

## Towards Spiritual Transformation: One Man's Journey

A reflection on spiritual development is bound to disappoint the deeply religious, as I do not engage topics of dogma or doctrine or morality, and it may annoy the atheist, as I avoid atheist objections (they are treated in a different essay); and it may seem too little or too much for someone new to the topic. I can only hope that the 48 questions sprinkled throughout, the 9 points for reflection, and 6 practical ideas, will give you fruitful points to ponder, and help you on your own journey. I welcome your feedback and would enjoy an ongoing dialogue.

*[Note: There is no pronoun in our language that is appropriate when referring to the Creator of all that is. The pronoun "He" will be used here simply because it is the most common convention. Our language does not have an appropriate pronoun that transcends gender. The Creator of all is of course neither male nor female, and far transcends any category or pronoun we utilize.]*

First reflection:

As far as we know, there are at least 200 billion galaxies in the observable universe, and thus the total planets in the known universe is estimated to be a billion trillion (1 followed by 21 zeros). As far as we know, how many of those planets contain life?

One.

Why? What does this fact from science reveal about the universe in which we find ourselves?

Before answering, let's confront the possibility that there are other life forms in the universe. In that case, then perhaps our planet is unique among hundreds of billions of planets, rather than among trillions. Does that suddenly make this planet insignificant or even less significant? Why would it matter if we were not the only life sustaining planet in the universe? Wouldn't life forms elsewhere only increase our awe and wonder at the Creator of it all?

In any case, it would seem that the divine Author who “wrote” this “chapter” of the observable universe apparently wanted to create a planet with life that is spectacularly unique, in which, if there were other life forms elsewhere in the universe, they are millions of light years away.

How is this relevant to you? In two rather opposite ways. First, contemplating the size and scale of the universe can help us stop seeing humans as the measure of all things. We tend to be absorbed in our own immediate needs and worries, and it is good to contemplate the vastness of the universe, and thus be more aware of how much we do not know and how much we cannot control. This is an opportunity to come out of ourselves, to see our smallness, and to stand in sheer awe of the Creator of it all.

On the other hand, we must confront the reality that on this planet, floating amidst a universe of unimaginable size and complexity, something very special has taken place. Here there is life. Some would say that because we are surrounded by so much non-life that our tiny planet is insignificant, but wouldn't it be even more likely that the uniqueness of this planet points to its spectacular importance? It is as if the painter of the universe, given infinite time, space, and matter at His disposal, chose to paint our planet of life on a vast canvas of non-life, as if to frame its importance.

Second reflection:

Because life is so rampant and so ubiquitous on our planet, we can tend to take it for granted. Because we see how species adapt and evolve over time, we also swallow the idea that life somehow started by itself - all that was needed was simple building blocks that complexified over time.

This is because we impose on the universe the assumption that time has a direction and a purpose, and this is not correct. Time itself is completely neutral. Time does not add any intelligence or direction to matter. Why is this important? Because the only way completely dead objects can come alive, is if there is some property already in the universe,

whether inside those objects or acting upon them, which leads to life, which wills life. As humans we see everywhere that life tends to develop over time, so we impose that drive backwards and think life can somehow naturally “happen.” It cannot.

The miracle of life is worthy of considerable contemplation. We are made of nothing but dead molecules. You are mostly just hydrogen, carbon, and oxygen. Add in some nitrogen, calcium, and phosphorus and we have 99% of you. Those compounds are no different than those found in a rock, or in cosmic dust. The only difference is the ratio and arrangement of those dead molecules, and, voila - here you are - a being who can think, hope, and love. The unavoidable conclusion is that life is a miracle, in the sense that it could only have happened if something outside of the matter involved was acting upon it. And there appears to be a divine “conductor” who is directing and energizing the entire process.

We don't see this so clearly because life appears to develop slowly (by our standards) and seemingly at random. After all, most species of life existed long before we did, most of them arose and died without any apparent purpose. In fact, 99.9% of all species are no longer here. How many species of life have existed on earth? About 5 billion (5,000,000,000).

