back
to be honest with yourself
to think for yourself
to follow your path
to live your life

Spend some introspective time today and reflect upon the list of pathways of radical responsibility. Choose three of them that most resonate with you and your life as steps in the direction of taking ownership and responsibility for your life. Identify a mindset, action, choice or step you could take today for each or one of the three areas you identified. Take that step today.

Were there any insights, realizations or discoveries of significance that arose in this investigation?

Day-22 Investigation: Practicing Conscious Living

“The unexamined life is not worth living.” - Socrates

Unexamined Living

Our thoughts, beliefs, attitudes and mindsets about anything, is shaped by a confluence of unique and particular influences, such as one’s family upbringing, religious tradition, cultural distinctives, education, media, and social conditioning.

People are heavily programmed by external sources to approach life in a particular way. It’s not like one day we sat down and thoroughly considered all the possibilities about what the meaning of life is, what constitutes true happiness, what it means to be a man or woman, or the marks of true success, and then critically weighed all the options and consciously choose the one we carefully reasoned out as the best choice. How we think about ourselves, life and the world is governed by a nexus of understandings and assumptions that we carry, not because we chose them, but because we were indoctrinated or socialized into them.

To be indoctrinated into something means a person or group is taught to accept a set of beliefs uncritically. The process of social conditioning happens when outside forces define, determine, and dictate what is “normal” - what you should think and how you should behave. We become, as Pink Floyd sang, “another brick in the wall.”

The fact that this happens is inevitable. No one can independently reason out every matter in life, especially in our younger and most formative years. We rightfully depend upon and absorb the knowledge of others. Some ideas and assumptions we are conditioned to believe can be good or useful. If you were taught from a very early age that you are a person of inestimable worth and capable of great things, or you learned that the practice of virtue is a wise way of conducting one's life, you would likely reap great benefit from these ingrained beliefs.

What default ideas are governing your life?

That we live our lives based upon views imparted to us by others is not necessarily itself a problem. However, not knowing that we are doing it, is. In other words, not realizing that the ways we think and act in the world are influenced by a process of conditioning is dangerous because we are less likely to question our assumptions. The danger lies in the fact that not all the beliefs and assumptions we are socialized into are accurate or liberating; they can also be debilitating, self-sabotaging and imprisoning. Why? Because not all the forces and influences that are shaping our view of the world have our best interest in mind. For example, societal institutions and the media, two primary normalizing systems, have their own agendas.

For instance, a car company creates commercials that show happy, successful, cool, and adventurous people driving their cars. It is as if this kind of life depends upon owning that car, which is exactly what they want you to think, so you will buy it. A news outlet presents you a one-sided view of a current issue, because their role to inform the public is tainted by a political ideology that they have a vested interest in promoting. Religion offers a particular and narrow set of answers to life's existential questions and uses fear to discourage a broader pursuit of truth, because their agenda is to defend and advance their legitimacy and superiority.

The matter at hand is not what you think true happiness is, or how you measure success, or your specific understanding of God, or what you deem matters most in life. The question is: why do you think this way? Where did these understandings and values come from? What is the origin or explanation for the views you hold and the actions you take with respect to anything? Every human being must take under careful consideration that their lives are being governed by a set of default and unquestioned beliefs, attitudes, stories, assumptions and expectations that were inculcated into them.

We all want to live life well, but what if our unconscious and unquestioned beliefs and mental models prevent us from doing so? It is quite possible that right now you have any number of default notions that will sabotage your intentions of living a fulfilled and meaningful life. Carl Jung described the power of unconscious beliefs this way, "Until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate."

Deconstructing unconscious beliefs

Unconscious beliefs are agreements we maintain in our mind that we have no awareness we are holding. We are indoctrinated into these unconscious beliefs or arrive at them through faulty reasoning. For example, you may have unconscious agreements with yourself such as: I don't have what it takes to succeed; it's not okay to make mistakes; I don't deserve to be happy; I never measure up; and I am doomed to fail. We also have unconscious agreements about life, the world, and other people. Some of these could be the world is unsafe; I cannot trust people; asking for help is weakness; I am powerless to make a difference; I have no control. Many of our prejudices and stereotypes of others are based upon views we were taught and never questioned.

How does one make the unconscious conscious? A useful tool is self-examination. This is not "navel-gazing", "analysis paralysis", or self-absorption, but simply being mindful of your life and probing beneath the surface. Breaking the shackles of social conditioning requires the willingness to question your most cherished beliefs and bedrock assumptions. Many of our beliefs have become so ingrained that it doesn't even occur to us to question them. We are often attached to and find security in beliefs, even if they are limiting and harmful.

For any belief or assumption that governs your life, ask yourself:

- Where did this belief come from?
- Is there any logical reason for holding it?
- Is it limiting myself in any way or contributing to living life well?

This exercise involves nothing more than using the human faculty of reason and rationality. It involves determining if there is a logical basis for holding your beliefs. Did you reach them through critical thinking, or did you just accept them as truth merely because you were indoctrinated into them? It's important to take a step back and ask whether your beliefs and assumptions are serving your happiness or causing you suffering.

Whether they are beliefs concerning religion, health, politics, economics, or any field of knowledge, one must scrutinize their validity. You would not want to be basing your life upon ideas that are false, deficient, or detrimental. Examining your beliefs allows you to decondition yourself from negative social programming, which permits you to grow in understanding and make wiser choices.

Never be afraid to question your beliefs. To doubt what you think you know is a sign of intelligence, and only those who are courageous enough to do so can break free from the shackles of social conditioning and walk on the path of wisdom.

One way of doing self-examination is to be mindful of those occurrences in your life when your intention and initiative to live life well is thwarted, or leads to frustration, anxiety, disappointment, or dissatisfaction. Let these emotions be a signal to investigate the matter more deeply. Look and see if there's a specific mindset, belief, fear, assumption, or expectation that is corrupting the process. Try to connect your negative feelings to a false belief or mindset.

For example, let us say you decide to explore a new area of artistic expression, say oil painting. You take a class, paint your first landscape, and you hate it. You look at your painting and conclude you are a failure, should quit painting and never try anything new again. Consider all the false beliefs and assumptions that could be behind this response. They could be:

- I must be perfect.
- I should be able to master something new, right away.
- My worth is based upon the results I produce.
- Not achieving my desired outcome means I am a failure.
- I cannot ever do anything right.

I think you would agree that all the above responses are not rational. No person is perfect. Perfection is an unrealistic, impossible, self-defeating, and imprisoning mindset. A question would be: why do you think you must be perfect? How did you learn that? Where did that belief or assumption come from? Likewise, no craft can be mastered in one's first attempt, a person's worth is not based upon what they produce, and not achieving a specific desired outcome isn't an indictment of failure. These are limiting and self-sabotaging beliefs that are not based in logic or reason, and yet they could be preventing you from living life well.

Another way to unmask one's default and unquestioned assumptions is to seek knowledge and viewpoints outside the sub-culture and realms of influence that have shaped your understandings. One of the surest ways for seeing something more objectively or fully, is to become aware of your own subjectivity. It is useful to remember that your view of everything in life and in the world is subjective and limited and based on what you currently know. The antidote to this is to explore what you do not know, investigate fields of knowledge you are unfamiliar with, interact with a diversity of people and groups, and avail yourself to opinions and views that are different from your own.

English statesman, William Drury wrote, "When your views on the world and your intellect are being challenged and you begin to feel uncomfortable because of a

contradiction you've detected that is threatening your current model of the world or some aspect of it, pay attention. You are about to learn something."

You are the owner of your own mind

Each of us must take control of the contents of our mind. We do not have complete control over what goes into our mind, but each of us are responsible for the beliefs, views, mindsets, and understandings we adopt that govern our lives. I mention above one of the nine pathways, learning new things, but the endeavor of living life well also includes unlearning – deprogramming ourselves of the false or faulty beliefs, mindsets, assumptions, and stories ruling and running our lives from within.

Do not blindly accept something as true, just because you read it in a book or on the Internet, heard it on the news, or an "expert" says so. Apply common sense and reason, educate yourself, and insist that ideas legitimize themselves based on critical thinking.

At risk of sounding like a conspiracy theorist, there are many societal entities that have a vested interest in convincing you to see life in a biased and limited way, want to prevent you from knowing too much, and hope to keep you focused on whatever shiny objects that serve their interests.

There is a point when a person discovers there are forces at work, determining and governing their lives. These forces are the views, stories, scripts, beliefs, attitudes, shoulds, limitations, pressures, and expectations we have inherited, absorbed and are currently following, consciously or by default. Becoming aware of these influences is central to our growth. We must scrutinize and question them, and in many cases discard them. There will always be some unconscious forces at work influencing our attitudes and actions, but it is a wise thing to be in the driver's seat of your life, consciously determining your steps based on careful and deliberate thought, critical thinking and your values and convictions.

Day-22 Investigation: Practicing Conscious Living

Today's investigation is about examining the beliefs and mindsets that unconsciously govern your life. Be aware today of a situation or circumstance that arises today when you feel an intense, troubling or distressing emotion such as: fear, shame, anxiety, self-judgment, anger, frustration, resentment, failure, inadequacy. Investigate these feelings by asking yourself a series of questions:

- Is there a belief at the root of this distressing situation and emotion?
- Where did this belief come from?
- Did I consciously adopt this belief?
- Is there any logical reason for holding it?

- Is it limiting myself in any way or contributing to living life well?
- What would it mean to let go of this belief?
- What would I choose to believe instead?

Day-23: Deconstructing heaven

“The kingdom of heaven is within you.” - Jesus

The next few posts are exploring alternatives to traditional Christian teachings about God, heaven, Jesus, the Bible, and prayer. I’m not advocating any particular position or belief about these subjects. My goal is to show alternative understandings for these areas as I worked through them for myself. You will come to your own views and beliefs about these and other areas through your own investigation, or may not feel the need or desire to do so.

Why is heaven such a cherished idea?

