11. Extraordinary Events

A vast range of extraordinary events have been reported in human history, and they have significant relevance for our lives today. (At the end of this chapter there are a number of recommended books on the topic)

A Fundamental Choice You Must Make

One of the barriers to valuing the wisdom traditions in modern times concerns the stories of extraordinary events associated with the saints and sages of history. Could any of these stories actually be true? Hasn't science proven them false? But if they are all false, the spiritual and religious traditions are questionable—if the founding stories and confirming events are fictions, why should we take the messages seriously?

Well, perhaps the teachings were given to us by smart people who had good ideas, so we can look at them and just see which make sense to us. The problem with this approach is that, if each wisdom tradition is based solely on a smart person's ego ideas, and each of us chooses the virtues, values, and meanings from among them our egos like, we have sentenced ourselves to a nihilistic world. In such a world, everyone will be trying to get all the good stuff they can for themselves, and competing interests will in the end be resolved by raw power. As Tennyson put it, we will have chosen a world "red in tooth and claw,"[1] and no matter how sophisticated a veneer we put on it, savage violence and merciless competition will reign in the hearts of men and women.

Which brings us to one of the most crucial choices you will make in your entire life: Will you make your act of faith that the universe is ultimately governed by raw power, or will you choose the path of deeper meanings, values, and virtues, will you choose to believe that there is something beyond your ego to which you can look for guidance?

Whether you like it or not, you must choose which worldview you will organize your life around. Making this choice especially difficult is that you cannot wait for proof, because you will never find proof for either position. You are therefore required to make an act of faith one way or the other. You do have an option between making your choice consciously or unconsciously. If you go along with what you were taught, or what the powerful people around you believe, you are making an unconscious act of faith. On the other hand, if you explore the questions for yourself, you will be in a position to make a more conscious decision.

If you choose nihilism, if you choose against the existence of deeper meanings, you enter the world Nietzsche described with words that became a founding moment of

the modern era. With this choice, you will be able to use the idealism of other people to manipulate them to try to get what you want. If you choose this unconsciously, you will seek power and control by joining in the actions of the group with which you identify. If you choose nihilism more consciously, you will be able to plan, scheme, and fight to get what you want by manipulating everyone, both those within your own group as well as those in every other identity group.

There is another option. The message of the saints and sages of history has always been that there is a deep Source from which they received guidance. Our greatest wisdom figures have said they did not just think up the guidance they gave us; rather, they all conveyed that their core teachings came from a Source beyond their egos, from a dimension that must be taken into account by anyone who wishes to have a truly fulfilled life.

And this is where extraordinary events come in—any event that cannot be explained within a materialistic worldview. These non-ordinary happenings are seen by the wisdom traditions as evidence that their guidance is grounded in something beyond power and beyond the ego, and providing evidence that there is more to the universe than meaningless materialism suggests. For the wisdom traditions, extraordinary events demonstrate that their guidance arises from flashes of insight into the dimension beyond the strictly material; beyond what can be derived solely by the ego mind.

William James called this larger dimension the “Unseen Order” and it is the Source toward which all the world’s wisdom traditions point. It is Plato’s World of Forms, the “Numinous” of Kant and Jung, the Transcendental realm of Emerson and Thoreau, the “deathless” dimension of the Buddha, the “Sacred” of Mircea Eliade, the terrain “across the threshold” of Tsong Khapa, the Mystery of Dostoyevsky, the Ground of Being of Paul Tillich, “Spirit” as defined by Hegel, the eminence of God in all things as described by Spinoza and affirmed by Einstein, the “Ground of Unknowing” referenced in the writings of an anonymous Medieval Christian, the Great Spirit of tribal cultures, the voice of the ancestors in numerous traditions, and the Divine, the Tao, Brahma, Allah, Yahweh, and God of traditional religions.

All these are names for that which cannot be named, and the wisdom traditions tell us that this is the Ground out of which values, virtues, meanings, purpose, intention, life direction, compassion, and the higher forms of love arise. Crucially, all the saints and sages of history have said that our lives will only be fulfilled if we find the “right relationship” to this Unseen Order. Alternatively, to reject the existence of such a Source leads inevitably to nihilism and a world in which raw power is the final arbiter of all conflicts.

This brings us back to the choice you cannot escape. If you allow skepticism about the stories of extraordinary events in the lives of the saints and sages to influence you in the direction of choosing to believe the wisdom teachings are nothing more than suggestions from which your ego can pick and choose, you have set yourself adrift in a nihilistic world. Unfortunately, an increasing number of people in the modern world are inclining toward this choice, and the dangers of this societal movement are being depicted by the explosion of dystopian movies, novels, and video games.

Alternatively, you can organize around the possibility that the teachings of the wisdom figures come from a Source beyond the individual ego. You do not have to be certain this is true, but simply decide to make this the direction you will take. Instantly, you have "entered the stream," have set your life upon the path of finding for yourself the truths the wisdom traditions suggest are available and offer life's final fulfillment. If you make this choice, then you can decide which of the traditions or teachers available to you are most likely to help you along on your Way.

Extraordinary Events in Buddhism

The dramatic moments in the lives of Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, and all the saints and sages that followed in their traditions are so well known that there is little need to recount them here. There are also countless extraordinary events throughout the history of Hinduism and Taoism. Even Confucius, the most practical of the historical founders, is quoted as saying, "If I had 50 years more to live, I would spend it studying the *I Ching*"[2] (which is a book of divinations). Confucius also believed strongly in the power of rituals to affect human relations with the Tao, the highest dimension of reality.

