9 - Your Act of Faith

All of us live within an act of faith about the nature of the world, as well as about our own identity. To live a human life requires that we have concepts about who we are, what the world is like, and how we fit into the overall picture of existence. For many people, this choice is made unconsciously: They simply adopt the worldview into which they were enculturated.

Some, however, become more conscious. Moving away from home, going to college, joining the military, or getting married can set changes in motion, and the opportunity arises for more conscious choices. Still, the most common path is to acquire a new group of friends and acquaintances and then shift one's worldview to align with the new community—it is easy to let oneself be carried along by influential others.

It is the same today as it has always been, with the addition that social media and the online world have made it more likely that a significant number of us will have no clear worldview at all, letting ourselves, instead, be swept this way and that by the societal forces flowing all around.

Throughout history, however, a few people have done the inner work necessary to make their acts of faith more conscious, gradually fashioning a worldview for themselves. This is still going on today. The difficulties and opportunities are different in some ways, but it has always been hard to go one's own way in the face of the pressures of the significant others in one's life. Thus, today, as it has always been, a few people are taking steps toward more conscious choices; each day a few people embark on the Ultimate Journey.

Undertaking this journey does not mean being alone, however. If you decide to venture forth, you do not need to do so by yourself. In fact, it is impossible to make much headway in the early stages of the journey without help. Look for help; it is available. That is what learning communities, spiritual groups, and wise friends are for—along with books, audio programs, educational seminars, and workshops. Religious communities can also play an important role—those that have not become static and rigid.

Of course, any group can become static and rigid—not just religions. But some groups and religious leaders have true wisdom—helping members on their journeys, encouraging individuals toward greater consciousness, deeper meaning, true fulfillment. They pass on what has been handed down to them and what they have learned in vital and energetic ways. Any group, community, or religious organization doing this is extremely valuable, as opposed to those that are trying to force members into unconscious acceptance of rigid views. Look for wise men and women wherever

you can find them who are conveying the heart of a tradition or a teaching. Just like medicines, religions and groups of every kind can function for good or ill—the right amount at the right time can be nurturing and healing; the wrong prescription, the wrong amount, or the wrong timing can be destructive.

Materialism: An old tradition in the modern world

Among the many interest groups competing for followers today is materialism, sometimes called physicalism. It has been around for thousands of years, almost always as a marginal group. In modern times its membership has increased, although it is still much smaller than the major traditions. But it has become a vocal player in the competition for attention.

Those who put their act of faith in this belief system assert that everything can be explained on the basis of the interaction of tiny bits of matter; that the universe contains only material matter and mindless energy, and thus everything—consciousness, emotions such as love and compassion, values such as responsibility and commitment, meanings, and fulfillment—are explainable by the interactions of matter alone. Unfortunately, adherents of this worldview are forced into the camp of nihilism (either consciously or unconsciously), because this act of faith closes off every other avenue. If the world is ultimately only the meaningless interaction of matter and energy, there are no common values that can be appealed to beyond personal self-interest, and there is no inherent meaning or purpose to life.

In this worldview, each being will always be trying to get the most good stuff it can for itself: power, sex, comfort, convenience, money, control over others, personal offspring because of self-centered desires. The result, as Thomas Hobbes described it, is a world of "continual fear, and danger of violent death."[1] In this world, according to Hobbes, our lives are inevitably "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."[2] That captures nihilism pretty well.

Although there are many evangelists for materialism today, it is still a very small faith system. Only a few people through history have adopted it, and although the numbers have increased in the modern world, the percentage who make it their act of faith is still quite small. Plus, there are plenty of alternatives available, including all the wisdom traditions of history. The traditions have their differences, but all agree there is "something more" than mindless physical matter and the meaningless flow of energy. Additionally, they all say that each person is called to find an identity beyond the ego; that each of us feels a longing to discover deeper motivations than just getting everything we can for our own individual ego self.