I don't think it's terribly complicated. The two things we fear most - death and suffering - are resolved and eradicated by the notion of heaven, which is a ready-made paradise of perpetual and eternal bliss, and the absence of all suffering. We are fond of the idea of immortality and eternal paradise.

It's hard to say if the idea of heaven would be a natural longing within a human being or if it is inculcated within us through the influence of religion. For example, would a 6-year-old who never went to church suddenly have a moment after launching a projectile with their Stomp Rocket and say, "Please, please, please - let there be a place

of eternal perpetual bliss and the absence of all pain and suffering that I will go to when I die!"

If I'm watching television and I see a Taco Bell commercial, suddenly I feel a need for a Nacho Doritos Locos Taco. If I go to church and hear about heaven every week, I become attached to the idea because of what it represents.

Heaven according to religion

The typical concept of heaven is that it's a ready-made place one arrives to.

The challenge, and perhaps the value, of religion is that it attempts to make the non-material, spiritual, metaphysical, transcendent dimension accessible, practical and relatable in human terms. God is anthropomorphised into a supreme being, evil is personified in Satan, eternal truth is encapsulated in a book (the Bible), and the two ultimate destinations are the consequence of our choices, which are represented by two locations - heaven and hell. The problem, however, is that over time we come to think of these metaphors, analogies and representations as real in a literal sense. This is where it is useful to use rational and critical thinking to evaluate these literal interpretations.

Is it rational to conclude that God is a human-like supreme being? Is it rational that evil is the result of a fallen angel, Satan? Is it rational that all transcendent truth is contained in one book? Is it rational that heaven is a location in the sky?

In my book, *Inner Anarchy*, I wrote:

"Heaven is the ace in the hole of the Christian religion. It's the trump card. The promise of heaven is the hope that keeps Christians believing. No matter the hardships that befall their lives or the suffering they see in the world, believers derive a sense of comfort and justice from the idea that there will be a huge payoff in the end. Heaven is regarded as where things finally happen—where Christians' hopes, rewards, and bliss will materialize. Heaven is the place where salvation is fulfilled and the good life begins—where all the believers are having a ball in their white nightgowns, walking up and down streets of gold and worshipping their God in glory. They have arrived!

Some things about this heaven just don't add up. How can the "good news" be that we must endure a lifetime of difficulty, misery, and suffering only to get sick and die a miserable death so we can finally be happy and fulfilled? If you went to a restaurant that advertised exquisite cuisine, but said you had to first eat all the rotten food out of the back dumpster to get the good stuff, would you? I'm guessing not! Surely many people reach the end of their life and look back and wonder what the purpose of it was—especially as they leave all their grieving loved ones behind. That is cruel.

And there is something else that doesn't add up about the Christian religion's ideas of heaven. Up until now, no one has been there and come back and been able to authentically verify those ideas. While it is true that people have had near-death experiences and spoken of very real spiritual and mystical experiences, there is no scientific hard evidence that proves that heaven exists somewhere out there. It is still very much a theory that Christians cling to. If we were so certain that this belief of heaven as a perfect paradise is so infallible, then why not put a bullet in our heads and go there now?! Woo hoo! We are out of here! Christians should be racing each other to see who can get there first!

But, despite all the misery of the world, most of us don't want to die. Instead, we do everything we can to slow down, hold off, and prevent death. We fight tooth and nail to cling to life for as long as we can here on earth—Christians as much as anyone. We spend billions and billions on medical research, doctors, and hospitals. Dying is the last activity we want to take part in."

What Ludwig, Nietzsche and Marx said

Throughout history, just as religion was advancing the idea of heaven, many philosophers questioned it. 19th-century philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach wrote:

"Christianity set itself the goal of fulfilling man's unattainable desires, but for that very reason ignored his attainable desires. By promising man eternal life, it deprived him of temporal life, by teaching him to trust in God's help it took away his trust in his own powers; by giving him faith in a better life in heaven, it destroyed his faith in a better life on earth and his striving to attain such a life. Christianity gave man what his imagination desires, but for that very reason failed to give him what he really and truly desires."

Friedrich Nietzsche wrote,

"The 'kingdom of heaven' is not something lying 'above the earth' or coming 'after death'. It does not have a yesterday or a day after tomorrow, and it will not arrive in a 'thousand years'. It is an experience of the heart. It is everywhere and it is nowhere."

In other words, Nietzsche was saying that the ideal and potential that heaven represents is not something that is located in some particular afterlife place, but is an ideal and potential that runs through the human heart and is meant to be manifested in the here and now on earth.

Nietzsche also wrote, "I beseech you, my brothers, remain faithful to the earth, and do not believe those who speak to you of otherworldly hopes."

What does "faithful to the earth" mean? It could include:

Faithful to...

- Becoming fully what we are
- Actualizing our highest potentialities and possibilities
- Preventing and alleviating human and planetary suffering
- Aiding human and planetary flourishing
- Honoring the gift of life by embracing it fully

What are these "otherworldly hopes"? Quite possibly they are:

- Heaven as a place
- Regarding the afterlife more highly than the herelife
- Anticipating God to right every wrong and end all suffering
- Promise of a future eternal paradise and perpetual happiness

Ludwig Feuerbach, in a series of lectures on religion, said the following:

"Man has many wishes that he does not really wish to fulfil, and it would be a misunderstanding to suppose the contrary. He wants them to remain wishes, they have value only in his imagination; their fulfilment would be a bitter disappointment to him. Such a desire is the desire for eternal life. If it were fulfilled, man would become thoroughly sick of living eternally, and yearn for death. In reality man wishes merely to avoid a premature, violent or gruesome death. Everything has its measure, says a pagan philosopher; in the end we weary of everything, even of life; a time comes when man desires death. Consequently, there is nothing frightening about a normal, natural death, the death of a man who has fulfilled himself and lived out his life. Old men often long for death. The German philosopher Kant could hardly wait to die, and not in order to resuscitate, but because he longed for the end. Only an unnatural, unfortunate death, the death of a child, a youth, a man in the prime of life, makes us revolt against death and wish for a new life. Such misfortunes are bitterly painful for the survivors; and yet they do not justify belief in a hereafter, if only because such abnormal cases – and they are abnormal even if they should be more frequent than natural death – could only have an abnormal hereafter as their consequence, a hereafter for those who have died too

soon or by violence; but a special hereafter of this kind is an absurdity which no one could believe."

Heaven as a political weapon

1st Century Greek historian, Diodorus Siculus, in his monumental universal history *Bibliotheca historica*, wrote, "It is to the interest of states to be deceived in religion." Roman historian, Livy, wrote in admiration of Numa Pompilius, the second king of Rome, who "introduced the fear of the gods as the most efficacious means of controlling an ignorant and barbarous populace." Roman philosopher, Seneca, added, "Religion is regarded by the common people as true, by the wise as false, and by the rulers as useful." And English philosopher, William Hazlitt, wrote, "The garb of religion is the best cloak for power."

There are always two equally participating parties in a lie – the person who tells the lie and the person who believes it. Even as religion has been a means of control over people, it has also offered something people want. We have all heard the well-known line of Karl Marx, "Religion is the opium of the people." Marx believed that religion had certain practical purposes in society that were similar to the function of opium in a sick or injured person: it reduced one's immediate suffering or distracted them from it by providing pleasant feelings and illusions. Marx saw religion as harmful and viewed the promise of heaven as a mechanism to distract people from seeing the class structure and oppression around them, and thus preventing the necessary revolution to change it.

To Marx, religion offered an escape from a grim and grinding world, typically caused by an oppressive ruling class. Religion tells people that God loves them as his own children, how he is in control of all things, will provide for and protect them, and how the faithful have a future eternal life of perfect happiness in heaven. Russian revolutionary, Mikhail Bakunin, wrote, "People go to church for the same reasons they go to a tavern: to stupefy themselves, to forget their misery, to imagine themselves, for a few minutes anyway, free and happy."

But for those few hours of escape, religion commits the greatest injustice against humankind by corroding the part of us that is capable of accessing what human beings most deeply want and need. American psychologist, Abraham Maslow, developed the notion of the "hierarchy of needs," which uses a triangle to convey the layers of fundamental needs all human beings have. On the bottom of the triangle are safety and security needs such as basic human survival. Maslow next identified needs of love, belonging and a stable self-respect and self-esteem. Nearing the top of the hierarchy, Maslow said human beings ultimately desire self-actualization and self-transcendence –

reaching one's full potential as an individual person, and meaningful engagement with a reality greater than oneself.

For a human being to consciously direct their lives in order to meet these essential needs they would have to have a strong sense of self-worth, self-trust and self-reliance. But these are the exact qualities that religion too often strips away from a person. Throughout history, religion has repeatedly discouraged people from thinking for themselves, dissuaded them from questioning what they've been told, and discredited their ability to direct their own lives. Religion weakens people's relationship with themselves, and replaces it with a dependency on a particular belief-system, and the leaders and organization that represents it. Religion has often used this arrangement to control people and further its own self-serving ends.

There's an insidious way that religion prevents a person from accepting reality. That's why Marx said, "Religion is the opiate of the masses." We would rather be swept up in good-feeling illusions, than look reality square in the face and address it.

Too often religion's idea of heaven lulls people into a mindset of...

- not fully embracing the life you have now
- not taking responsibility for your own happiness
- accepting the unacceptable about your life and the world

The fundamental message of Christianity is: this life is hardship and suffering but it's only temporary, and enduring it gracefully will be rewarded by eternal paradise in heaven. To question this premise is to question God. To refuse the premise of current suffering and seek to eradicate it is a losing game and stands in opposition to the will and plan of God. God is the rescuer, fixer, saver, redeemer; not you.

This is why many non-religious people have happier lives than religious people; they are not holding-out for some better eternal future and instead, making the most of the life they have now. Jim Morrison was right, "No eternal reward will forgive us now for wasting the dawn." In other words, it's unforgivable to squander the present because of some religious notion of the future.

God is not going to swoop down and solve our problems for us. Divine intervention is not the secret to a life of happiness. The gift you have already been given is the capability of consciously guiding your life in ways that are meaningful and fulfilling to you. You are responsible for your life.