Some modern Buddhists like to say that Buddhism is different, that it is based on nothing more than being mindful—as we moderns use that term—but nothing could be further from the truth. First, the Buddha reported that after six years of seeking and failing to find what he sought, he determined he would sit under a Bodhi tree and either find a complete answer—or die. What happened next is one of the most extraordinary events in human history. Buddhist scholars convey his words, which were faithfully memorized for centuries:

"When the mind was thus concentrated, purified, bright, unblemished … I directed it to the knowledge of recollecting my past lives … one birth, two … five, ten … fifty, a hundred, a thousand, … many eons of cosmic contraction & expansion: There I had such a name, belonged to such a clan, had such an appearance.… Passing away from that state, I re-arose … and had such a name, belonged to such a clan, had such an appearance. … Thus I remembered my manifold past lives in their modes & details."[3]

To see all the details of many past lives certainly qualifies as an extraordinary experience, and is quite different from simply being "mindful" of what is going on in and around you. But the life of the Buddha provides many other examples of extraordinary events. In fact, in *Great Disciples of the Buddha*, several highly regarded scholars document that the most authentic sources discuss a set of six paranormal faculties—called the six superknowledges—that the Buddha himself mastered and taught to his closest disciples. The first five were: thought reading, clairaudience, clairvoyance, astral travel, and telekinesis. The sixth was the ability to know when all of one's defilements had been eradicated and could never arise again.

What should we make of this? First, if there has ever been one single instance of one of the superknowledges in human history, materialism cannot be true. Because of this, some modern Buddhists, trying to fit in with their materialist friends, ignore or try to explain away this documented part of Buddhist history. Discussing this attempt to rewrite history, one of the authors of *Great Disciples*, the respected scholar Bhikku Bodhi, states: "The Pali suttas, as a matter of course, frequently ascribe supernormal powers to the Buddha and his arahant disciples, and there is little ground apart from personal prejudice for supposing such passages to be interpolations."[4] In other words, supernormal powers were taken for granted by the Buddha and his early followers, and anyone who tries to interpret things differently has no scholarly or scientific leg to stand on. Denials spring solely from irrational prejudice.

But back to reincarnation. Some Christian and Muslim groups declare that the Buddha could not have seen his past lives because reincarnation is impossible. All materialists say the same thing. The only basis for these claims springs from an act of faith that has nothing to do with logic, reason, or science, for there is no evidence, scientific or otherwise, that reincarnation is impossible. In this and many other ways, fundamentalists of all kinds are similar—Islamic, Christian, materialistic, and every other variety. The only difference between them is the specific act of faith they have made. This is probably the reason fundamentalists often clash with other fundamentalists: Since there will never be any proof of their beliefs, they must either avoid all those who disagree with them, argue with them, or change their own views (which is often the most difficult option).

Can science resolve the issues around reincarnation? Probably not, but the best scientific work I have found is by a team at the University of Virginia, led for many years by a fine scholar named Ian Stevenson. After much careful research, he published in 1966 *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*, in which he presented the evidence he had collected after studying hundreds of cases. What he found was pretty good evidence that reincarnation had occurred in some form in these twenty

cases. Since then, there have been several other thorough investigations by Stevenson and his associates. (A good summary is presented in *Return to Life: Extraordinary Cases of Children Who Remember Past Lives* by Jim B. Tucker, published in 2015.)

Personally, I have not formed a belief one way or the other about reincarnation. But those who wish to follow the science, those who wish to use science as their primary guide on the topic, will have to lean toward its occurrence. Of course, to accept this idea would completely destroy the faith system of materialism, so I cannot find one single materialist who "follows the science" on this topic.

As for whether the Buddha and his disciples had supernormal powers, I have made no act of faith about this either, and there is no scientific evidence one way or the other, for scientists today have no way of investigating events happening around the Buddha 2500 years ago. Thus, to be scientific regarding the Buddha's supernormal powers means remaining open-minded. Only those who have made an act of faith that supernormal powers are impossible can assert that these events did not happen.

There are, of course, many explanations for what might "really" have occurred, theories that try to explain away these documented extraordinary events. Anyone is free to offer speculative explanations for what might have happened in that ancient time and place. But such speculations are not science. I could speculate about the reasons some people become materialists, positing that it has to do with childhood wounds, or brain chemistry, or mirror neurons, but I have no evidence, scientific or otherwise, so it would only be speculation, not science. It is exactly the same with those who make up speculative theories to explain away the extraordinary events of human history. It is not science, but fantasies based upon a prior act of faith.

Healing

From pre-history to the present day the healing of one person by another, or by a group of others, through means that we do not understand scientifically has been so common as to be taken for granted by most people who have ever lived. For thousands of years tribal peoples everywhere used healing rituals and the skills of a shaman to restore and maintain health. They still do. In fact, many westerners in the last few decades have visited healers who practice within these ancient traditions, and a significant number say they have received great benefits.

And, increasingly, we in the modern West do not have to go to the jungles of Brazil to find such healers, because they are being advertised in every city. I tried to count the number of "healers" with advertisements who fit this mode in Los Angeles, and the number was overwhelming—many thousands. Nor does modern medicine with all its

successes seem to be diminishing the appeal, even though some mainstream medical practitioners have directed harsh critiques toward these alternative methods. Despite the attacks, all over the western world the number of people practicing and making use of alternative healing techniques is growing rapidly.

As it is becoming ever more accepted even in educated circles today, however, this historically common form of healing is still considered "impossible" by those who have made materialism their act of faith. This is actually quite irrational: Why would anyone dismiss the experiences and the vote of confidence given by billions of people in every culture throughout recorded history when there is no evidence to warrant such a dismissal?

One powerful example of a healer is Jesus. He attracted crowds, not primarily for the words he spoke, but because he had developed a reputation as an amazing healer. People flocked to him because they wanted to be healed, or because they hoped he could heal a loved one. Further, the healing power he offered was not limited to Jesus alone. He said of those who followed him: "The works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do."[5]

Given the healings attributed to Jesus, it is hard to imagine others doing even greater works, but those are his words. Perhaps he meant greater numbers would be healed, and it is certainly the case that since those words were spoken 2000 years ago, millions of people have reported an experience of being healed in some way by Christian saints or other dedicated Christians. Or by a visit to one of the many healing sanctuaries around the world (about six million people visit just one of them every single year, the healing sanctuary of Lourdes in France).