This calling to find "something more" is described differently in the different traditions. Some of the ways it is said: 1) to find one's True Self or Essence; 2) to find salvation (the best translation of which is "to be healed, made sound, made whole"); 3) to enter nirvana, become the deathless, or open into Buddha-nature; 4) to be in harmony with the Tao; 5) to become a Jen (a wise one or sage in the Confucian vision); 6) to see that Atman is Brahman and "Thou Art That;" 7) to unite with Spirit; 8) to open into the Mystery; 9) to find the soul's purpose, and on and on. The great philosopher Soren Kierkegaard called this longing the "passion for the infinite"[3] and the Buddha named it "the Great Desire."[4]

Science versus Materialism

One thing many people find hard to accept is that there is no objective proof for any worldview. It is especially hard to accept that there is nothing really solid on which to rest one's own act of faith: We all want to believe that we are right, and that there is proof we are. But it is unlikely there will ever be proof of any worldview; rather, your worldview will always and ever involve an act of faith. That is the opportunity as well as the challenge of being human.

Materialists sometimes claim that science provides objective proof for their act of faith, but this is completely false. Modern science was created as a method for examining and understanding the material world. At the time it was developing, most everyone accepted that, to use biologist Stephen Jay Gould's phrase, science and religion were "Nonoverlapping Magisteria"[5]—they dealt with different areas of life and knowledge. As science became increasingly important, everyone understood that it was a separate area of knowledge—not only from religion, but from art, ethics, values, and meanings.

In fact, science grew and thrived as one branch of philosophy—natural philosophy. Science was not understood as competing with spiritual ideas, and was certainly not thought to be able to explain them, for it dealt only with the physical world. It was not meant to explain anything that was beyond physical examination, nor was it developed to provide a worldview to live by.

As science became increasingly effective at describing and managing the physical world, however, some materialists began to claim that science would eventually explain everything. They went further, claiming that, although there was no proof as yet, science would eventually demonstrate the world was strictly material and nothing else. Responding to this claim, one of the 20th century's most influential philosophers of science, Karl Popper, said this was "promissory materialism."[6] This was later elaborated by another great scientist, John Eccles, who pointed out that when

materialists were confronted with the fact that there was no proof for their assertion, the response was always that it would eventually be found. Why did they believe this? Because they believed materialism was true! (A perfect example of a circular argument.) Although there was then and there is now no evidence to support this claim, materialists still try to co-opt science in their favor with the claim that their views will eventually be proven true.

The important thing to keep in mind is that science has no way of knowing or even commenting on anything that might lie outside the physical realm. It was not developed to deal with such things and has no tools to do so. To get a sense of this, simply consider the many things that science has little or nothing to say about: whether to go to war, with whom, and when to stop; how to raise and educate the children in a culture; what kind of government should be instituted; who should have power, how much, and how it should be applied; what kind of taxes should be levied, how much, and on whom; how societal monies should be spent; the purposes for which science and technology should be deployed; how much money should be spent to develop scientific ideas, which ones, and who should reap the rewards.

In your own life, science cannot tell you how to spend your time, what job you should take, who your friends should be, the people you should love, what hobbies you should undertake, what town you should live in, how much money you need for a fulfilling life, how to spend the money you have, what books you should read, the movies you should watch, when and how to engage in social media, the values you should live by, or the meaning of your life. Crucially, these are the most important things in our lives, yet science has little to offer in dealing with any of them.

Most importantly, these are exactly the areas of life that the wisdom traditions have focused on through the centuries. Most people have turned to the wisdom teachings of Jesus, the Buddha, Confucius, Mohammed, Lao Tzu, Socrates, Moses, community elders, tribal shamans, and saints and sages for guidance concerning these important questions about life and living. Most of us still do today.