This still leaves the question: Is heaven real?

This could be broken down into two questions:

- Is heaven real?
- In what way is heaven real?

People often speak of having transcendent, peak or heaven-like experiences. Consider the possibility that these are pointers to the way things could be. In other words, moments of deep love, peace, harmony, belonging, freedom and joy point to how things could be. Yes, hate, discord, alienation, oppression and suffering are rampant in our world. Does it have to be this way? Could it be a different way? And more importantly, could we create and produce that way?

How would things be if humankind got its act together and focused 100% of our time and energies working towards the good? We don't know. Maybe the sky's the limit, and then once we reach the limit of the sky, there's a sky beyond that and then another and another. Who knows where this goes! What are the limitations of the human being? Do we know?

The universe has been in a process of expansion, stretching back some 14 billion years. The evolution of living things on earth began 4.5 billion years ago. Human evolution has been a process of a meager 85 million years. Maybe the universe, living things, and human beings are only in the toddler stage of development, at best. Who's to say that there aren't other entire dimensions or realms of expansion and evolution that we haven't even gotten to yet? Maybe the current study of consciousness is a doorway into one of those new dimensions or realms.

Is it possible that heaven is meant to represent this realm or dimension of becoming?

Consider the possibility that the notion of "on earth as it is in heaven" is meant to convey that the next leap in the expansion and evolution of the cosmos exists right now in potential, waiting to be actualized. Maslow spoke of "self-actualization" as a step in individual human development, but what if it's also a decisive step in the process of an ever-advancing universe and the evolution of our collective reality as human beings and all living things.

Could the Bible mean this?

1. The Garden of Eden in Genesis represents the idea of a fully evolved and actualized universe in which all living things coexist in peace, harmony and flourishing.
2. Adam and Eve's eating of the forbidden fruit represents a monumental stage in the saga of the unfolding universe because human beings discover that we have the capacity to use our powers to create heaven or hell.

3. God is initially the primary agent calling the shots and overseeing human affairs while human beings fail miserably at executing their human agency and makes the world more like hell than heaven.

4. Around the time of Abraham, human beings are starting to get the hang of it, which marks a transition where God withdraws into the background, and more highly developed human beings take the reigns of guiding and directing human affairs.

5. Jesus, referred to as the "Second Adam", represents the fully actualized human being who is a synthesis of divine/heaven and human/earth, and capable of restoring what was represented in the paradise of Eden, which Jesus refers to as the "kingdom of heaven."

6. Jesus teaches that the "kingdom of heaven" is real and present in potential within every human being, waiting to be realized. Jesus also defines "eternal life" as "knowing God"; in other words, "eternal life" is accessing the transcendent dimension, which we experience through love, peace, harmony, equanimity, joy and well-being.

You could answer the two heaven questions this way:

Is heaven real? Yes.

In what way is heaven real? Heaven is real in potential.

What is "potential"? Potential is having the capacity to become something. You can't get any more real than that. A person may have the potential to become an NBA player. Not everyone has this potential. Out of those who have this potential, some number of them actualize that potential and in fact become NBA players. The point is to consider that heaven is real and exists as potential and that the nucleus of this potential is within each of us. Heaven exists as potential. This potential is represented in the Eden Paradise of peace, harmony, belonging, well-being and flourishing, and the absence of enmity and suffering. It's a potential we are capable of actualizing. In other words, heaven is not a ready-made place you go to, it's a reality that you and I create and produce. We don't go to heaven, we make it.

But there's also a stark warning in this. Hell is also real and exists as potential. The capacity to create the anguish, suffering, and torment of hell is also within us. We have seen this hell made real throughout history and is real today. This is what Adam and Eve discovered - the human condition and predicament is tricky; heaven and hell are both within us as a potential. We can create and produce either one.

Consider the possibility that heaven is not a ready-made place you go to, but a real potential that we create in the world, and quite possibly representing the next stage in

the expansion of the universe, evolution of our species, and the self-actualization of a new collective reality.

If heaven is real in potential, then you could say that heaven is a choice. If hell is real in potential, hell is a choice. Every choice we make in life is either creating heaven or creating hell. The choices we make in our personal life, in our relationships, in our work, in our interactions with others, what we care about, what matters to us, the beliefs, views and mindsets that govern our lives, our response to human suffering... every choice... is being made out of a heaven and hell that are real and exist as a potential within each of us. Heaven on earth is a choice you must make, not a place you must find.

You are heaven

Deeper still, consider the possibility that everything heaven represents exists right now as innate qualities of your innate nature and true self. If the word and concept of "God" points to ultimate reality, then "Imago Dei" means that each of us is a manifestation of one ultimate reality - ultimate wholeness, ultimate peace, ultimate happiness, ultimate wellbeing. Virtually every great spiritual master such as Jesus and Buddha taught that the reality of heaven was not a place but a quality of being. The "kingdom of God" and "nirvana" are not future locations, but a present reality that is the ground of our very being. In other words, heaven is not a future location but is just another name for what you are in every moment. You have always been heaven (timeless and infinite wholeness, peace, harmony, happiness, serenity, absence of all suffering), you are always heaven, you will always be heaven.

The Buddha's moment of enlightenment under the Bodhi tree was the realization that nothing fundamentally needed to change in order to know peace, serenity and freedom. In other words, there is nothing wrong with the way things truly are at its most real and fundamental level, and therefore there is nothing truly, factually or objectively preventing peace, serenity and freedom. Buddha's profound insight was that all is well and whole at the most fundamental level and that his underlying nature and essence was one with that wholeness.

Jesus would not have disagreed with any of these insights, but expressed them in different ways and focused on different things, namely the lie of separation between God and humankind, which Jesus believed was at the root of the kind of suffering and ignorance that Buddha spoke of.

Heaven can be attained here and now. We do not have to wait for death to reach it. The lived human experience is about translating this reality into our lived human experience. You are heaven. You cannot seek what you already are. You can only let go of what you are not.

Where to find heaven

There was once a group of very wise men who had each discovered the kingdom of Heaven. Wanting it all for themselves, they met and discussed where they could hide this Heaven so ordinary people couldn't find it.

One said, "Let's hide it in the depths of the ocean."

Another said, "No, let's hide it in the farthest galaxies."

The third replied, "No, people will surely look there. Let's hide it in the most obvious place, a place where it will never occur to them to look because they'll think it's too simple. Let's hide the kingdom of Heaven inside of people. They'll never look there!"

Day-23 Investigation

What follows are questions for self-reflection related to the idea of heaven:

- Has your view about heaven changed since leaving religion?
- What is it about religion's teaching about heaven that especially appealed to you in your former religious life?
- What is your response to the idea that heaven is not an afterlife location but a herelife reality and potential, and the fundamental nature of what you are?

Day-24: Rethinking Jesus

"If Christ were here there is one thing he would not be—a Christian." - Mark Twain

Jesus

Perhaps no person in history has been the subject of so much controversy and debate. It began two thousand years ago, when religious and political powers conspired to brutally execute him. Virtually all modern scholars of antiquity agree that Jesus existed historically. After that point, agreement is difficult to find; opinions about the life and message of Jesus differ sharply.

My own understanding of Jesus has been a long and winding journey. You might say that I have my own "Finding Jesus" story that has passed through many phases.

Religion's Jesus

I was raised loosely in the Catholic Church, attending Mass most Sundays. I made it through my First Communion and First Confession, but drifted away and did not pursue official Confirmation by the Church. I had no personal interest in God or religion until life's existential questions began troubling me in my late teens. I first came to know Jesus as "Religion's Jesus." I accepted Jesus as my savior and became a born-again Christian the summer before I went off to college. Throughout my collegiate years I was a leader in a Christian campus ministry. Along the way my understanding of Jesus was shaped by traditional Christian teachings, which could be summed up in the Nicene Creed. I was heavily vested in this view for many years of my life, including earning a Master of Divinity degree, and many years as a professional Christian minister and church pastor. I experienced a crisis of faith when I acknowledged to myself that I was empty, broken and unhappy inside despite my religious devotion. I observed this same dissonance in many of the people I led and cared for in my church parish. As a result, I left professional Christian ministry to sort out my spiritual struggles.

Religion-Free Jesus

The next stage in my understanding of Jesus, I'll call the "Religion-less Jesus" phase. I knew something was not adding up in terms of my Christian belief-system. Jesus himself said that knowing the truth sets a person free, and yet I was anything but free. Discontented, restless, afflicted, fragmented – yes, but not free. I began deconstructing my Christian belief system. Belief by belief, I questioned and examined every teaching and doctrine. Walt Whitman wrote, "Re-examine all you have been told. Dismiss what insults your soul." My own version of Whitman's sentiment was to re-examine all my Christian beliefs based on the preeminence of love. I used the scripture, "God is love" to scrutinize my dogma. I realize this may sound quite simplistic, perhaps even childish, and certainly unbecoming of a person who studied the Bible in Hebrew and Greek, and understood the finer points of proper exegesis. But for all my theological sophistication I had no inner peace, and so I decided upon a much simpler method for accessing the validity of my beliefs. It's at this point of my journey that I began writing books, the first of which was, [Divine Nobodies: Shedding Religion to Find God \(and the unlikely people who help you\)](#).

This endeavor of questioning and deconstructing my beliefs resulted in the demolition of my Evangelical Christian belief-system. And yet in all the theological rubble, there was still a Jesus standing there. I could not seem to deconstruct Jesus out of the picture. This left me in a quandary. Jesus had once been necessary as the central piece of the theological edifice I called Christianity. But if I no longer believed in that theological edifice built around him, then who was Jesus and did it really even matter.

This quandary led to a question that guided my spiritual journey for the next few years: Is there a credible way of understanding Jesus apart from traditional Christianity?

My first step in this direction was a chapter I wrote in my second book, [Wide Open Spaces: Beyond Paint-by-Number Christianity](#). In that chapter, I explore what I believed to be the unreasonable motto of modern Christianity – the WWJD-question: What would Jesus do? I pointed out the insanity of this proposition – binding people to the notion of living as Jesus did while also asserting that Jesus is God, therefore making his life unattainable by mere mortals. This ultimately led to the question: What makes Jesus and me different? Through some theological gymnastics I managed to come up with an answer, which stated that any person could actually do what Jesus did, without compromising the notion of the divinity of Jesus. Phew!