Christianity is not unusual in this. Every tradition has healing shrines and sanctuaries, and there are countless reports of people being healed by saints and sages in every wisdom tradition. The only conclusion I can reach is that there is no rational reason for anyone to discount all this evidence—especially when there is no evidence whatsoever that this kind of healing is impossible.

I do not think most humans through history were stupid. They would not have spent so much time and energy with healers and on healing techniques unless they felt strongly that such techniques sometimes worked. We humans can do dumb things and sometimes behave in silly ways, but if evolution has any merit, it is unlikely we would have maintained practices for our entire recorded history that were a waste of time.

Needless to say, every single claim by someone who says they have the power to heal is not true, and every story of someone being healed should not be accepted. Some claims have been proven false. Some are exaggerated. Some who claim to be healers

are charlatans. But this does not mean that all claims are false. Some sales pitches for stocks in the stock market are exaggerated, and some are made by charlatans, but this says nothing about all the others, except that it is wise to study each claim carefully before buying.

Is Healing Just the Placebo Effect?

There is, of course, the placebo effect, and many people who believe they have been healed by various means have benefited from its power. This is definitely the case with alternative healing methods, but the same is true with modern medicines and medical techniques. One estimate I saw suggested as much as 50 percent of all healing within the mainstream medical system is due to the placebo effect. Whether this number is accurate or not, it is without doubt that within the mainstream medical system as well as outside it, all healing is a mixture of the treatment itself combined with the placebo effect.

The wise conclusion to reach, then, is not to discount any healing as "just the placebo effect," but to try to understand how it is that a person's belief can set a healing process in motion, and to study the best ways to skillfully work with this internal healing process. The healing traditions outside mainstream medicine have done this for centuries, so we should look to them for guidance in this arena. Importantly, acknowledging the importance of the placebo effect in alternative treatments does not mean that other forces do not also exist, just as accepting that the placebo effect is part of the healing process in mainstream medicine does not mean that the medicines are completely ineffective.

Also note that the existence of the placebo effect runs counter to the whole idea of materialism, for it shows that the mind can affect the material world. Thoughts are not material objects and cannot be measured in mechanistic ways, so how can they affect our bodies if everything has a material cause? In addition, no one has ever shown that thoughts are generated only by the flesh of the brain. Perhaps they are, but it is at least as likely that consciousness precedes matter, as many wisdom traditions, as well as modern physicists, believe. (See my essays under "Consciousness and Memory" on my web site.)

My conclusions concerning the best way to approach healing:

1. Most human beings have believed that something valuable can go on when one person or a group of people give or send healing energy to another. In fact, non-ordinary healing is one of the most common and accepted happenings in human history. There are many intelligent and dedicated people studying this today, and a number of well-designed studies have yielded fascinating results. (Some of the books

describing these studies are listed below.) Wisdom would therefore suggest that we respect and continue to study non-ordinary healing to find the best ways to use it in our lives.

2. Some reports of healings are exaggerated. Some are made by charlatans hoping for fame and profit. But if a researcher finds ten examples of fraud in the stock market, she has not proven that all stocks are fraudulent. In the same way, the existence of charlatans and exaggerations in the healing realm does not prove that all non-ordinary healing is misguided or fraudulent.

3. Some stocks have been highly successful. This is precisely the reason stocks are a fertile ground for fraud. If no stocks had ever made money no one would pay any attention to the claims of charlatans. The same is true in the world of healing—if no healings had ever occurred, no one would be interested in healers. The lesson in both cases is to proceed with caution, while keeping an open mind.

4. Some healings are due primarily to the placebo effect, both within mainstream medicine as well as in the area of non-ordinary healing. Rather than ignore or discount this powerful tool, let us learn to incorporate it more fully and effectively into all healing techniques.

Plant Medicine, Psychedelics, Hallucinogens

For thousands of years human beings have had experiences transcending their small ego selves with the help of chemicals found in plants, ranging from the drug preparations of shamans to soma in ancient India to the mysterious drug used in the Eleusinian Mysteries in ancient Greece. Not all shamanic traditions used mind-altering chemicals, but many did. In these traditions, there is a firm belief that there is a dimension beyond the material world, and by getting outside the ego self we can connect to that larger dimension. Many extraordinary events have been reported during such experiences.

There is an active field of study concerning shamanic practices today, and especially their use of plant medicines. It is becoming clear that we have much to learn. Few people are aware that 120 of our most popular pharmaceuticals are derived from plants that people have used for centuries, including most of the top 20 best-selling prescription drugs. This validation of traditional healing wisdom suggests we should also take very seriously the importance many gave to hallucinogens.

Although many cultures have used hallucinogens in very specific ways for centuries, including for healing and for spiritual insight, their use in the U.S. became mostly recreational in the 1960s, which led to their complete ban under President Nixon. One

great irony is that hallucinogenic drugs are seldom addictive, but their banning in the U.S. increased the use of opioids—which are highly addictive. The ban thus led to the explosion of the illegal drug industry and the opioid epidemic with which we are now struggling.

In recent years there has been a revival of research on the possible health benefits of the hallucinogens, as well as on their potential for spiritual growth. A modern journalist who decided to explore first-hand what was going on is Michael Pollan, a professor of journalism at the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism, former executive editor for *Harper's Magazine*, and the author of several best-selling books. He began his investigation with a highly skeptical view, doubting that he would find anything of value to him personally. He was wrong. Toward the end of the book about his experiences, *How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence* he writes:

"I had an experience that was by turns frightening and ecstatic and weird. ... I looked out and saw myself spread over the landscape like a coat of paint or butter. I was outside myself, beside myself, literally, and the consciousness that beheld this ... was not my normal consciousness, it was completely unperturbed. It was dispassionate. It was content as I watched myself dissolve over the landscape.
"What I brought back from that experience was that I'm not identical to my ego, that there is another ground on which to plant our feet and that our ego is kind of this character that is chattering neurotically in our minds."[6]

There is no question that most people who have lived within the shamanic traditions over thousands of years, right up to the present day, have been organized around extraordinary experiences in their healing practices, both with and without medicinal help. All trusted these extraordinary experiences to help them acquire wisdom for life and living. To discount this vast human history, rather than trying to learn what we can from it is, well, kind of foolish. There is a vast literature available, and I will point to a few good books to start with below.