To make the key point in another way, if you made a list of the 100 wisest figures in each culture throughout history—China, India, South America, Europe, the Middle East, shamanic lands, and so forth—you would be hard pressed to find more than one or two on any list who believed everything could be explained by examining material things alone. This is certainly true for most of the great scientists, from Aristotle to Descartes, Galileo to Newton, up through and including the pioneers of modern physics such as Heisenberg, Schrödinger, de Broglie, Max Planck, Wolfgang Pauli, and Arthur Eddington. All believed there was “something more” to life than just the material dimension. Consider these words from Albert Einstein:

"We are in the position of a little child entering a huge library filled with books in many different languages. The child knows someone must have written those books. It does not know how. The child dimly suspects a mysterious order in the arrangement of the books but doesn't know what it is. That, it seems to me, is the attitude of even the most intelligent human being toward God. We see a universe marvelously arranged and obeying certain laws, but only dimly understand these laws."[7]

Non-overlapping realms

The crucial point is that, among all the people who have ever lived—including the wisest figures in human history—all but a handful agreed with William James that there is an "Unseen Order." Or to put it differently, almost everyone in human history, including the wisest among us, affirmed that there is something outside the narrow world of materialism, that beyond the threshold of the strictly material realm lie dimensions important for a complete human life. It is from these other dimensions that meanings and values arise, and fulfillment only comes from aligning ourselves with those dimensions. This is why Einstein said:

"Humanity has every reason to place the proclaimers of high moral standards and values above the discoverers of objective truth. What humanity owes to personalities like Buddha, Moses, and Jesus ranks for me higher than all the achievements of the enquiring and constructive mind."[8]

I do not mean to suggest that all the things the world's religions have said are accurate. They aren't. The individuals who carry out leadership functions in any organization are often flawed, including religious organizations. The wisdom teachings have been abused and misused to justify selfish, cruel, and mindless actions. And they have made claims that conflict with science. When this happens, when a religious claim is proven to be in conflict with what science is learning with regard to the material world, religious assertions need to be modified.

This does not mean, however, that most spiritual and religious beliefs are in conflict with science. They are not. Poetry, story, metaphor, symbols, and myth are the language of the spiritual and religious traditions, and all deal with different aspects of reality than science. (For a deep dive into the relation of art, science, religion, and spirituality, as well as a way to understand the difference between the latter two, see my book: *Art, Science, Religion, Spirituality: Seeking Wisdom and Harmony for a Fulfilling Life*—available on Amazon in paperback and kindle formats.)

Religions must give way to science with regard to specific understandings about the material world, but at the same time, scientists must remember that the tools of science were not developed to deal with religious and spiritual questions. Organized

religions and communal belief systems provide a needed function, helping each culture organize around the wisdom that has been passed down through the generations. Without this wisdom, human culture would not be possible.

A separate matter entirely from the relation of science to spiritual and religious traditions is the faith system of materialism. While science has shown that a few religious claims about the material world are wrong, the materialistic faith system conflicts with most ALL spiritual and religious beliefs. But this in no way suggests that any spiritual and religious belief is wrong. Further, science will never resolve most of these conflicts, because science cannot prove or disprove either spiritual beliefs or materialistic beliefs.

Consider the many non-ordinary spiritual and religious events reported throughout history. Science can show that one particular event did not happen, or was exaggerated. Careful historical research can do the same. But conclusions about one particular event have nothing to say about the countless other reports that defy materialistic explanation. For instance, some medical studies have been shown to be misleading, and some have even been faked or exaggerated by those hoping to gain fame or make a profit. The same is true for scientific studies—history has many examples of scientists who exaggerated or even faked their results. But this does not mean that all medical or scientific studies are invalid.

The exact same is true for spiritual and religious histories and events. Some claims are probably not true, but the core events of religious and spiritual history have not been shown to be untrue, especially since many are best understood as symbol, poetry, teaching story, allegory, metaphor and myth (in the positive sense of that word).

The best guidance for your act of faith

If science provides little or no evidence or guidance for making our acts of faith, where can we look for help? To the lives of the great wisdom figures of history. There are distortions and exaggerations in their stories, but for many of us, something shines through as we hear the accounts of their lives and absorb the messages they gave us. Although all the extraordinary stories and events you have heard are probably not true, some might be, and others likely are. The world is much more mysterious than a reductionist view allows (as is being shown by modern physics).