But my explanation in *Wide Open Spaces* seemed incomplete and for me raised more questions than it answered. It became a splinter in my mind. I devoted my third book, [Being Jesus in Nashville](#), to more fully exploring the premise of the WWJD-question. I did so by devoting a year of my life to test the notion that I was capable of doing anything Jesus did, including the miraculous or supernatural works that are attributed to him. *Being Jesus in Nashville* is the story of what unfolded over that year and what I discovered. Though I took no specific theological position, I blurred the lines of Jesus' divinity enough for the comfort of my Christian publisher. I was accused of being a "heretic" who had "abandoned orthodox biblical theology." The manuscript was rejected and my book contract swiftly cancelled.

This "Religion-less Jesus" phase ended with a paradox. I was more interested in Jesus than I ever had been, but conflicted about referring to myself as a "Christian," at least not on the terms of my own particular Christian persuasion.

Spiritual Jesus

Let me say that I think it is unfair to pit "religion" against "spirituality" as if they are two completely different and unrelated things. There is a robust "spiritual but not religious" (SBNR) movement that can sometimes imply that organized religion is devoid of true personal spirituality. I believe this is an unfair criticism, and is not true across the board. I refer to this next phase of my Jesus journey as "Spiritual Jesus" because I discovered a deeply significant and meaningful understanding of Jesus that did not require that I necessarily identify with the institution or organized Christianity.

Jesus himself was a Jew and raised in a family and culture of Judaism. As such, Jesus both affirmed Judaism for its goodness, but also confronted the ways Judaism had been corrupted by the religious establishment. Not to be comparing myself to Jesus, I did imperfectly walk this line myself. On the one hand, the world can thank Christianity for having established and preserved a witness to Jesus down through history. But there are

ways I believe that the Christian establishment misconstrued and corrupted the relevance and significance of Jesus, and I explore these in detail in my fourth book, [Notes from \(Over\) the Edge](#). Then in my fifth book, [Inner Anarchy](#), I offered an alternative way of understanding Jesus, based on a different interpretation of the Jesus story in the Bible. This book was controversial from the start because of the sub-title: Dethroning God and Jesus to Save Ourselves and the World, which I explain in great detail in a [FAQ about the book](#).

During this phase I was heavily criticized on all sides. Some of my Christian tribe criticized, even demonized me for my non-traditional views of Jesus, while others took issue with my continuing to talk about Jesus at all. I have since written several blog posts in attempt to clarify my position, and answer my critics:

[Did Christianity get Jesus right?](#)

[Why I Speak of Jesus \(why I'm not a Christian\)](#)

[Jim, are you a Christian?](#)

I'm not sure I succeeded but I discovered in the process, mainly through private messages and emails, that there are many people who were at a similar place as myself with respect to Jesus – having misgivings about Christianity and traditional Christian theology but not wanting to throw out the baby with the bathwater.

Universal Jesus

The more I pressed into an alternative way of thinking about Jesus, I discovered a universal significance and relevance to Jesus that I have found quite meaningful. In most instances, religious division is based on the premise that someone has to be right and someone has to be wrong. Or stated another way, when it comes to the world's religious, spiritual and philosophical belief-systems, everyone can't be right. In recent years I have challenged this notion. In my view, virtually any open-minded person can see that despite differences and distinctions among the world's religions, there is agreement on what I believe to be the most profound level – values such as love, compassion, harmony and the golden rule. I also believe there is much more [agreement between science and religion](#) than people may think. In a nutshell, it is my view that all religions, spiritualities, and philosophies (including science, humanism, agnosticism and atheism) can peacefully coexist, enhance one another's understanding of the universe and life's existential questions, and find a rationale for building a world that works for everyone.

For my part in this, coming from a Christian background, I am wanting to influence my Christian tribe to shift from a message of exclusivity about Jesus to a message of inclusivity. I don't believe Jesus came to start a new religion to compete with all the

others. I see Jesus as one who lived, demonstrated and bore witness to the truth that humankind has never been estranged from God, and the only issue to work out now is to end our estrangement from one another. Jesus taught that love for God is synonymous with love for one another, and anything less is missing the point and [fake religion](#).

There is no reason why we can't maintain our own uniquely meaningful ways of understanding God, find and make meaning for our place and purpose in the universe, and express and satisfy our own spiritual or self-transcendent proclivities, without it being a source of division, hostility and hatred in the world.

I have written several blog posts, speaking to this subject:

[Why Jesus matters, regardless of your beliefs](#)

[Scapegoating Religion](#)

[How can there be religious tolerance if Jesus is the ONLY way?](#)

In recent years I have become more aware of people who would consider themselves non-theists or atheists, and still ascribe significance to Jesus. There are two books by the same name that I read on this subject:

[Christianity without God by Daniel Maguire](#)

[Christianity without God by Lloyd Geering](#)

This is a summation of how I have come to understand Jesus. I don't believe this is a violation of the Jesus in the Bible, nor a rejection of the person Jesus associated with the Christian tradition. Every generation, every Christian denomination, every church, even every Christian "finds Jesus" differently. This doesn't make one person "right" and another person wrong." In my view, if love, compassion, harmony and the golden rule are non-negotiable then we can all learn from and appreciate how each of us finds Jesus.

I don't believe it's possible to ever "find Jesus" entirely, or even understand him completely. Perhaps this is why he endures as a person of universal interest and intrigue. Jesus was an interesting combination of paradoxes in terms of who he was and how he lived. He was loving and compassionate. He was confrontational and contentious. He was meek. He was scrappy. He was instructive, nurturing, empowering and inspiring. He was subversive, undermining, inflammatory and a renegade. He spoke of the kingdom of heaven within us. He rebelled against the kingdom of men that oppressed the people. He was a warrior. He was a poet. You really can't pick and choose the parts you like and those you don't. He was all of that.

Jesus might well be the world's most famous missing person. What Jesus was and what was made of him are two different realities. Once you clear away the spin and hype, you discover a lot of remarkable things about Jesus. Jesus died as a political provocateur and disturber of the alliance of convenience between the Roman occupiers and the corrupt Jewish leaders. The Romans did not waste crucifixion on nobodies. Jesus was a somebody. It wasn't a surprise that Jesus was killed, only that he was not killed sooner.

Jesus' rhetoric and way of life was a threat to the occupiers and the priestly caste that benefited from it. Jesus spoke of a different kingdom and stirred the hopes of the people. Hope is the energy of revolution. Hope and excitement can disturb the pseudo-peace on which tyranny depends. The truth that Jesus shared and demonstrated debunked the foundational premises on which those religious and political systems were built.

Jesus called for people to stop listening to them and start listening to the spirit of truth within themselves. He attacked the credibility of those systems and told people to find their authority inside themselves. Each time Jesus opened his mouth, he was pulling out another wooden Jenga block, making these religious and worldly powers vulnerable and unstable. Jesus himself was no threat—he had no position of religious or political power and wasn't campaigning to be the worldly president—but his truth made him a one-man wrecking crew.

Jesus is the world's most famous missing person because the religion that bears his name worship him as God, and have mostly lost who he was as a human.

Marcus Borg wrote, "Jesus was from the peasant class. Clearly, he was brilliant. His use of language was remarkable and poetic, filled with images and stories. He had a metaphoric mind. He was not an ascetic, but world-affirming, with a zest for life. There was a sociopolitical passion to him—like a Gandhi or a Martin Luther King, he challenged the domination system of his day. He was a religious ecstatic, a Jewish mystic, for whom God was an experiential reality. As such, Jesus was also a healer. And there seems to have been a spiritual presence around him, like that of St. Francis or the present Dalai Lama. And as a figure of history, Jesus was an ambiguous figure—you could experience him and conclude that he was insane, as his family did, or that he was simply eccentric or that he was a dangerous threat—or you could conclude that he was filled with the spirit of God."

It seems to me that one of the reasons Christianity appeals to people is because Jesus represents a self-actualized person. The idea of Jesus being both human and divine makes him the ultimate expression of any sentient being. Therefore, the idea of "becoming like Christ", or the life/spirit of Jesus manifesting in/through/as us, carries this idea of realizing our fullest potentialities.

Let's say it was possible that you had the specific life/spirit of Martin Luther King, Jr., or the specific life/spirit of Susan B. Anthony inside you. If you did, it would follow that you could possibly become like these individuals. Likewise, the idea is that if the life/spirit of Jesus is within us, we can become like Jesus.

The problem, however, is that Christianity made Jesus a standard of perfection, downplaying and sterilizing his humanity and glorifying his divinity. By making Jesus equal to God, the idea of "becoming like Jesus" is an impossibility since no person is capable of achieving God's perfection, nor has the divine power/attributes to do so. If Jesus was not God, but a highly evolved and self-actualized human being, then it would follow that all people have this same latent potential.

However, the further problem we have is how little we know about Jesus. Even if you take the gospel writers at their word, you still only have a very small number of stories and accounts that were carefully selected to portray a certain image and story of Jesus.

Jesus could be seen as representing a convergence of characteristics and qualities that have universal appeal. Jesus is often portrayed as someone with a grounded humanity and transcendent spirituality; a fearless non-conformist and friend of the outliers and disenfranchised; someone with a sharp mind and a soft heart; a revolutionary by day and the life of the party by night. Jesus is depicted as someone who was merciless when necessary and merciful when no one was looking; a person who could destroy you in a debate or restore you with his compassion, love, and kindness.

We don't really know for sure if Jesus was any of these things, but I think there is something important to learn from the fact that this is who many people want Jesus to be and have faith that he was this.

Day-24: Investigation

What follows are questions for self-reflection related to Jesus:

- Has your view about Jesus changed since leaving religion?
- What is it about religion's teaching about Jesus that you question or no longer subscribe to?
- Is Jesus a figure who still holds significance in your spiritual journey? In what way?