Superknowledges

The superknowledges attributed to the Buddha and his followers, the healings and other extraordinary events associated with Jesus and Christian saints, the countless stories of supernormal events associated with yogis in India, Taoist masters, Tibetan lamas, Islamic spiritual figures, Jewish rabbis, and Hasidic *tzaddiqs* permeate history.

Many of these accounts are myths and metaphors meant to carry meanings and values, and must be understood in that way. This does not mean, however, that the

extraordinary events they recount did not take place. Some probably did not happen as described, but some might have: Just because a story has become a myth does not mean there was not an actual event behind it. One of the great myths of our time involves the voyages of Apollo, with astronauts walking on the moon. That iconic photograph of the Earth from space taken in 1968 during the Apollo 8 mission has been downloaded, shown, and reproduced billions of times, to the point that nature photographer Galen Rowell called it "the most influential environmental photograph ever taken."[7]

The Apollo program is thus one of our great modern myths, based on what most of us take to be actual events. Many myths are like that. Imagine, however, that a great cataclysm or World War took place and wiped out all current civilizations, and 2000 years from now there was a myth about people walking on the moon and taking pictures of the Earth from space—in a civilization that had no ability for space travel. The story would probably be considered by people of that time to be a myth not based upon an actual event.

In the same way, an extraordinary event reported in the life of a saint or sage in the past that has become a mythic story does not give us any information about whether it is based on an actual event. Some of these events were observed by a lot of people at the time, and others were investigated close to the time of occurrence with a good bit of positive evidence being found (see the books listed below), but we cannot know today whether most of these reported events actually happened. A materialist can make an act of faith that all are impossible, but that is not supported by logic or science. In the end, in most cases, we simply do not know, and an objective observer will keep an open mind.

Extraordinary events that cannot be explained today within a materialistic worldview include accurate premonitions, sensing when something has happened to a loved one at a distance, knowing when a person is going to call or write, prayers affecting health or other outcomes, healings, accurate dream guidance, extrasensory perceptions, shamanic visions, precognition, remote viewing, psychic communications, messages received through a medium, meaningful synchronicities, out-of-body experiences, trance healing or guidance, glimpses beyond this life, and reincarnation. Considering the range of possibilities, it is not surprising to find that studies suggest more than half of us have had one or more of these experiences at some point in our lives.

There are lots of studies being done today involving non-ordinary possibilities. For example, in the mid-1970s several U.S. intelligence agencies initiated secret programs that were eventually consolidated into the Stargate Project, managed by the Stanford Research Institute (founded by the trustees of Stanford University and later becoming

a separate non-profit organization). Two physicists at Stanford had already begun exploring psychic abilities at the time, and the government asked them to coordinate the program and funded various projects for almost 30 years.

The main tool of this program was remote viewing, and some dramatic results were obtained. There are many fascinating books about the program. One is *The Stargate Chronicles: Memoirs of a Psychic Spy* by Joseph McMoneagle, who was a highly successful military officer who joined the project and had many documented successes accomplished under double-blind protocols. For instance, he described the interior of a top-secret Soviet manufacturing plant thousands of miles away; accurately predicted a new class of submarine under construction there; sketched the location and described the thoughts of a U.S. Army General who had been kidnapped, and accurately predicted in advance where Skylab would land on the Earth's surface.

As part of Stargate, another success involved Rosemary Smith, who was given a map of Africa and told that sometime in the past a Soviet spy plane had crashed somewhere on the continent. U.S. intelligence desperately wanted to see the top-secret Russian codes and equipment, but they had been totally unsuccessful in locating the plane despite using all the spy equipment available, including multiple satellite searches (it had been completely hidden from the sky by the jungle canopy).

Sitting in a room far away with no equipment but her mind, Smith reached a focused state in which she precisely pinpointed the wreckage. When questioned about the incident after it leaked to the press, President Jimmy Carter admitted that the CIA, without his knowledge, had used a psychic to locate the plane.

The successes of this program have fueled much interest and many studies since that time, while the results so infuriated a few materialists that they credited an organization to undermine the reports, going so far as to put out false stories and even falsify Wikipedia pages. (See books by Chris Carter, Mark Gober, Russell Targ, and Rupert Sheldrake about these actions.)

They Aren't Repeatable!

One argument leveled against extraordinary events is that they are not repeatable, and thus not scientific. But science, as well as life, is filled with non-repeatable events. We exist because of the Big Bang, the coming together of the Earth in orbit around the Sun, the emergence of life on Earth, and the miracle of human consciousness. Or consider the tectonic plate shift that separated Europe and Africa from the Americas, the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD that destroyed the city of Pompeii, or the explosion of a blue supergiant star in the Large Magellanic Cloud whose light reached

Earth in 1987. Does anyone suggest these events could not have happened because we cannot duplicate them in a lab?

In our communal lives, each football game, every game in any sport, each contest, each competition is non-repeatable—that is what makes them exciting and why we spend so much time watching them. Art is unrepeatable: there is only one *Starry Night* by Van Gogh and only one *Ninth Symphony* by Beethoven. Businesses cannot be duplicated in a lab or everyone would copy Apple and the company would not be worth $2.17 trillion dollars on the stock market. History is unrepeatable: Stalin's takeover of the Soviet Union, Abraham Lincoln's presidency. Obviously, this list is endless. Human life is made up of non-repeatable events.

But more important for your life, everything central to you is non-repeatable: Your birth, your first date, the first time you fell in love, your first job; in fact, each of the moments in each of your relationships is non-repeatable. The most important currents in each of our lives have to do with love, relationships, meaning, purpose, virtues, values, and intentions that do not happen in a laboratory and cannot be duplicated. It is in this flux of living, breathing life that extraordinary events occur—not in scientific laboratories.