Yet none of those life forms possess the spiritual capabilities of the human being.

This leaves us in a similar situation as when contemplating the scale of the universe: humbled on the one hand that we are part of a process, in this case the life process, about which we understand relatively little, but forced to confront that among all known life forms, humans hold a very, very unique place.

So within the context of the known universe, which is 13.7 billion years old, and within the context of all life, which began about 3.7 billions years ago, your life is very, very unique, and most likely has a very special purpose.

### Third Reflection:

The assembling of atoms into living creatures is a mysterious wonder, and it is why we should treat all living things with respect and even reverence. But humans appear to have capacities far beyond even the most advanced animals. What is it that truly sets humans apart? The answer to this should tell us a great deal about why we are here, and where we are going.

First, it is worth noting how much we have in common with animals. The most advanced animals can be conscious, mobile, adaptable, and even creative, they eat, sleep, mate, live in community, communicate, and care for and protect one another. Viewed chronologically, we appear to be just the most advanced animal in the animal kingdom.

But the fact that humans developed after most other species has caused confusion rather than clarity. To understand a book you do not find the answer in the ink and the paper; to understand a sculpture you do not look into the stone; to understand a painting you do not analyze the brush, the canvas, or the paint. In all these cases the material came first and was refined over time (like the development of animal life over time), but you will only understand the purpose of the final product by communicating with the author, the sculptor, or the painter. To understand the human, we need to look to the Creator, and not to the animals. We need to look up, and not down.

What makes the human unique is that we possess unique spiritual qualities and capacities. If you think about it, almost everything humans truly value is spiritual: friendship, loyalty, humor, gratitude, joy, knowledge, hope, freedom, honesty, justice, belonging, beauty, peace, purpose, compassion, and love. To name a few. And the greatest suffering is usually also of a non-material nature: loneliness, despair, hatred, betrayal, and so on.

There seems to be a progression within creation: first there is dead matter, then bacterial and plant life, then animal life, and then humans, who are an odd mix of animal and spiritual. And nearly all religions posit the existence of pure spirits, or angels.

But back to you and me - this mysterious mix of physical qualities shared with animals and spiritual qualities....shared with...whom?

Fourth Reflection:

The easy answer is that our spiritual qualities were created to be shared with other humans. Is that the end of the story?

A turning point came in my life when I was standing on the side of a mountain, looking down into a beautiful valley with meadows, a roaring river, and another snow-peaked mountain rising above on the valley's other side, and I spontaneously uttered a prayer of awe and thanksgiving. But I was alone. Who was there to hear me? Was the creator of the beauty I beheld unable to hear? Unable to see what I saw? Unable to know the stirrings of my heart? Did the creator of all even relate to what struck me as so stunningly beautiful?

At that point I had always believed in an impersonal, transcendent Being who created and ordered existence. I had long ago decided that people who believed in a personal God were just people making the Unknowable into an image like themselves. Childish.

But is a vague, abstract Creator somehow more "mature," or more dignified, or more divine than one that also understands human qualities? Did the Creator of all create his most complex and spiritual creature, the human, but lack the ability to share in spiritual qualities like hope, gratitude, and love? How, or why, would a Creator make eyes, ears, and tongues, and yet be blind, deaf, and dumb? Wasn't believing the Creator could not relate to his creatures making the Creator a very limited being? Is adding human capacities to the Almighty not a necessity if He is indeed the creator of all? How does allowing a personal element to the Creator making Him less divine? Does seeing in God the spiritual and personal capacities humans have, such as to love and relate, make God more human, or humans more divine?

It struck me that the Creator of all, by definition, must contain all the attributes and capacities He creates, and to an infinite degree, and this includes human attributes as well.

I was not alone on that mountain. And you are not alone as you read or hear this.