Day-25: Rethinking the Bible

“The Bible contains some of the most sublime passages in English literature, but is also full of contradictions, inconsistencies, and absurdities.”

- Elizabeth Cady Stanton

Does shedding religion mean discarding the Bible?

Curious about my spiritual life outside of organized religion, people often ask me if I read the Bible. In my second book, [Wide Open Spaces](#), I devote an entire chapter to how my view of the Bible has evolved. For many years I read the Bible daily as a personal spiritual discipline. I also studied the Bible academically in seminary. And then of course I taught the Bible several times a week for many years as the head minister of a church. These

days I don't sit down and read the Bible as a regular practice. That doesn't mean I don't think people should. And it doesn't rule out that I might read it more regularly in another season of life.

I don't think there is a right or wrong answer to how people relate to the Bible or how they choose to incorporate it into their lives. Of course the caveat would be that it is unacceptable to use the Bible to rationalize or justify hatred, bigotry, misogyny, injustice or any other injurious way against other human beings

Christians look to the Bible as their authority on the subject of God and for answers to life's big existential questions, as well as guidance on matters of ethics, morality and the directing of one's daily life.

The Bible may be great for different reasons

The Bible is a series of books written, edited and assembled over thousands of years. People claim the Bible is special because, despite the diversity of authors, time periods and places it was written, it presents a seamless story about God. If the Old Testament writers and editors were hoping to present a coherent, comforting, stable view of God, they failed miserably. In the Old Testament, God is presented as capricious, cruel and narcissistic.

What's fascinating to me is that whoever wrote and edited this content didn't feel any need to alter this picture of God or put a more positive spin on it. It's also important to point out that Old Testament stories and themes predate the OT writings. In other words, they were not entirely original to the OT writers. So you can't necessarily pin these stories and ideas entirely upon them. It's interesting to me that they felt the need to continue telling and perpetuating these stories and themes with their own twist.

Jesus was not a Bible teacher

In many religions, authority is based in a sacred book or Scripture, and often, by extension, to those who are deemed most knowledgeable or equipped to interpret and understand them. Jesus's religious tradition, Judaism, was very much a religion anchored in a sacred text, the Torah and the rabbinic commentaries. In [Notes from \(Over\) the Edge](#), I write extensively about how Jesus challenged this system.

From what we know about Jesus, however, he was a sage and story-teller, and typically did not take his point of departure from texts of Scripture. In his core sayings and parables, the Scriptures are conspicuously missing.

The province where Jesus spent most of his public life and drew most of his support was in Galilee. This was a region noted for its more cavalier or indifferent attitude toward the religious traditions of Judaism. The crowd who followed Jesus, for instance, was declared to be under a curse because they were ignorant of the Torah or Holy Scripture. Yet there

is no evidence that Jesus took on the role of a Bible teacher to remedy their Scriptural deficiency. In fact, the only people he chided for their ignorance and misuse of Scripture were the orthodox elite.

Neither did Jesus write anything, or instruct his apostles to record what he said or did. It was not Jesus who commissioned the writing of the New Testament. Instead, Jesus confronted the religious elite, finding them guilty of what amounted to Bibliolatry – the glorification of a sacred writing. Jesus said to these religious leaders, “You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.”

Jesus was continually challenged, “By what authority do you say this or do that.” He never answered by appealing to the authority of the Bible. He laid no claim to a vision from any kind of special revelation. In fact, what makes Jesus immeasurably greater than any religious guru is precisely the fact that he spoke and acted without authority and that he regarded “the exercise of authority” as a pagan characteristic. Jesus chastised the religious leaders of his day for burying their noses in their sacred text, and missing the plain and simple truth.

Jesus’s perception and teaching of the truth was direct and unmediated. He did not even lay claim to the authority of a prophet. Unlike the prophets he did not appeal to a special prophetic calling or to a vision in order to legitimize his words. Jesus never used the classical prophetic introduction, ‘God says...’ What gave weight to the words of Jesus were the words themselves. Jesus was unique among the men of his time in his ability to overcome all forms of authority-thinking. The only authority which Jesus might be said to have appealed to was the authority of the truth itself.

There is no single orthodoxy

Throughout history and spanning the world, people have related to the Bible in many different ways. It would be a gross misrepresentation of even Christian history to say that there is only one way to view or relate to the Bible. People will often say, “My authority is the Bible.” It would be more accurate for them to say, “My authority is what they told me at church the Bible means.”

There are at least 14 Factors that influence what one comes up with in the Bible:

1. Your views regarding the inspiration of Scripture.
2. Whether you would favor a literal or figurative interpretation of a given passage.
3. Your knowledge and awareness of other “related” Scriptures dealing with the same issue, including the immediate context and the broader context of the entire body of Scripture.

4. Your knowledge and understanding of the background and motivation of the writer.
5. The way in which a given interpretation fits into your over-all theological belief system.
6. Your level of understanding of the original language in which the text was written.
7. The various interpretations and commentaries to which you have already been exposed.
8. The ways in which you process information. Some of you tend to emphasize reason and logic, while others depend more on personal experiences and intuition.
9. The degree to which you are willing to accept logical inconsistencies as part of your belief system.
10. Your willingness to change your views in the light of new information.
11. The degree to which you are satisfied with your current views.
12. The amount of time you are willing to devote to your theological study and inquiry.
13. The unwillingness to consider alternative interpretations that diverge from your religious tradition.
14. Your overall view of God that has been conditioned by many different life experiences and relationships.

Based on the above variables, does it surprise anyone that there are many different ways the Bible is interpreted? This is especially problematic because many people view the Bible as something to be “right about.” In my most recent book, [Inner Anarchy](#), I challenged the traditional Christian interpretation of Jesus, and offered an entirely different framework from which to understand him, his life and his message and teachings. I build this framework from the Scriptures themselves but with a different hermeneutic.

Humans have always done stupid things and pinned them on God

I do not believe the purpose of the Bible is to create a belief-system about God. In my view, the Bible tells the story of humankind’s relationship to and with God, the divine or ultimate reality. The Bible opens with a picture of God and humankind in harmony and one, and then the story takes a disastrous turn when human beings begin operating out of fear, alienation and disunion.

The story continues with humankind trying to hash things out through religion. At times that story is beautiful, and at other times it’s ugly. We discover in the story that humans can be inspired by their beliefs in God to love each other, and at other times to rationalize about anything, including killing people in the name of “God’s will.” That’s all

part of the story. We still do this today. Jesus shows up in the context of his people, his day, his times, and his religious tradition. His central claim was, "I am the truth," which was meant to abolish the false notion of separation from God, and to unveil the long forgotten reality that God and humankind are one. Jesus taught that this truth was the secret to unfurling the kingdom of God on earth.

Jesus taught it was necessary for him to leave the earth in body so that his followers would not create a personality cult around him, but instead learn to listen and follow the same spirit within them. But as the story and human goes, some of the earliest Christ followers organized themselves according to the same mentalities of their previous religious orientation. The bulk of the New Testament is essentially a set of letters written by a few of the most prominent early Christians, addressing various issues that came up as different Christian groups tried to work out their devotion to Jesus in the context of their times. Sometimes this was done beautifully, and at other times it was a train wreck. But it's all part of the story.

Maybe, we should not write off the Bible

Is it possible that the Bible, rather than God's binding word to humankind to be believed literally and followed legalistically, is a fascinating work of literature that explores themes of deep psychological significance?

What if the Bible is a collection of meta-stories - ancient stories that evolved over thousands of years by combining the distilled truth out of hundreds of smaller stories until they were finally written down in their final form?

What if the Bible is a collection of writings, giving different snapshots of humankind's relationship with the ultimate questions of life assembled into one volume?

What if these snapshots tell a story that we somehow find ourselves in at every turn, including moments of profound beauty and goodness, and moments of deep heartache and sorrow?

What if the story includes chapters where people are getting things horribly wrong and justifying hatred and atrocity in God's name, and other chapters where people are getting it right and living as powerful expressions of love in the world?

What if it's a human story, a timeless story, and a cultural story happening, evolving and intertwined all at once?

What if there is an unnamed brilliance, depth and mystery to the story that requires one to look deeper, read between the lines, and listen with your heart?

What if the primary plot or theme of the whole story is strangely fulfilled in the birth, life, and death of a divine nobody?

What if the story has the power to inspire love, peace, beauty, healing, wholeness, harmony, and goodness in the world, and transform humankind's relationships with ourselves individually and collectively, with others, and with life itself?

In my view, the story of the Bible could have value for all of humankind, regardless of your religious tradition or no religion at all, if taken this way. We can all agree that one's religious, spiritual or philosophical beliefs can either be used as an instrument of division, hatred and violence, or harmony, solidarity, and love. The bottom line is that wherever you read in the Bible that people are acting in division, hatred, oppression, injustice, or violence in the name of God, then it should be taken as the part of the story where we corruptly co-opt God for our own self-serving and less than noble purposes. We should learn from this; not keep repeating it.

Is theology dead?

Contemporary theology is unquestionably in a state of crisis for multiple reasons. One of them is the relationship of dogmatic theology to its biblical ground. We know that the Bible was written in and from a view of the world that was reflective of its particular culture and time. Scientific knowledge and sociocultural evolution has rightfully dropped those outdated views. It has opened up a different understanding of the Bible altogether from being some sort of theological treatise for carving out an orthodoxy about God to a story of humankind's relationship to the divine from which we must each work out its meaning and significance for our own lives.

The world of the 21st Century is very different from the world of the 1st Century and even of the 19th Century. Yet, too often Christian understandings are still based on the worldviews of those antiquated time periods. For example, we no longer accept that there is a religious explanation of natural events and processes. We understand a great deal about life and cells, about the laws of physics and of the atom, the origin of the universe and the movement of the stars, about space and time, about the evolution of life forms and the earth's geological formations, about forces and matter, about causation and result.