Science is best when it deals with material things that can be studied in somewhat controlled conditions, but human life is messy and each life is unique. Considering life as we know it, who in their right mind would come to a sweeping, absolute conclusion that every single extraordinary event reported in human history is impossible because it is not repeatable. Taking such a view would necessitate rejecting most of the events of your own life as impossible because they are not repeatable.

The Scientific Position

One of the great strengths of science is that it does not posit final answers. It is forever investigating, changing, offering new theories to be proved or disproved. It is only materialism that rejects the possibility of any extraordinary event ever having happened in the history of the world. For all we know, we might be on the cusp of a new revolution in the scientific paradigm, and some of its underlying assumptions might well change in ways that are compatible with extraordinary events.

Copernicus set in motion a revolution with his theories about the functioning of the solar system. Newton did the same with his three laws of motion and his theory that gravity was the same force all over the universe. Then, Einstein's ideas on relativity created a whole new view of the universe that replaced Newton's. Today, we are struggling to incorporate quantum theory into our scientific worldview, but no one has really been able to wrap their mind around the fact that each and every material

object is made up of probabilities, not actual matter; that energy waves aren't in one place but are "probability waves" that don't exist anywhere until they are measured, or perhaps until a consciousness observes them.

Have you incorporated into your picture of the universe that everything is in a virtual state until observed, that until an object is observed it is nowhere (or that it is everywhere)? When these theories were being developed, one of the greatest physicists of all time, Niels Bohr, said: "When we measure something we are forcing an undetermined, undefined world to assume an experimental value. We are not measuring the world, we are creating it."[8] In other words, we create instruments to find things we have speculated are there, and then those instruments we have made for that particular purpose "find them." And when a new theory comes along, new instruments are created and we find a new and different world. So, what is really out there? (Physics as a Zen koan.)

Many materialists have tried to resist the implications of quantum theory, but it has turned out to be the most accurate science ever created. It works. Its predictions have been almost unerring. It has led to an endless stream of new technologies that have revolutionized the modern world. But no one really understands it, and certainly no one understand the nature of the world it gives us. To quote Niels Bohr again: "Anyone who is not shocked by quantum theory has not understood it."[9] Or this by Nobel Laureate physicist Richard Feynman who specialized in the field: "I think I can safely say that nobody understands quantum mechanics."[10] At another time Feynman said:

"Do not keep saying to yourself, … 'But how can it be like that?' because you will get 'down the drain,' into a blind alley from which nobody has yet escaped. Nobody knows how it can be like that."[11]

If the greatest physicists don't understand the larger implications of their own area of study, their science certainly has not proven that any act of faith about the world is correct. Instead, as quantum theory continues to develop, it is raising ever more unanswered questions. And inevitably, as it deals with these questions, it will change. Will this change in the new view of the world be as great as happened with Copernicus, Newton, and Einstein? One thing seems clear: Because the new theories that are emerging are not mechanistic, are not grounded in matter as the starting point for everything, there is no reason to believe that science will support materialism in its emerging paradigm.

Also pretty clear is that, as science goes about its remarkable business, its emerging worldview will not be in conflict with the core teachings of the wisdom traditions, just

as the old one was not. Many, many great scientists through history were not materialists, and science proceeded along its path of development just fine. For instance, Kepler thought of himself as a priest of God in the temple of Nature and Newton considered his scientific work a hymn in praise of God.

There is no reason a good scientist, in the past or in the present, need be a materialist or believe that all extraordinary events are impossible, since there is nothing within science to suggest that everything about life or existence lies within the material world alone. It certainly does not look like the emerging scientific worldview will offer proof that most of the extraordinary events reported throughout history were impossible. Therefore, when considering the vast history of extraordinary events, the only conclusion a scientist who wishes to be "scientific" can come to is to reserve judgment, to remain open-minded.

A Broader View

In my own life, I do not wish to be naïve, nor do I wish to be closed-minded. This means that I do not rush to embrace extraordinary claims, but neither do I reject all as impossible. The world is quite mysterious, "wondrous strange,"[12] as Shakespeare put it. Hamlet says: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."[13] Taking to heart the wisdom of the great Bard, why would I reject the possibility of extraordinary events that might have a meaning for my life?

One conclusion that seems clear is that if any single extraordinary event ever happened, just once in the history of the world, materialism is not a wise act of faith. To modify the thought of Blaise Pascal, French philosopher, theologian, mathematician, and physicist—to bet against the possibility of every single extraordinary event in history, when neither science nor reason supports such a view, and when doing so provides no benefit—is not a good wager. On the other hand, to keep an open mind about these things is scientific, for science is always open to new ideas, new possibilities, new theories, new understandings.

Crucially for your life, it is possible that at some point an extraordinary experience might have value for you, as it did for Jesus, the Buddha, and most all the saints and sages of history. Most of them had extraordinary moments that changed their lives, many of which cannot be explained in materialistic terms. To be wise therefore suggests remaining open to the possibility of receiving guidance, such as from a Higher Self or "something greater" than the ego self. It is certainly wise to keep an open mind if one has any possibility of becoming the deathless, merging into the

ocean of All-That-Is in a way that is not meaningless, or discovering that the death of the body is not the end of everything.

Ultimately, a materialist who clings to an act of faith that does not allow for the frequent accounts of extraordinary events in the lives of the saints and sages is in a totally unscientific stance. Making such an act of faith means blinding oneself to the Source of wisdom the most important people in history trusted, the exceptional men and women who touched the mystery for themselves and came back to live among us and offer their guidance.

Ken Wilber, perhaps the most widely read philosopher in America in the last three decades, put the importance of paying attention to a greater knowing this way:

"Are the mystics and sages insane? Because they all tell variations on the same story —the story of awakening one morning and discovering you are one with the All, in a timeless, and eternal, and infinite fashion.

"Yes, maybe they are crazy, these divine fools. Maybe they are mumbling idiots in the face of the Abyss.

"But then, I wonder. Maybe the sequence really is from matter to body to mind to soul to spirit, each transcending and including, each with a greater depth and greater consciousness and wider embrace.