#### Fifth Reflection:

We tend to have a deficient view of the Creator, making Him either too personal on the one hand, or too abstract on the other.

Making God in our image would be depicting him like a God of ancient Greek mythology: God as an old man, peering down at our human affairs, sometimes tinkering, sometimes angry and vengeful, someone we can appease with ritual or sacrifice. In short, he is pretty much like us, just more powerful.

On the other hand, we might view the Creator as a vague, abstract force, keeping the universe ordered, but not in any way involved in creation. This view allows us to feel comforted in knowing we are not exactly alone in the universe, but the Creator is far enough away so as not to impact or judge our day to day actions and we can pretty much do as we please.

Both these perspectives probably have some truth in them, but both exclude far too much. A more holistic view of the Creator would have to incorporate the vastness of the universe, including its bizarre black holes, dark matter, billions of galaxies, and blizzard of seemingly arbitrary life forms. We must contemplate that God is outside of time and space, neither big nor small, neither old nor young, neither human nor abstract. We must accept that much of the universe, and even more of the divine, is mysterious. But the Creator of all would also most certainly have to include all the spiritual attributes of what appears to be the highest life form in the known universe - humans.

#### Sixth Reflection:

The spiritual aspirations and attributes of humans are many. At the same time, human nature across the ages does not really seem to have changed that much. We have always yearned to have happy and stable families, meaningful work, good health, and a sense of community. Perhaps the most basic human need, and what would ensure our happiness no matter our age or status in life, would be to love and be loved, unconditionally.

Yet if we were created with these yearnings and capacities, and they come from God, and He must contain all attributes he creates to an infinite degree, then surely we are meant to share them with him, and not just each other?

In other words, what makes humans truly unique is not just that we have some spiritual capacities (named earlier), but that we are able to share them with our creator. We can be grateful to our Creator, we can share our joys and sorrows, we can fall in love with the source of the universe, because he shares the personal nature he placed in us.

Humans were created to live on two planes simultaneously - the horizontal, earthy plane, with all its diversity and pleasures, but also the vertical plane, where we can open our minds and hearts to our Creator.

Of course, the sad but obvious reality is that we are a shadow of this original destiny. We have lost the art of living on the vertical plane. We are like hunting dogs with the instinct to find the rabbit of happiness, but who no longer have noses, so we dash into this hole, around that bush, and up that tree, barking and searching wildly, but never seeming to find our prize. We look to money, sex, power, fame - nothing is ever enough. For the human, the goal of happiness cannot be found on the horizontal plane alone, but must include the vertical relationship with the Divine. The scent has grown cold, you could say, but the instinct and the ability is not extinguished. We still possess the wonderful capacity to enjoy interpersonal love, but this is meant to be shared not only with other humans but also with our Creator.

Seventh Reflection:

Not living up to our highest destiny is one thing, but for most people life in general is pretty miserable, and all history shows humanity has been saturated in suffering since the beginning. This is the best the all-powerful Creator could do? The universe was created 13.7 billion years ago and its climax is a few thousand years of nasty human history where we each live at best about 80 years?

First, there is no way we as limited creatures who have only recently appeared on the stage of existence, can know what the “climax” of the universe is, nor can we know if human history is near its end or only just beginning.

However, the reality of evil and suffering is unavoidable. It cannot be explained away, and to some extent remains a mystery. What is clear is that suffering and evil arise from the misuse of things that are good in and of themselves. Can you name anything inside or outside of man that is inherently evil, evil in its very substance? This doesn't explain away evil, but it does point to the fundamental goodness of creation. The vast majority of human suffering comes from bad choices made by us or our ancestors, and this is because humans, along with all the other spiritual powers already mentioned, have been given a truly unique and very powerful gift: Free Will. Put most simply, we are living through the tragic consequences of the misuse of the terrifying power of true free will. Why were we given such a dangerous power? If we had no free will we would no longer be moral agents, we would no longer be able to choose the good or to freely give our hearts to another. We would, in effect, be robots and not persons, driven by mechanical forces and not by free choice. If the Creator willed to fashion a being able to truly love and be loved, he would have to give that being true freedom. That we have not used that freedom well is obvious, but it is also clear we can still bring good out of evil, and that our original destiny to love each other and our Creator, while obscured, is by no means lost. Nor do we know the ultimate end of the human story — right now we see only a very small slice of the big picture.