Christianity has yet to come to terms with the world of the 21st Century and as a result has lost what is central and essential in Christianity. When the Christian church is faced with the fact and implications of 21st Century thought, it panics and retreats backward into a theological fortress where it has tried unsuccessfully to defend an outdated worldview that is incomprehensible to many of us. By failing to interpret Christianity to our generation in terms and concepts that this generation could understand, Christianity has lost its power to speak authoritatively and meaningfully to us, and that has resulted in a Christianity that is increasingly seen by many as irrelevant.

The Bible Requires A Different Kind of Question

People argue back and forth about the Bible on the question of whether the Bible is true. But true in what sense? Historically true? Scientifically true? Transcendently true? Is the Bible to be taken as rules to follow or evidence for the existence of God?

I find the value in the Bible relates to a question that would go something like this:

What does this particular piece of biblical writing (cosmic story, historical narrative, prose and poetry, commandments and laws, God/Jesus/Spirit-themes) tell me about how human beings work out questions of ultimate meaning and deep psychological significance, and what can I/We personally learn and gain from this?

For example, in my mind it's nonsense to argue over a literal Adam and Eve, Garden of Eden, and the Fall of Man. However, I find it meaningful and instructive to investigate what these stories represent and why.

The field of the Philosophy of Religion is the philosophical examination of the central themes and concepts involved in religious traditions. The philosophy of religion is different from theology in that theology's critical reflections are based on religious convictions. The Philosophy of Religion is an intermingling of philosophical inquiry with religious themes and the broader enterprises of philosophy.

The importance of philosophy of religion is chiefly due to its subject matter: alternative beliefs about God, the sacred, the varieties of religious experience, the interplay between science and religion, the challenge of non-religious philosophies, the nature and scope of good and evil, religious treatments of birth, history, and death, and other substantial terrain. A philosophical exploration of these topics involves fundamental questions about our place in the cosmos and about our relationship to what may transcend the cosmos. The meaningfulness of religious language, philosophical reflection on the concept of God, and exploring of religious experiences are all part of this area of inquiry.

William James described religion in this way, "Were one to characterize religion in the broadest and most general terms possible, one might say that it consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto."

I do believe there is an unseen or nonmaterial reality that human beings experience. A piece of art or music moves us, deep feelings of love and belonging arise in close relationships, peak and euphoric experiences make us feel exhilaratingly alive, there are moments we are filled with awe and wonder, and we touch beauty, joy, sadness and sorrow. These are but a few ways we encounter an unseen or nonmaterial reality that cannot be adequately explained with test tubes and formulas.

In my mind it's a leap to say that this "unseen order" is limited to only one particular and right religious or belief-system. In [a previous blog post](#) I wrote extensively about a non-religious, even secular spirituality.

I can accept the William James definition of religion, however I feel obliged to say that there is never a valid justification, including a religious one, for:

- The hypocrisy of claiming to know God but demeaning people
- Disparaging people of other faiths as a sign of devotion to yours
- Casting judgment upon others while giving yourself a pass
- Dividing the world up into "us" and "them"
- Fostering fear of God
- Telling people they are inherently bad
- Repressing individuality and demanding conformity
- Casting disapproval on those who question
- Perpetuating a superiority class structure of "clergy" and "laity"
- A performance-based system of earning God's love and approval .
- Assigning maleness to God and esteeming men over women
- Allowing differences of beliefs to prevent working alongside others to alleviate suffering in our world
- Praying for divine intervention without taking direct action
- Claiming a close relationship with God while perpetuating discord and hostility in human relationships
- Using religious beliefs to rationalize or justify hate, violence, injustice, oppression, discord, bigotry, misogyny, dehumanization, or the affliction of human or planetary suffering

Day-25 Investigation

What follows are questions for self-reflection related to the Bible:

- Has your view about the Bible changed since leaving religion?
- In what ways has the teaching of the Bible been damaging in your life?
- Do you feel the Bible could ever be a useful or meaningful spiritual pathway in your post-religion life?

Day-26: Debrief Day

Today is a debrief day before we start our last week tomorrow. We've covered a lot of ground, and probed many different areas of cultivating a life after religion. Take today to go back and investigate the daily investigations you missed or haven't yet had the opportunity to dive into.

Here are a few questions to consider in today's debriefing:

- What would you say is the idea, mindset, belief, attitude or way of being from your former religious life that you most need to discard from your life? What would be an inspiring, empowering, liberating and peace-giving idea, mindset, belief, attitude or way of being to stand in its place?

- Many people who leave religion switch sides from being a practitioner of religion to becoming a staunch opponent against religion. In both cases, one's life revolves around religion. What would it look like for you to embrace a new centering or unitive nucleus in your life that has nothing to do with religion? What would it be?

I hope you will share your responses in a comment on this post.

Day-27: What's wrong with prayer?

"The hands that help are better far than the lips that pray." - Robert G. Ingersoll

Intercessory prayer

I was recently asked if I still pray for others. It's common in Christianity for someone to request prayer. Many people who leave religion find this an awkward situation to deal with. What does one say when another person asks you to remember them in prayer, when you are not someone who may question the validity of prayer within the religious framework.

Deconstructing prayer

I no longer subscribe to many of the premises that are associated with the idea of intercessory prayer, at least as I learned it. In a nutshell, I learned intercessory prayer as a request for divine intervention on behalf of another person. It's asking God to intervene in a person's circumstances in order to provide whatever is necessary to resolve their difficulty or dilemma. Intercessory prayer is often a request for God to intervene in another person's life in the form of providing healing, guidance, strength, courage, wisdom, health, change of circumstances, protection, better financial situation, etc.

Intercessory prayer seems to operate on a model that involves three separate parties:

- the intercessor
- God
- the person being prayed for

The idea is that the intercessor appeals to God, and God in turn intervenes accordingly, and the life of the person being prayed for is affected by God's action.

In my view, dividing it out this way is reinforcing the falsehood of separation. A visual representation of this intercessory prayer idea might be something like this: the intercessor is sitting at home, God is up in the sky like a divine satellite dish, and the person in need is wherever they happen to be. The intercessor's prayer goes up and pings the divine satellite. In response, the divine satellite turns toward the person in need and their particular situation, and miraculously supplies what was requested.

This model of intercessory prayer imagines a kind of separation that in my view isn't real. The intercessor, God, and the person being prayed for, are not separate in the way this model implies. Further, the model assumes that the person who is being prayed for is separated from what they need or desire, namely peace, freedom, well-being, love, courage, guidance, strength, wisdom, etc. The model also implies that the answer or resolution to their circumstances or difficulty lies outside of their own ability to act or the possibilities present in the situation itself.

In some instances "intercessory prayer" can be magical thinking or encourage a lack of personal responsibility, if the situation involves a person who is not taking responsibility for their lives or not responding to situations as they require, and instead hoping or expecting God to miraculously swoop in and bail them out.

Christians sometimes share in this fallacy by living as if their peace, security, identity, worth, identity, purpose, contentment and fulfillment are determined by circumstances. The value of God is seen in his ability to influence life's situations for the good or offer protection from adversity and misfortune. One of the most common forms of prayer is

asking God to intervene and change our circumstances. We often equate God's "blessing" with things going our way.

Jesus continuously pressed people to see that the source of their deepest desires was not outside themselves but inside them. Jesus announced that God's kingdom had come. Listening bystanders began looking around befuddled. Jesus said they needed to look inside themselves to find this kingdom. Jesus taught that the same spirit within him that connected him to love, peace, freedom, wholeness and well-being, is that same spirit within each of us. Paul discovered that this kingdom within him was the secret to his contentment. He wrote in Philippians 4:11, "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances." Pretty amazing for a guy who often seemed "down on his luck"—imprisoned, beaten, hungry, and shipwrecked...three times!

The good/bad problem

In our human view, circumstances are classified as either "good" or "bad," but this view falls short of the truth. No circumstance can strip you of the choice and power to:

- create an empowering context for yourself
- make good on what really matters to you
- have a breakthrough in transformation
- give expression to your true Self
- honor your highest truth
- be authentic
- love

No circumstance can cut you off from the kingdom of heaven within you where true belonging, abundance, harmony, wisdom, strength, courage and well-being are found. Even the worst of circumstances never threaten these inner realities.

One way of approaching "intercessory prayer" involves the following. Accept the interrelatedness and interconnectedness of all things including God, of which I am a part. Hold a desire for the liberation of all beings and humankind has been growing and intensifying over the years. Walk and live along the everyday paths of life and be mindful of wanting to think, do or be what aids the liberation of all beings. Realize that your way of seeing and being in the world affects the whole, and impacts all humankind. So in this case, "intercessory prayer" is accepting that you are not separate from God or separate from peace, love, freedom, well-being, courage, wisdom, etc. Understand that one of the most spiritual acts that you contribute to the whole is to take responsibility for your own life, address the root cause of your own suffering, and learn to live skillfully by responding to the situations of your life as they require.

Intercessory prayer for me is also a willingness to involve myself in tangible ways to encourage, support, assist, and help those around me that I see in need, whether the person is my neighbor or someone on the other side of the world. Rather than tell someone “I’ll pray for you,” I consider what it might mean for me to be part of the answer through my own love, compassion, support, assistance, and generosity. For me, sometimes “intercessory prayer” is holding a deep and persistent desire for the liberation of another person, and the end of their suffering.

I think there are many different ways that people connect with God or ultimate reality on behalf of the well-being of others. All that I’ve shared is simply how it has been evolving for me. I don’t think this is the prescribed way; this is just how things are working themselves out for me at this point with respect to intercessory prayer.

It's easy to find oneself caught up in trinkets and preoccupations, simply reacting or responding to this world from the habit-energy of our ego. Most people live thinking only about their own personal, narrow circumstances connected with their desires.

The life that flows through each of us and through everything around us is actually all connected. This means that who I really am cannot be separated from all the things that surround me. In other words, all human beings have their existence and live within my life. This includes even the fate of all humankind - that, too, lies within me.

I find beneath my self-preoccupations a deep desire for the liberation of all. So I take up the cause of liberation for myself, and the very ways I hope for the liberation of humankind, I aim at as my own direction.