"And in the highest reaches maybe, just maybe an individual's consciousness does indeed touch infinity, a total embrace of the entire Kosmos, a Kosmic consciousness that is Spirit awakened to its own true nature.

"It's at least possible. And tell me: is that story, sung by mystics and sages the world over any crazier than the materialism story, which is that the entire sequence is a tale told by an idiot signifying absolutely nothing? Listen very carefully: just which of those two stories actually sounds totally insane?

"I'll tell you what I think. I think the sages are the leading edge of the self-transcending drive. I think they embody the very drive of the Kosmos toward greater depth and expanding consciousness. I think they are riding the edge of a light beam, racing toward a rendezvous with God.

"And I think they point to the same depth in you, and in me, and in all of us. I think they are plugged into the All, and the Kosmos sings through their voices, and the Spirit shines through their eyes. And I think they disclose the face of tomorrow, they open us to the heart of our own destiny—which is already right now in the timelessness of this very moment."[14]

Your Choice

So which story will you choose? It is a crucial choice, and science does not suggest one answer or the other. My suggestion is that you take the wisdom of the saints and sages seriously as you look for the best path to the fulfillment of your life. Remember, though, that this path is not about trying to squeeze the larger possibilities into your currently limited understanding of yourself and the world; rather, it will require the expansion of your horizons; it will insist that you transform yourself, that you undergo a change of consciousness so that you can become a larger version of who you are.

Also important is that the wisdom traditions do not suggest that the Unseen Order exists to make your ego life better. Instead, it will encourage you to leave your small self behind and search for a vision like Jesus had in the desert or the Buddha under the Bodhi tree. This path will lead you to put aside "petty fears and petty pleasures"[15] in order to experience a new birth, to open your third eye so as to catch a glimpse of the vision the saints and sages have seen. This is your true birthright.

Books That Explore A Broader Reality

Many of the saints and sages who experienced extraordinary moments were part of a religious tradition, and I will suggest books in future essays with many examples. The books below, however, are focused on the extraordinary experiences of those not directly tied to practices within a specific religious tradition. Most of these examples happened spontaneously, such as in sudden premonitions or in dreams. Many concern experiences reported by well-known scientists, scholars, artists, and leaders.

1. Books that document numerous accounts of extraordinary experiences

The Flip: Epiphanies of Mind and the Future of Knowledge by Jeffry Kripal: The author holds a prestigious chair in philosophy and religious thought at Rice University and has several books to his credit. This book is a very good summary of the extraordinary experiences of scientists, philosophers, and neuroscientists, a number of whom had previously been skeptics of all non-ordinary possibilities until they were confronted by their own experience. Since the author is a scholar, the discussion is set within the framework of the history of science and religion.

The Relevance of Bliss by Nona Coxhead: A delightful book about extraordinary experiences of normal people, based upon a study of the work of numerous researchers.

Seeing the Invisible: Modern Religious and Other Transcendent Experiences by Meg Maxwell and Verena Tschudin: A good book based on the work of Dr. Alistair Hardy, a chaired professor of biology at Oxford, a Fellow of the Royal Society who was

knighted by Queen Elizabeth. Although a Darwinian in biological thought, Hardy had deep spiritual interests and founded the Religious Experience Research Unit at Oxford in 1969. He did not think his Darwinian ideas conflicted with spiritual possibilities, as made clear in his book, *The Spiritual Nature of Man*.

An End to Upside Down Thinking: Dispelling the Myth That the Brain Produces Consciousness, and the Implications for Everyday Life by Mark Gober: A good summary of the studies and research that suggest a broader view of reality.

Quantum Change: When Epiphanies and Sudden Insights Transform Ordinary Lives by William R. Miller and Janet C'de Baca: The authors are psychologists who became intrigued by the way extraordinary experiences sometimes changed peoples' lives. They present a number of fascinating examples.

Mystics, Masters, Saints, and Sages: Stories of Enlightenment by Robert Ullman and Judyth Reichenberg-Ullman: An excellent account of the transformative experiences of many of the best-known spiritual figures in every tradition.

Soulmaking: Uncommon Paths to Self-Understanding by Michael Grosso: A philosopher, Grosso explores how dreams, intuitions, meaningful coincidences, and strange leaps beyond time and space have impacted the lives of many people through history, sometimes in powerful ways.

Revolutionaries of the Soul: Reflections on Magicians, Philosophers, and Occultists by Gary Lachman: Explores the profound experiences of a number of people in the last 200 years who had dramatic extraordinary experiences and conveyed those experiences in a way that had an impact on western culture.

2. Personal transformative journeys by thoughtful people

Extraordinary Knowing: Science, Skepticism, and the Inexplicable Powers of the Human Mind by Elizabeth Lloyd Mayer: An associate clinical professor in the psychology department at UC-Berkeley, Mayer set off on an exploration of the extraordinary because of an event in her family. She brought her skills as a scholar and psychologist to the attempt to make sense of what she found and experienced.

The Way of the Explorer: An Apollo Astronaut's Journey Through the Material and Mystical Worlds by Edgar Mitchell: Astronaut Mitchell was trained as an engineer and scientist and became a member of the Apollo 14 mission. He was traveling back to Earth, having just walked on the moon, when he had an experience that was an "ecstasy of unity" for which his previous life had offered no preparation. This book recounts his lifelong journey exploring the meaning of that event.

Head and Heart: A Personal Exploration of Science and the Sacred by Victor Mansfield: An astrophysicist explores psychology, philosophy, and spiritual ideas in his own search for meaning.

Infinite Awareness: The Awakening of a Scientific Mind by Marjorie Hines Woollacott: The author is a neuroscientist whose introduction to meditation opened her to a much broader perspective.

From Science to God by Peter Russell: The author studied mathematics, theoretical physics, experimental psychology, computer science, and philosophy as part of his quest for wisdom, "a passion for knowing, an insatiable curiosity about the laws and principles that govern the world."[16] This book is Russell's attempt to reconcile all these currents in a harmonious way.

Touching Spirit: A Journey of Healing and Personal Resurrection by Elizabeth K. Stratton: A journalist who set off on a personal journey to better understand herself, which led to numerous extraordinary experiences.