Virtually all religions and many philosophies teach that the human soul lasts past the separation from our bodies at death. Humans correctly intuit that our souls were created to live forever, and that is why death is so often viewed as an offense, an interruption, a tragedy. Ultimately, this is



what makes humans truly astonishing - material beings who possess eternal souls.

So look at the human situation from this new perspective: Is 13.7 billion years, the age of the entire universe, a long time to generate tens of billions of souls that will last for eternity? Or is the 1.1 billions years, the age of multi-celled life on earth, a long time to generate 5 billion species, including over a hundred billion humans, these astonishing creatures of both matter and spirit? This strikes me as bewilderingly fast, not slow.

Nor do we know the full story of creation. 13.7 billion years could be very young in relation to the future of creation. This period of chaos and suffering could be a mere flash in relation to the totality of the human story. We did not write the story. We do not know precisely its beginning, and certainly not its end, nor do we know how many chapters there will be.

We must be careful not to keep judging the universe by human standards. Humans appear to be at the pinnacle of the known universe, but we know next to nothing in relation to the Creator of all that is. We do not know how the Creator views or appreciates the galaxies He has formed, or the life forms he has allowed to evolve.

## Eighth Reflection

The creator of all that is also created time and space. This means He “knows” all things - past, present, and future, and all at the same time. He not only created all that is, but also sustains it, down to the spinning of each electron around each nucleus of every atom. To sustain all the energy in the entire universe of trillions upon trillions of planets and stars, takes no effort, as his attributes in all things are infinite. He is also the creator of all spiritual realities which are familiar to humans.

This means that the Creator could give you, literally infinite time and attention. Actually, it would suggest that the Creator IS giving you infinite time and attention. You have the terrifying gift of free will. Will you choose to respond?

## Ninth Reflection

These thoughts lead directly to a consideration of prayer or meditation, which is the foundation of a spiritual life. Prayer is directing your heart or mind to God. Yes, it is that simple. Prayer is not the specialty of pastors, nor is it meant to be restricted to places of public worship. Prayer is, or rather should be, as natural as thinking, as constant as the beating of your heart.

We are likely to have two very limited views of prayer.

On the one hand is the false impression that prayer is emotional mumbo-jumbo. We clap our hands and raise our arms and speak in flowing eloquence about spiritual stuff.

On the other hand, we might think prayer is repeating memorized lines, repeating phrases spoken by a pastor or learned as a child. The one is alienating to many by its emotionalism, the other a turn-off by its seeming sterility.

For now, you must put all those concepts of prayer aside. Neither is bad, but it may not be the place to begin if prayer is new to you.

Traditional ideas about God seem to present him as interested in the morality of our actions or the content of our beliefs. Let me suggest it is not so much right action or right belief that He seeks, as right relation.

Focus instead on you as you are. Put aside any expectations of emotions and any old prayers learned by rote. Nor is prayer just rattling off a list of needs or people who need help. Start with your own thoughts, just as they are, in your own head.

Who put those thoughts there, or at least who gave you the ability to have thoughts?

Isn't it likely that the Creator of your mind, who developed it with such delight across billions of years of cosmic maturation, would now delight in your actual thoughts? As far as we know the motions of the rest of the

universe are determined by mechanical forces...except your mind, which has free will. The very fact that you can think at all is His gift, and He wants to enjoy it with you.

This can be the most helpful foundation in understanding prayer, in developing a spiritual life: you are not alone, not in the workings of your mind, not in the stirrings of your heart.

So developing a spiritual life begins with taking the time to re-establish that connection with our divine Creator.