Over a hundred years ago, William James made clear that if you make an act of faith that all crows are black, the existence of one white crow invalidates your entire belief system. Thus, anyone who makes an act of faith that it is impossible for an event that cannot be explained by material forces to occur are betting no white crow will ever be

found. Yet there are tens of thousands of credible white crows—well investigated accounts of extraordinary events throughout history.

The existence of so many glimpses beyond the threshold coming from every culture and age—and especially those coming from the wisest people in each place and time—is strong evidence that there is more to life than a limited, materialistic view allows. In fact, given the prevalence and influence of the lives, experiences, and insights of the saints and sages of humanity, it is only willful ignorance that can keep a person from seeing that we live in a world that is more than material objects and ego satisfactions.

Still, the extraordinary events in the lives of the great wisdom figures are not the most significant factors for me. Instead, I measure the truth and wisdom of what they had to say by the degree to which their lives provide a model for living that calls to me. I need images to inspire my own journey. So, when I try to decide how to live and what to live for, the messages of the saints and sages are compelling because of the compassion, love, peace, serenity, courage, kindness, service, and joy that characterized their lives. I want my life to be like that—or as close as I can manage to make it.

On the other hand, when I look at the lives of those who did not seek a connection to the Mystery, those lives seem more driven by fear of loss, overriding ambition, greed, continual grasping—lives that usually ended in bitterness, boredom, pettiness, exhaustion, anxiety, depression, or despair. Such lives serve as a model also, a model of what I wish to avoid.

For Your Consideration: We all make several primary acts of faith as we go through life. What is yours today?

Books for the journey

There are, of course, many good books and accounts in every culture by and about those who took the Ultimate Journey. In the remaining essays I will provide various books that contain hundreds of credible accounts of some of the most amazing, wise, and talented human beings who ever lived. Thousands more accounts of such journeys are available, but the ones I offer are those that have been most valuable for me.

Taken together, these men and women have shaped the course of human history, especially the ways in which we have found values, meaning, and fulfillment. They have helped us understand how to live, the things on which it is worth spending our time and attention, and the best ways to move toward the highest possibilities life has to offer. In fact, it would be impossible to understand human history and how people

have lived without taking into account the influence of these exemplars, along with the tens of thousands of others who have given us our central images for how best to live.

All those referenced below glimpsed the mystery; all understood there was "something" beyond the threshold of the everyday world. These accounts range from ancient times to the present. All those I consider exemplars traveled a long way on the path. Not all became fully awakened, but a few seem to have come to rest in the Ultimate Territory beyond the threshold.

For those of us who believe there is more to life than we have yet understood, the journeys of these exemplars provide valuable guidance for how we too might proceed. And their lives point to the rewards we ourselves might find by aligning with the wisdom they discovered and passed on to us.

Overviews:
These are my favorite books and audio programs giving an overview of the journey, incorporating the lives and events of many wisdom figures:

Confucius, Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad by Mark W. Muesse: An excellent audio program about the life journeys of the four most influential spiritual figures in human history, making vivid their extraordinary lives and the influence they have had upon humanity.

The Varieties of Religious Experience by William James: Although written more than a hundred years ago, this is still one of the very best books for understanding the possibilities of expanded consciousness, how we can experience it, and how this broader view relates to our everyday lives and our ways of thinking.

The Hero with a Thousand Faces by Joseph Campbell: The classic book about the journey as an adventure and transformational process that calls to every one of us, and the ways it has been developed and supported in various wisdom tradition.

The Perennial Philosophy by Aldous Huxley: A brilliant scholar, Huxley uses several wisdom traditions including Zen Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Christian mysticism, and Islam to show how they are united in a common yearning for an experience of the divine.

Mysticism by Evelyn Underhill: One of the most insightful and deep dives into the nature of mysticism, examining the lives and experiences of some of the most important mystics, mostly Christian, but including a few from other traditions.

Women in Praise of the Sacred: 43 Centuries of Spiritual Poetry by Women by Jane Hirshfield: A beautiful book with poems by some of the greatest poets through

history, highlighting their glimpses of the Mystery, including short pieces to introduce each poet and their place in the human story.