Bone Games: Extreme Sports, Shamanism, Zen, and the Search for Transcendence by Rob Schultheis: An exploration of the altered states of consciousness that can arise during extreme sports, including paranormal experiences. The author researches the spiritual experiences of Arctic explorers and shipwreck victims and finds parallels in shamanistic practices and Zen Buddhism.

Journeys Out of the Body by Robert Monroe: The author was a highly successful businessman who started having spontaneous out-of-body experiences, and then devoted the rest of his life to trying to learn more about them and sharing his knowledge with others.

The Case for Miracles: A Journalist Investigates Evidence for the Supernatural by Lee Strobel: The author was the award-winning legal editor of the *Chicago Tribune* until he became a Christian and turned his journalism talents toward investigating his new faith.

Out of Darkness into the Light: A Journey of Inner Healing by Gerald G. Jampolsky: A graduate of Stanford Medical School and respected doctor encounters the teachings of *The Course in Miracles* and begins a new life, including becoming a best-selling author and helping many people through the creation of the Center for Attitudinal Healing, now a worldwide network of centers in over thirty countries.

The Stargate Chronicles: Memoirs of a Psychic Spy by Joseph McMoneagle: Discussed in essay above.

3. Explorations of the meaning of extraordinary experiences

The World of the Paranormal: The Next Frontier by Lawrence LeShan: The author is a highly respected academic who has authored over 150 papers and 20 books. He holds a PhD from the University of Chicago and has taught at various universities. He spent much of his long career trying to understand extraordinary phenomena, and in this book shows how it relates to the new developments in science. LeShan also has a fine audio program on healing: *Mobilizing the Life Force*.

The ESP Enigma: The Scientific Case for Psychic Phenomena by Diane Hennacy Powell: A Johns Hopkins-trained neuroscientist, Powell considers the meaning and nature of consciousness in light of a great deal of current research on psychic phenomena.

States of Consciousness by Charles Tart: Another academic who has studied extraordinary experiences for a lifetime, this book is a systematic exploration of how and why altered states come about and the possibilities they offer us. It is not an easy read, but very worthwhile. A more accessible of Tart's books is *Waking Up: Overcoming the Obstacles to Human Potential***.**

The Secret Vaults of Time: Psychic Archaeology and the Quest for Man's Beginnings by Stephan Schwartz: Presents and analyzes 100 years of research around the world involving the use of remote viewing in archaeology.

The Reality of ESP: A Physicist's Proof of Psychic Abilities by Russell Targ: A physicist who was a leader in the CIA sponsored project to explore the possibility of ways to use ESP, Targ then spent the rest of his career researching the field, and this book is a summary of the evidence he collected for its existence. Another of his books is *Limitless Mind: A Guide to Remote Viewing and Transformation of Consciousness.*

The Parapsychology Revolution: A Concise Anthology of Paranormal and Psychical Research by Robert M. Schoch and Logan Yonavjak: A very good overview by two scholars who examine numerous scientific studies that used rigorous methodology and peer-reviewed oversight over the last 125 years.

Science and Psychic Phenomena: The Fall of the House of Skeptics by Chris Carter: A hard-hitting book that highlights the fallacies, and sometimes the dishonesty, in the attacks made by some skeptics who seem to be willing to go to great lengths to disprove extraordinary experiences.

Supernormal: Science, Yoga, and the Evidence for Extraordinary Psychic Abilities by Dean Radin: Another scientist who became interested in extraordinary phenomena, Radin has spent a lifetime studying them. As research director of the Institute of Noetic Sciences, founded by astronaut Edgar Mitchell, Radin has been able to design and develop many scientific studies. His other worthwhile books include *The*

Conscious Universe: The Scientific Truth of Psychic Phenomena and *Entangled Minds: Extrasensory Experiences in a Quantum Reality.*

5. Plant medicine, psychedelics, hallucinogens

Sacred Knowledge: Psychedelics and Religious Experiences by William Richards: A respected member of the psychiatry department of Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Richards was on the front lines of LSD research in the 60s and 70s and one of the original researchers in the field. He ceased his research by the early 80s when using these drugs in research became illegal. Now he is involved again, and this book is a very good overview of the potential value in this field.

How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence by Michael Pollan: Discussed in essay above.

LSD: Doorway to the Numinous: The Groundbreaking Psychedelic Research into Realms of the Human Unconscious by Stanislav Grof: The author was a key figure in the early Johns Hopkins research program focused on the psychological effects of psychedelics. This book details the amazing successes of the program until it was closed down by Nixon's war on drugs.

Food of the Gods: The Search for the Original Tree of Knowledge: A Radical History of Plants, Drugs, and Human Evolution *by Terence McKenna:* A brilliant young British scholar began to explore of the use of psychedelics through history, and spent a lifetime bringing the field to the attention of a larger audience and coming to some fascinating conclusions.

Consciousness Medicine: Indigenous Wisdom, Entheogens, and Expanded States of Consciousness for Healing and Growth by Françoise Bourzat: A good place to start for doctors, therapists, and other healing practitioners who would like to explore the use of shamanic wisdom and hallucinogens in their practices.

The Fellowship of the River: A Medical Doctor's Exploration into Traditional Amazonian Plant Medicine *by Joseph Tafur:* After spending many years with shamans in the Amazon jungle, the author presents a worldview in which sacred plants, used in appropriate ceremonies, can become important tools in the western medicine chest, adding elements of emotional and spiritual healing.

Shaman, Healer, Sage: How to Heal Yourself and Others with the Energy Medicine of the Americas by Alberto Villoldo: A classically trained medical anthropologist, the author has studied shamanic healing techniques among the

descendants of the ancient Incas for more than twenty years, and here presents some of the most important lessons he has learned.

The Psychedelic Explorer's Guide: Safe, Therapeutic, and Sacred Journeys by James Fadiman: Now considered the "dean" of psychologists interested in the therapeutic use of psychedelics, Fadiman here examines recent developments in the field.