The fate of humanity itself lives within each of us.

Day-27: Investigation

What follows are questions for self-reflection related to prayer:

- Has your view about prayer changed since leaving religion?
- What is it about religion’s teaching about prayer that you question or no longer subscribe to?
- Is prayer a practice that still holds significance in your spiritual journey? In what way?

Day-28: A Non-Theist God (Baruch Spinoza)

"I believe in Spinoza's God." - Albert Einstein

Baruch Spinoza: Introduction

In a letter to Rabbi Herbert Goldstein, who pressed Albert Einstein about his belief in God, Einstein wrote, "I believe in Spinoza's God, who is revealed in the lawful harmony of the world, not in a God who concerns Himself with the fate and the doings of mankind."

Who was Baruch Spinoza and who was "Spinoza's God"?

Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) was one of the most important philosophers of all time; he was also arguably the most radical and controversial.

Baruch Spinoza was a Jewish-Dutch philosopher. One of the early thinkers of the Enlightenment and modern biblical criticism, including modern conceptions of the self and the universe. He came to be considered one of the great rationalists of 17th-century philosophy.

Spinoza was raised in a Portuguese-Jewish community in Amsterdam. He developed highly controversial ideas regarding the authenticity of the Hebrew Bible and the nature of the Divine. Jewish religious authorities issued a cherem (חרם) against him, causing him to be effectively expelled and shunned by Jewish society at age 23, including by his own family.

His books were later added to the Catholic Church's Index of Forbidden Books. He was frequently called an "atheist" by contemporaries, although nowhere in his work does Spinoza refute the existence of God.

In our covering of Spinoza, we are going to especially explore his views of religion and God.

Spinoza is an interesting character because, on the one hand, he was an atheist, denying the God of theism and the idea of God as a supreme being. And yet, no philosopher spoke more about God and evoked the concept of God in his writings, than Spinoza. In fact, he was often referred to as a "God-intoxicated man."

Spinoza is one of my favorite heretics. I see many people who leave religion spin their wheels about what to believe about God. In my estimation, understanding Spinoza's views would provide a meaningful pathway out of this dilemma.

Spinoza made significant contributions in virtually every area of philosophy, and his writings reveal the influence of such divergent sources as Stoicism, Jewish Rationalism, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Descartes, and a variety of heterodox religious thinkers of his day. Among philosophers, Spinoza is best known for his Ethics, a monumental work that presents an ethical vision unfolding out of a monistic metaphysics in which God and Nature are identified.

A theory of God

In Stephen Hawking's book, A Brief History of Time, Hawking writes, "If we do discover a complete theory, it should in time be understandable in broad principle by everyone, not just a few scientists. Then we shall all, philosophers, scientists, and just ordinary people, be able to take part in the discussion of the question of why it is that we and the

universe exist. If we find the answer to that, it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason — for then we would know the mind of God."

It seems evident that Hawking believed that the path of rationality leads to a unified understanding of ultimate truth, even God.

This is very much a Spinozan idea.

Some classify Spinoza as a Pantheist, which is the idea that God is everywhere and God is in everything. Pantheism isn't exactly right for Spinoza because he believed God IS being - not that God is in being or dwelling in things but that God is the equivalent of all existence. In other words, Spinoza believed that the proper way to think of God is to equate God with the whole of being or the underlying essence of all being, which is expressed through an infinitude of attributes.

Another way of saying it is that Spinoza understood God to be the very substance of reality and this substance has infinite expressions of forms and modes. Sometimes Spinoza would equate God as being synonymous with "nature," a notable line of his was - deus sive natura, which translates "God or Nature." However, Spinoza did not mean "nature" in the modern sense of nature as rivers, rocks and trees, but "nature" as the fundamental essence of all things. Spinoza wrote, "Whether we say that all things happen according to the laws of nature, or are ordered by the decree and direction of God, we say the same thing."

Spinoza clarifies his understandings in statements such as:

- "By substance I understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself."
- "By attribute I understand what the intellect perceives of a substance, as constituting its essence."
- "By God I understand a being absolutely infinite, i.e., a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes, of which each one expresses an eternal and infinite essence."

To Spinoza, God is an infinite, necessary and uncaused, indivisible being, which is the only substance of the universe, expressed in an infinity of attributes.

Both Hawking and Spinoza denied the idea of the personal God of theism but understood God as being synonymous with the laws of physics and the laws of nature, and the very structure, essence, process and expressions of being. Spinoza did not think of the universe as a reality of randomness but one of orderliness. He believed that through the use of reason we could know the true nature and fundamental structure of reality.

In his Letter to the Colossians, Paul spoke of God as the one who is "... before all things and in him all things hold together." In his Letter to the Romans he makes a similar statement of God - "For from him and through him and to him are all things." If you were to strip these verses of Paul's Theism and supernaturalism, Spinoza might find them useful in describing God, in as much as they convey that God is the single essence of one substance before, in and through all things, and in which all things exist and hold together. Unlike Descartes, Spinoza did not make a distinction between mind and matter, and viewed them both as attributes of one essence or substance.

For Spinoza, one could feel a deep sense of awe, wonder, connection, harmony, meaning and even love for this nature, essence and substance at the heart of all things, as long as one did not expect it to love in return. As mentioned, Spinoza did not believe in a personal or theistic God or supreme being, which includes the denial of deism that posits the existence of a supreme being and creator but who does not interact with humankind.

Spinoza believed that the highest stage of knowledge ("intuitive knowledge") is the mind apprehending all things as expressions of the eternal cosmos. He wrote, "It sees all things in God, and God in all things. It feels itself as part of the eternal order, identifying its thoughts with cosmic thought and its interests with cosmic interests. Thereby it becomes eternal as one of the eternal ideas in which the Attribute Thought expresses itself, and attains to that "blessedness" which "is not the reward of virtue, but virtue itself", that is, the perfect joy which characterises perfect self-activity."

In Spinoza's mind the path of seeking to understand the universe and the nature of reality through the powers of reason meant that all human beings could come to see the underlying essence of all things as one reality expressed in many different ways, which would be a basis for harmony among all human beings. Spinoza understood the world as a beautiful unity manifested in a rich diversity. This Spinozan idea could be captured in a well-known phrase, "All paths lead to God."

Spinoza saw rationality as the basis for morality and freedom. He wrote, "Acting absolutely from virtue is nothing else in us but acting, living, and preserving our being by the guidance of reason." And, "The highest activity a human being can attain is learning for understanding, because to understand is to be free."

I can't possibly adequately cover Spinoza's views of God in one post.

To dig into the subject of Spinoza and God, give these two videos a listen:

- An Atheists God: The Paradox of Spinoza

-> https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_pQcwBnLYXY

- Spinoza's Nature and God

-> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a9ahFzcCPLo>

A Spinozan view of the Bible could be:

- The nature of reality functioning as one harmonious essence, expressed through many forms and modes, depicted as the Garden of Eden metaphorically.
- Humankind discovers that rationality can be a vehicle to either apprehend and consciously actualize and express the one harmonious essence, or to deny and subvert it, depicted by "the fall."
- Humankind undergoes a process of salvation by recovering its true nature and essence, which is depicted in Jesus - the God-man (the "Second Adam").

You could say that Spinoza's God was a secular God or the God of humanism. I've often wondered why Spinoza used the word "God" to identify what essentially amounts to his theory of everything. For surely, most people when they hear the word "God," will likely think of theism. My only explanation for why he used this word is because Spinoza was convinced that this actually was what God is.

In a letter to Rabbi Herbert Goldstein, who pressed Einstein about his belief in God, Einstein wrote, "I believe in Spinoza's God, who is revealed in the lawful harmony of the world, not in a God who concerns Himself with the fate and the doings of mankind."

What did Spinoza believe about God?

It's complicated. We know he was not a Theist. We know, despite being considered by many to be an Atheist, that he never explicitly referred to himself this way. Those who want to put Spinoza's God into a clearly-defined box will be frustrated. For those who insist on doing so, Pantheism and Panentheism are the most common.

A term commonly used to identify the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza is, "Spinozism" (sometimes spelled Spinozism).

Monism

At the root of Spinozism is "monism." We often hear the term "oneness" bantered about, but the term/idea of "oneness" has a particular philosophical meaning.

In general terms, a philosophy is monistic if it postulates unity of origin of all things. More pointedly, monism also says not only unity of origin but also unity of substance and essence (oneness).

Monism has three main variations:

- Priority Monism - all existing things go back to a source - one thing that is ontologically basic or prior to everything else.
- Existence Monism - strictly speaking, there exists only a single thing, the Universe, which is divided up and manifested into many things.
- Substance monism asserts that a variety of existing things can be explained in terms of a single reality or substance. Substance monism posits that only one kind of stuff exists, although many things may be made up of this stuff, matter or mind.

The concept of monism applies to religion and spirituality. For example, it's a central notion in Pantheism and Panentheism, as well as many Eastern philosophies, religions and spiritualities. For example, Advaita Vedanta is a school of monistic Hindu philosophy.

Metaphysics

Metaphysics is the branch of philosophy that examines the fundamental nature of reality, including the relationship between mind and matter, between substance and attribute, and between potentiality and actuality.

Spinoza's metaphysics consists of one thing, Substance, and its modifications (modes). Early in his book *The Ethics*, Spinoza argues that there is only one Substance, which is absolutely infinite, self-caused, and eternal. Substance causes an infinite number of attributes (the intellect perceiving an abstract concept or essence) and modes (things following from attributes and modes).

Deus sive Natura

He calls this Substance "God", or "Nature". In fact, he takes these two terms to be synonymous, which he stated in the Latin phrase he often used, "Deus sive Natura".

Spinoza argued that everything is a derivative of God, interconnected with all of existence. The argument for there only being one Substance (or, more colloquially, one kind of stuff) in the universe occurs in the first fourteen propositions of *The Ethics*. The following proposition expresses Spinoza's commitment to substance monism:

Except God, no substance can be or be conceived.