The Atman Project: A Transpersonal View of Human Development by Ken Wilber: An early work by a prodigious scholar who examines human development from infancy into adulthood and beyond, including states described by mystics and spiritual explorers in several traditions, and their resulting movement into transcendent realms.

Sex, Ecology, Spirituality: The Spirit of Evolution by Ken Wilber: The best statement of Wilber's mature theory of the nature of human life and our movement toward the highest possibilities of fulfillment. His book *A Brief History of Everything,* is a simpler, but less rich, presentation of the same ideas.

The World's Religions by Huston Smith: A lifelong scholar and professor, Smith created the definitive classic in this sensitive and insightful introduction to the world's great faith traditions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and native traditions. Among Smith's other fine books about the journey are *Forgotten Truth: The Common Vision of the World's Religions* and *Why Religion Matters: The Fate of the Human Spirit in an Age of Disbelief***.**

The Experience of God: Being Consciousness **Bliss** by David Bentley Hart: The author is a Christian theologian, but he intentionally chooses to characterize the Ultimate with the Hindu phrase Sat Chit Ananda, which translates to Being Consciousness Bliss. Hart says that anyone who does not believe in a Transcendent Order is making a totally irrational act of faith, because there is nothing to give order to the world. There can be no basis for any rational laws without "something more" to base them on. They must be grounded in some Ultimate Source, or they do not exist. For Hart, God is this Mystery; it is the Unknowable, the Unnamable. In this context, Being-Consciousness-Bliss is an experience of existence, of having awareness, and the feeling one has when in touch with the Ultimate. It is the experience of a different order of Reality not limited to specific religions or particular names. Yet, he makes clear, individuals have experienced this continually throughout history.

The Second Mountain: How People Move from the Prison of Self to the Joy of Commitment by David Brooks: An account by an influential *New York Times* columnist about his discovery of the importance of a spiritual perspective if life is to have meaning.

Reality by Peter Kingsley: Kingsley is a scholar who makes vivid that the early Greek philosophers were all spiritual teachers. For example, Parmenides, who is celebrated as the first to tell us about reason, meant by reason the ability to grasp Reality as a

"knowing" in a mystical sense. And Pythagoras, who has greatly influenced all western thought for 2500 years, was first and foremost a shaman, and the heart of his teaching was how to get in touch with a deeper reality beyond the thinking mind.

The Soul of the World by Roger Scruton: In this powerful book, philosopher Scruton makes clear, among many valuable points, that consciousness must exist before we can think about or try to explain anything. In his view, materialism has not been able to explain consciousness because it depends on the prior existence of consciousness to even begin creating its theory.

Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind by Richard Maurice Bu This book is a valuable guide for living better in the modern world.

Guide for the Perplexed by E. F. Schumacher: In this short book, the author explores our relations to other people, to the earth, to technology, and to ourselves—and makes vivid the need for a connection to "something larger" than our small selves. *Small Is Beautiful* is Schumacher's international best-selling book about a better way to think about our economic lives, and this book is his offering on the spiritual journey.

Individual journeys outside the main religions of today:
Most of the best-known journeys occurred within the main religions active in the modern world. I will share my favorite books in each tradition in future essays. Below are books about individual journeys that do not fit within one of today's main traditions.

The Trial and the Death of Socrates by Plato: A book that has also been made into and audio program that provides some of the final lessons Socrates had to offer, as well as a wonderful glimpse into who Socrates was as a person, his views about that which lies beyond the threshold, and how he approached death.

The Spiritual Light of Ralph Waldo Emerson by Ralph Waldo Emerson: An audio program that contains some of his best spiritual writings. A good book containing those writings and more is *The Spiritual Teachings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* by Richard Geldard. Emerson had a profound spiritual vision that affected millions of people and the development of the United States. Many of those affected by his ideas do not how much came from him.