6. Healing

Getting Well Again by Carl Simonton: The first mainstream book about using visualization to heal cancer. There has been much work done on this since then, and there are many books, but this is still a good place to start.

Physicians' Untold Stories: Miraculous experiences doctors are hesitant to share with their patients, or ANYONE! by Scott J. Kolbaba: Many doctors have encountered extraordinary healings in their patients, but are often reluctant to talk about them. This book offers a chance for them to do so.

Anatomy of an Illness by Norman Cousins: The long-time editor of the prestigious *Saturday Review of Literature* and a skeptic of alternative approaches, Cousins underwent a health crisis that modern medicine could not cure that set him off on a journey to explore alternative healing methods, which ended in his own healing and a number of well-written books about his experiences.

The Biology of Belief by Dr. Bruce Lipton: A synthesis of the research in cell biology and quantum physics that demonstrates genes and DNA do not control our biology but that both are controlled by signals from outside the cell, including our positive and negative thoughts. Lipton followed this book with the equally valuable *Wisdom of the Cells*.

Remarkable Recovery: What Extraordinary Healings Tell Us About Getting Well and Staying Well by Caryle Hirshberg and Marc Ian Barasch: An investigation into many cases of remarkable recovery that offers several insights on the factors that play a part.

Radical Remission: Surviving Cancer Against All Odds by Kelly A. Turner: A study of people who recovered after conventional medicine failed or who were healed without the help of conventional medicine, and the approaches of some of the healers who helped them.

Prayer Is Good Medicine: How to Reap the Healing Benefits of Prayer by Larry Dossey: The author was a highly successful physician who became interested in the healing stories of patients, and began to research the scientific evidence for prayer as

well as the controversies associated with prayer experiments. His first book on the topic was a *New York Times* bestseller, *Healing Words*.

Miracles: 32 True Stories by Joanie Hileman: The title describes the book well.

Super Brain: Unleashing the Explosive Power of Your Mind to Maximize Health, Happiness, and Spiritual Well-Being by Rudolph E. Tanzi and Deepak Chopra: Tanzi held the Joseph Kennedy Chair in Neurology at Harvard for many years, and Chopra is the international best-selling author of many books. Here they explore in depth the ways that consciousness affects not only health and healing but all aspects of our lives. Some of Chopra's later books have been controversial, and they left me puzzling over some assertions, but this book is worthwhile. I also recommend Chopra's early audio program, *New Physics of Healing***.**

Love, Medicine and Miracles: Lessons Learned about Self-Healing from a Surgeon's Experience with Exceptional Patients by Bernie Seigel: One of the early books that set in motion the new wave of study about how healing really happens. His conclusion: Love is central, both the giving and the receiving.

7. Fascinating biographies of three lives filled with extraordinary events

There is a River: The Life of Edgar Cayce by Thomas Sugrue

Swedenborg: An Introduction to His Life and Ideas by Gary Lachman

Chico Xavier, Medium of the Century by Guy Lyon Playfair

8. What might happen after death

Is There an Afterlife? A Comprehensive Overview of the Evidence by David Fontana: The best discussion I have found considering the possibility that something continues after the body dies.

Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation by Ian Stevenson: A highly respected researcher at the University of Virginia, Stevenson wrote this book as the first thoroughly documented study of reincarnation by a scholar in the west.

Return to Life: Extraordinary Cases of Children Who Remember Past Lives by Jim B. Tucker: Discussed in essay above.

The Ultimate Journey: Consciousness and the Mystery of Death by Stanislav Grof: A psychiatrist who for 50 years has been at the forefront of exploring many of the issues raised in the essay above, Grof has written several scholarly books on various topics, but this one gives his late-life conclusions reached over many years of study as well as his lived experience.

Afterlife: An Investigation by Colin Wilson: A fairly short summary by an accessible writer of the early years of exploration of this topic.

9. Movie

The Man Who Knew Infinity: There are several good movies and many YouTube videos about these topics, but I especially like this movie about Srinivasa Ramanujan, one of the greatest mathematicians of the 20th century. He derived his profound early insights with almost no education in math, and said that these insights were given to him from a source beyond his own mind.

[1] Alfred Lord Tennyson, *In Memoriam* (New York, New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1909), 93.

[2] Confucius, *The Analects*, Translated by James Legge (1815-1897), Chapter 7.

[3] Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Teachings of the Buddha: The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya* (Somerville, Massachusetts: Wisdom Publications, 1995) 105.

[4] Nyanaponika Thera and Hellmuth Hecker, *Great Disciples of the Buddha: Their Lives, their Works, Their Legacy*, ed. Bhikku Bodhi (Boston, Massachusetts: Wisdom Publications, 2003), 88-89.

[5] John 14:12 (English Standard version of the *Bible*).

[6] Michael Pollen, *How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence* (New York, New York: Penguin Press, 2018), 263.

[7] Daniel Ruy Pereira and Luiz F. Cardoso, *In Awesome Wonder: Bridging Science and Faith* (Durham, United Kingdom: Sacristy Press, 2021), 52.

[8] Robert Lanza, M.D., *Beyond Biocentrism: Rethinking Time, Space, Consciousness and the Illusion of Death* (Dallas, Texas: BenBella Books,2016), 94.

[9] Dean L. Overman, *A Case for the Existence of God* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009), 76.

[10] Richard Feynman, *The Character of Physical Law* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT/Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1967), 129.

[11] Feynman, *The Character of Physical Law*, 129.

[12] William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*: "Hamlet" Act 1, Scene 5 (San Diego, California: Canterbury Classics, 2014), 745.

[13] Shakespeare, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*: "Hamlet" Act 1, Scene 5, 745.

[14] Ken Wilber, *A Brief History of Everything* (Boulder, Colorado: Shambhala Publications, 1996), 38-39.

[15] Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. Raymond Macdonald Alden (New York, New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1910), 80.

[16] Peter Russell, *From Science to God: A Physicist's Journey into the Mystery of Consciousness* (Novato, California: New World Library, 2002), 4.