There are two stages to prayer. The practice phase, when you actually sit quietly, alone, and literally “practice” talking to God. And the applied phase, when you lift your heart and mind to God throughout the day, asking his help and his guidance, as you face various difficulties and opportunities.

Both types of prayer are important: if we only find God in prayer and meditation, but do not allow the conversation and inspirations to spill into everyday life and experience, our spiritual life is pretty useless and selfish; but if we never set aside some time dedicated to the one who created us, we are not exercising the primary reason we were created, and our relationship with God will become remote and casual.

By now, if not long ago, you started thinking, “No way, this stuff is not for me.” Well, let’s be clear that prayer is not natural to us in our current state. It is hard, it is unnatural. In fact, it is like any new venture we take up. When I first went to the gym I felt wildly out of place. When I started learning a new language, it seemed hopeless, etc. In this case we are beginning to add a whole new dimension, the vertical, to our horizontal existence.

What has helped me is the recognition that communicating with my Creator in loving dialogue is the primary reason I exist, and in fact is likely to be a primary reason the known universe was fashioned. God did not make the universe to watch moons circle a planet (though who are we to say this does not provide immense pleasure!), he created it in no small

degree so that He could converse with you and to love you and be loved by you.

Developing a spiritual life is developing that relationship, and because it is between persons, it is very much like developing a relationship with any other human person. Reflect on that, and transfer what you already know very well on the human plane, to the divine.

It is not necessary to pretend we are yogis, far advanced in the spiritual life, who must sit in the lotus position in total silence for long periods. Be patient with yourself and be creative. Play music that helps you pray or meditate, or light a candle, or go into a church, or pray outdoors in a peaceful place, or read briefly from a spiritual book, or attend a religious service. Try different things at different times. But like everything else, if you do not persevere, you will not improve.

Developing a spiritual life is a skill that needs to be nurtured and developed like any other. However, in this case, there are two persons working towards the same end, you and your Maker. In fact, God has been seeking you all along, and it is His inspiration that has gotten you to start this journey in the first place. He has never lost sight of you for even one second, it is we who have not been looking or listening.

Let me share a few, rather random, practical ideas that might help us view life from a more spiritual perspective:

Practical idea #1 - Enjoy the revelations of science

Contemplating the wonders of creation as revealed by science can be an important exercise in developing spiritually. For example, go online and behold the pictures taken by the Hubble spacecraft of other galaxies, and dwell on the sheer scale and beauty of the universe.

While doing that, reflect that the complexity of the universe goes in the opposite direction as well, in the direction of the microscopic. For example, there are as many molecules in ten drops of water as there are

stars in the entire universe. The world in which we find ourselves is nothing short of magical!

Or contemplate the complexity of the human cell. I recommend you study it on your own, but I will offer a short thought experiment here. First picture all of New York City, with its millions of humans, animals, automobiles, towering skyscrapers, homes, factories, offices, streets, gardens, trees, etc. - it is a dense cluster of furious activity spanning hundreds of square miles. Now imagine the city is not spread out, but instead rolled up into a dense ball so that there is no space between any object and another, with none of the activity slowing down. That approximates the complexity and dynamism within each human cell. Just as an example of the speed at which microscopic change takes place, cell enzymes carry out their chemical interactions hundreds of times per second, and a male can produce 1,500 new sperm *cells* in just one second. Each DNA strand contains 3.2 billion letters of coding. Somehow all the parts seem to know what to do and are beautifully coordinated. And they know how to repair themselves and reproduce.

Now take that giant ball of dynamic energy, and shrink it down, down, down until it is much smaller than the head of a pin. How many of those entire cities of complexity could you fit on that head of a pin? It depends on the size of the cell, but 64,000 red blood cells could fit on the head of one pin.