During his time, Spinoza's statement - "Deus sive Natura" - was seen as literally equating the existing world with God, for which he was accused of atheism. Spinoza asserted that the whole of the natural universe is made of one Substance – God or Nature – and its modifications (modes).

Spinoza identifying God as the one Substance was a sharp contrast to the "God" of Theism. Spinoza did not view God as a supreme being or personal God who managed

human affairs with a plan or purpose, or had a personal connection or relationship with human beings.

Spinoza was considered to be an atheist because he used the word "God" [Deus] to signify a concept that was different from that of traditional Judeo-Christian monotheism. Spinoza expressly denies personality and consciousness to God. He wrote: God neither intelligence, feeling, nor will; he does not act according to purpose, but everything follows necessarily from his nature, according to law....

Thus, Spinoza's cool, indifferent God differs from the concept of an anthropomorphic, fatherly God who cares about humanity.

Loving God

Baruch Spinoza wrote, "He who loves God cannot endeavor that God should love him in return." You must think of this quote in terms of Theism and a personal God.

Spinoza is speaking of an intellectual love of God (*amor dei intellectualis*), which he believed was the highest blessedness to which humans can aspire. This deeply satisfying love arises from an immediate and intuitive knowledge of God - whom Spinoza identifies with Nature -and of oneself as a part and product of God/Nature.

Spinoza's conception of the intellectual love of God resonates with the long tradition of philosophical thinkers in the West, going back at least to Plato and the Neoplatonists, who celebrate the emotional satisfaction to be derived from reflective contemplation of what is ontologically ultimate—sometimes called "the God of the philosophers."

It also suggests to some the ecstatic love that is said to characterize the mystical union with the divine. Spinoza's concept derives from the specifics of his metaphysical psychology and theory of the emotions. A sublime conception that conjoins affective religiosity with rational understanding, the intellectual love of God has been an inspiration both to such romantic poets as Novalis and to hardheaded scientific rationalists such as Einstein and Bertrand Russell.

Spinoza wrote, "The mind's intellectual love of God is the very love of God by which God loves himself."

Despite the reference to God's love, Spinoza rejects all attribution of human-like emotions to his naturalistic God.

Spinoza's vision is a vision of a non-personal God that individuals can come to love through understanding Nature and understanding the way that things follow in accordance with natural laws. The account of rapturous participation in the divine—knowing the self in God and God in the self—led the German Romantic poet Novalis to dub Spinoza a "God-intoxicated man." The pleurably contented peace of

mind (*acquiescentia animi*) that accompanies a naturalistic understanding of oneself and the world has led many natural scientists—among them Bertrand Russell and Albert Einstein—to endorse and identify with Spinoza’s vision of the intellectual love of God.

What God isn't - to Spinoza

The view that Spinoza rejects is anthropomorphism, which is attributing human characteristics to something non-human – typically, to plants or animals, or to God. There are several important implications of Spinoza's denial of anthropomorphism.

First, he argues that it is wrong to think of God as possessing an intellect and a will. In fact, Spinoza's God is an entirely impersonal power, and this means that he cannot respond to human beings' requests, needs and demands. Such a God neither rewards nor punishes – and this insight rids religious belief of fear and moralism.

Second, God does not act according to reasons or purposes. In refusing this teleological conception of God, Spinoza challenged a fundamental tenet of western thought. The idea that a given phenomenon can be explained and understood with reference to a goal or purpose is a cornerstone of Aristotle's philosophy, and medieval theologians found this fitted very neatly with the biblical narrative of God's creation of the world.

Aristotle's teleological account of nature was, then, adapted to the Christian doctrine of a God who made the world according to a certain plan, analogous to a human craftsman who makes artefacts to fulfil certain purposes. Typically, human values and aspirations played a prominent role in these interpretations of divine activity.

Despite all of this, it would be careless to right off Spinoza too quickly as an atheist. On the contrary, he places a certain conception of God at the heart of his philosophy, and he describes the ideal human life as one devoted to love of this God.

Spinoza's God in his words:

All quotes are from Spinoza, *Ethics*, translated by R. H. Elwes.

NOTHING EXISTS BUT GOD

God is one, that is, only one substance can be granted in the universe. [I.14]

Whatsoever is, is in God, and without God nothing can be, or be conceived. {I.15]

God is the indwelling and not the transient cause of all things. All things which are, are in God. Besides God there can be no substance, that is, nothing in itself external to God. [I.17]

GOD IS THE FORCE PRESERVING THINGS IN EXISTENCE

Although each particular thing be conditioned by another particular thing to exist in a given way, yet the force whereby each particular thing perseveres in existing follows from the eternal necessity of God's nature. [ii.45]

INDIVIDUAL THINGS ARE EXPRESSIONS OF THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

Individual things are nothing but modifications of the attributes of God, or modes by which the attributes of God are expressed in a fixed and definite manner. [i.25.]

THERE IS NO EVIL

The perfection of things is to be reckoned only from their own nature and power; things are not more or less perfect, according as they delight or offend human senses, or according as they are serviceable or repugnant to mankind. [i. Appendix]

KNOWLEDGE OF GOD IS THE HIGHEST GOOD

The intellectual love of the mind towards God is part of the infinite love wherewith God loves himself ... The love of God towards men, and the intellectual love of the mind towards God, are identical. [v.36]

The mind's highest good is the knowledge of God, and the mind's highest virtue is to know God. [iv.28]

The human mind has ideas from which it perceives itself and its own body and external bodies as actually existing; therefore it has an adequate knowledge of the eternal and infinite essence of God. [ii.47]

Our highest happiness is in ... the knowledge of god ... We may thus clearly understand how far astray from a true estimate of virtue are those who expect to be decorated by God with high rewards for their virtue ... ; as if virtue and the service of God were not in itself happiness and perfect freedom. [ii.49]

LEARNING TO SEE GOD IN ALL THINGS

The mind can bring it about, that all bodily modifications or images of things may be referred to the idea of God. [v.14]

The more we understand particular things, the more we understand God. [v.24]

He who clearly and distinctly understands himself and his emotions loves God, and so much the more in proportion as he more understands himself and his emotions. [v.15]

Our mind, in so far as it knows itself and the body under the form of eternity, has to that extent necessarily a knowledge of God, and knows that it is in God, and is conceived through God. [v.30]

ACCEPTANCE OF DESTINY

In so far as we understand the causes of pain, to that extent it ceases to be a passion, that is, it ceases to be pain; therefore, in so far as we understand God to be the cause of pain, we to that extent feel pleasure. [v.18]

The wise man ... is scarcely at all disturbed in spirit, but, being conscious of himself, and of God, and of things, by a certain eternal necessity, never ceases to be, but always possesses true acquiescence of his spirit. [v.52]

The mind has greater power over the emotions and is less subject thereto, in so far as it understands all things as necessary. Proof: The mind understands all things to be necessary and to be determined to existence and operation by an infinite chain of causes, therefore ... it thus far brings it about, that it is less subject to the emotions arising therefrom, and feels less emotion towards the things themselves. [v.6]

NATURE DOES NOT WORK WITH AN END IN VIEW

Nature does not work with an end in view. For the eternal and infinite Being, which we call God or Nature, acts by the same necessity as that whereby it exists... . Therefore, as he does not exist for the sake of an end, so neither does he act for the sake of an end; of his existence and of his action there is neither origin nor end. [iv. Preface]

GOD IS INDIFFERENT TO INDIVIDUALS

God is without passions, neither is he affected by any emotion of pleasure or pain . . . Strictly speaking, God does not love anyone. [V.17]

He who loves God cannot endeavour that God should love him in return. [V.19]

Day-28 Investigation: Questions to ponder:

1. Given the spectrum of views about God, ranging from monotheism to atheism, in what ways do you feel that Spinoza's conception of God offers something meaningful to our understanding of God, and our continuing conversation as a human species about God and ultimate reality?
2. What about Spinoza's conception of God is meaningful to you personally and/or unappealing?

Day-29: Life After Religion - Next Steps

"It is not the length of life, but the depth." - Ralph Waldo Emerson

We've covered a lot of ground the last month in our Life After Religion: 30-Day Investigation Group. My plan is to leave the group open for an extended period of time so you can access all the content here.

The themes, subjects and personal investigations of our group will likely be areas you will continue exploring and re-visit. As I shared previously, it's likely you were not able to dive into all the daily posts over the past several weeks, but I want to strongly encourage you to engage them all. I titled each of the daily investigations, which you will find on the right sidebar of the page for easy access.

Next steps to consider

There are a few next steps worth considering as you continue living into the next season of your spiritual journey.

- Doing individual work together

If you feel it would be helpful to continue exploring the themes and subjects of this group in individual video-call sessions, I would be happy to discuss this further with you. You can explore that possibility at this link ->

<https://www.jimpalmerauthor.com/.../reimagining-spiritual...>

- Exploring Non-Theist Spirituality

The next course in this series is the Exploring Non-Theist Spirituality group, which starts September 21. You can learn more about this course and enroll at this link ->

<https://www.jimpalmerauthor.com/.../exploring-non-theist...>

- Spiritual director training

Many people who leave religion and cultivate a more open and inclusive spirituality are great candidates for becoming spiritual directors themselves, particularly for others who are leaving religion and wanting to cultivate a non-religious spirituality. You can contact me directly if you have an interest in this kind of training.

Day-30

Jim, some time ago I left religion. I poured myself into deconstructing my former religious beliefs and I no longer subscribe to the Christian theology I learned in church. I don't believe in heaven, hell, the Bible or the God of the Christian religion. But there are times when I feel something is missing. It's like a void, ache or emptiness I feel. What would you say about this?

Thanks, Steven

*

Steven, consider the possibility that this void, ache or emptiness is an invitation to that which you have been seeking and searching your entire life. You ultimately discover that liberation is to find what you never lost, to become what you have always been, to see what is already there, and to accept what you have always known. It was once said that the answer one seeks is at the center of themselves. I would go one step further and say that the answer you seek IS you and what you are. True liberation is awakening from the illusion that there is something to seek, and to simply know the totality of what you are.

Steven, it was always you.

© Jim Palmer