Walden by Henry David Thoreau***:*** The Transcendentalist vison made vivid and down-to-earth in early America. Thoreau was deeply influenced by Emerson, eastern thought, his experience of Nature, and his early religious training. From those roots he developed a unique and moving way of directly experiencing the Mystery for himself.

***Peace Pilgrim: Her Life and Work by Peace Pilgrim*:** A personal account of one of the most complete and remarkable journeys in the modern west by a woman who combined Transcendentalist, Christian, and Jewish thought in a profound way.

Catafalque: Carl Jung and the End of Humanity by Peter Kingsley: Many psychologists try to pigeonhole Jung, trying to keep him in their ranks as a psychologist. Others vilify him as a mystic and thus not scientific. For a profound and penetrating picture of who Jung really was and what he believed (which changed many times over his long life), this is THE book. And it makes vivid that Jung explored extensively beyond the threshold.

Tales of Wonder by Huston Smith: Huston became the standard in the modern world for judging those who try to convey an understanding of the world's religions with his book *The World's Religions,* first published in 1958 and translated into many languages. It has sold over 3 million copies. *Tales of Wonder* is the story of his personal life journey, including his experiences in studying and practicing several religious traditions.

Etty Hillesum: An Interrupted Life the Diaries, 1941-1943 and Letters from Westerbork by Etty Hillesum: An amazing life story of a Jewish woman who incorporated parts of the Christian message into her beliefs; then, under the pressures of the Nazis, decided to do what she could for others—for which she gave her life. But not before she found for herself a final connection to the Ultimate, and peace with her herself and her life.

My Religion by Hellen Keller: A fascinating glimpse into the creative process by which this incredible woman found her spiritual ground.

Florence Nightingale: A Life Inspired by Lynn Hamilton and Wyatt North: Besides creating the modern nursing profession and almost single-handedly bringing hygiene to medical care, Florence Nightingale spent her long life in a serious, self-guided spiritual search.

The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius by Marcus Aurelius: Both a Roman Emperor and a stoic, Marcus Aurelius**,** during a difficult military campaign, kept a journal that has become one of the most inspiring works of all time. (I like the introduction in the translation entitled *The Emperor's Handbook* by Scot and David Hicks.)

Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World by the Dalai Lama, Desmond Tutu, and Douglas Abrams: Abrams arranged for an extended dialogue between these two great modern spiritual figures, and the result is enlightening, inspiring, funny at times, and gave me a feeling of being in touch with the source of the wisdom and compassion embodied by these two extraordinary figures.

Wild Mercy: Living the Fierce and Tender Wisdom of the Women Mystics by Mirabai Starr: The author has intensely explored several paths herself, studied several others, and written about the journey for many years. This is a summation and culmination of her life lessons and experiences.

And There Was Light: Autobiography of Jacques Lusseyran: Blind Hero of the French Resistance by Jacques Lusseyran: The remarkable story of a man who had lost his sight but still became a leading figure in the resistance to the Nazis in WWII. The book recounts several miraculous moments he experienced during his journey.

[1] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathon* (Ottawa, Canada: East India Publishing Company, 2023), 84.

[2] Hobbes, *Leviathon*, 84.

[3] Michael Dion, *Worldviews, Ethics and Organizational Life* (Baar, Switzerland: Springer Nature Switzerland Publishing Company, 2021), 122.

[4] Sir Edward J. Reed, *Japan: Its History, Traditions and Religions* (London, United Kingdom: John Murray Publishers, 1880), 85.

[5] Elaine Howard Ecklund, *Science vs. Religion: What Scientists Really Think* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 186.

[6] Sir John C. Eccles, *Evolution of the Brain, Creation of the Self* (London, United Kingdom: Routledge Publishing, 1989), 241.

[7] Denis Brian: *Einstein: A Life* (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1996), 186.

[8] Helen Dukas and Banesh Hoffman, eds., *Albert Einstein: The Human Side: Glimpses from His Archives* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013), 70. This was said to be a statement by Einstein dated September 1937 in response to a personal request from a member of the Princeton Theological Seminary.