And these cells somehow work in near perfect harmony throughout your entire body, noiselessly, 24 hours a day. How many New York cities compressed into microscopic units do you have in your body? Approximately 37 trillion. (37,000,000,000,000)

To get a handle on this staggering number: Suppose I asked you to create, from just simple atoms and molecules, the cell briefly described above: microscopic, tasks by the thousands at lighting speed, without noise or error, and never slowing down. How long would it be reasonable to give you to create that one cell with the complexity of New York City (the analogy with New York City is not far-fetched, there are 100 trillion atoms in each cell)? Well, if you were genius enough to make an entire, beautifully functioning cell with millions of parts in, say... 60 seconds,... and you could

do that every minute of every hour of every day of every month of every year, without a break, it would take you 70.4 MILLION YEARS to create ONE human being. And yet each of us went from a single fertilized cell to a completely formed baby in under 9 months. And we dare to think life evolved randomly and slowly?

As was just stated, in each of those 37 trillion cells, there are 100 trillion atoms (100,000,000,000,000). Each of those atoms is in itself a blizzard of precise activity, with the electron spinning at 1,357 miles per second around the neutron. Contemplate. And every one of those atoms has been doing that since the Big Bang. In other words, atoms don't grow old. So next time you think that it is absurd for any physical being to last forever, remember that the atoms that make every living creature DO last forever, it is only the coordination of atoms that expires over time. And whoever made the rules that govern the universe, could certainly choose to change the duration that atoms stay coordinated within a particular living being. This is a common error humans make: imposing our human and experiential parameters on the Creator.

So next time you watch a special effects movie, with monsters or complex machines springing out of nowhere and whole cities and landscapes collapsing and liquifying in seconds, know that the most advanced special effects are tame in comparison with the reality of the activity within just one cell of your own body.

Science offers a host of places to contemplate the magic of our world. Take a moment to study the complexity of the human brain, or the wonder of the human heart muscle, or even look at what are supposed to be simple cells like a virus or slime mold, and behold stunning complexity and coordination. Can this really be random and directionless? That there is a cosmic intelligence behind what we see seems, at least to me, common sense.

Practical Idea #2 - Probability and you

If the universe is without a Creator, then we live in an empty universe without direction or meaning, and the human, with all our spiritual longings

and ideals, is the most ill-adapted creature to ever evolve. But with a transcendent Being who put all things in motion, everything changes. Your life is not an accident, nor random, and the near impossibility that you would exist, points to just how special you are. The near impossibility that I would exist, you ask?

Consider:

For you to exist requires the fertilization of an egg from your mother with a sperm from your father. However, your mother produced 2,000,000 eggs during her lifetime (though only about 500 will be released for possible fertilization). Your father produced about 525,000,000,000 sperm cells during his lifetime. 2 million X 525 billion equals 1 quintillion, 50 quadrillion or 1 followed by 18 zeros (1,000,000,000,000,000,000).

That is nothing compared to the next step. If it was not exactly your mother and exactly your father who came together to conceive you, you could not exist, yet each of them also had a mother and father, so now there are four people who each had that 1 in 1 quintillion 50 quadrillion chance of being conceived by their parents. But the probability is not just adding one to another, but multiplying one by another. At the next generation 8 parents are involved, at the next 16 parents, then 32, 64, 128 and within just 10 generations over 1,000 parents are involved. The number of possible genetic combinations is beyond the power of the human brain to even contemplate.

Yet the incredible truth is that, for you to be you, this **exact** progression had to continue all the way back to the first humans on earth. If ONE single time a union was skipped, or did not take place with the particular male or female it did, even if it was back before the time of, say, the ancient Egyptians, you would not exist, as the entire genetic chain would have been altered.

You might say this contemplation is nonsense, because if any one conception did change, then someone slightly different would have been conceived all down the line, so no big deal. Who would know, who would care. You are correct. But that is NOT what happened. Fantasy does have infinite possibilities, but reality, or history, only one. The truth

is you are a link in a chain that affects all of human history after you, and you are link in a chain that is utterly unique.

Imagine a deck of cards stretching from earth to Mars to the Sun and back to earth, a thousand times over, and just one card picked out of that deck. That card is you, and the Creator saw it coming and will use it in the drama of his creation. And you, with the gift of free will, can play the card of your life in different ways, with your decisions and actions reshuffling the deck of human history. Most importantly, while the Creator did not “choose” you in a literal sense, and allowed humans to use their free will and allowed natural biology to take its course, the Creator, being outside of space and time, DID foresee you, and does know your spectacular uniqueness in the movement of history, and He has been waiting to interact with your free will since the beginning of time. In that sense you were planned from all eternity. Congratulations! And next time you meet someone, remember that they too have “won” the lottery of life against unimaginable odds.

Think this over for yourself, and see where it leads you.

### Practical Idea #3 - Prayer or Meditation

We have lost the art of opening our hearts and minds to the vertical dimension of reality. We are, in a sense, addicted to the horizontal, and changing this will not come easily or quickly. But to begin, just find a quiet spot where you can be alone with eyes closed for say, five minutes. In that silence, contemplate the truth that the Creator, by definition, has made all that is, and that includes your own body and your own thoughts, including the ones you are having at that very instant. To think it could be any other way is to invent a lesser God who is not the Creator and sustainer of all that is and ever will be. As a human being, capable of interpersonal communication and authentic love, you are the most advanced creature (meaning sharing the most qualities with the divine) in all of the known universe. And this means the Creator is assuredly deeply aware of, and interested in, you. This includes your every thought. There is nothing preventing you from simply opening your mind and your heart to his presence. It is simple, but it is not easy, as we have almost completely lost the art of incorporating our Creator into who we are. When we open our mind and heart to the Creator, it may seem nothing has changed, but in a



very real sense, everything has changed - a third dimension has opened in your life. Take those five minutes and bask in this new reality.

Five minutes is just a suggestion, a first small step where you can get used to watching your own thoughts, contemplating their source, and sharing them with your Maker. The goal of 15 minutes for meditation or prayer, done twice a day, is ideal - any less and a sense of relationship is not likely to develop. Start slowly and be patient with yourself, but know that prayer or meditation is the foundation of the spiritual life.

#### Practical Idea #4 - Support of Religious affiliation

Many have been brought up with some kind of religious training, and many of us have abandoned those teaching due to poor example, even abuse, or because we have become lazy or distracted by other things. A short reflection like this will not take you very far. At some point you will need the support of others, as well as have a deeper intellectual and spiritual tradition to explore. There is a reason a few great religious traditions have lasted across centuries and they are worthy of serious attention. If you have been a Muslim, consider returning to living the 5 pillars faithfully. If Buddhist, decide to be diligent in trying to understand and live the 8 fold path and the four noble truths. If you come from a Christian tradition, perhaps you could start by reading the New Testament on your own, and then start asking tough questions to people in a denomination you respect, or have been part of.

Part of our human nature is social, and we need the support and guidance and example of others to help us on our own journey.

#### Practical Idea #5 -

You probably know some people who make a sign of the cross before they eat a meal, and usually they say a brief prayer before digging in. This is a small but important disposition, for we did not create food, nor ourselves, nor those we love, so it is wonderful to pause for a moment to give thanks. Do the same, at least with a moment of interior silence and gratitude for the food you will eat. But don't stop there. Who created the taste, and sight, and texture, and smell of food, of every morsel you eat?

Who created your tongue, and your pleasure of eating? Treat each mouthful of food like the opening of a present - appreciate and thank the One who created it for you. Eating should not just be an activity we brutishly share with animals, but a more personal dialogue with the giver of all these gifts. Try it. Even the food will taste twice as good.

Practical idea #6 -

Beauty is something virtually every human experiences every day, in some form. It could be through the sense of sight, hearing, touch, taste, or smell, or it could be an idea or memory or emotion. If you think about it, there is a nearly endless list of things we find beautiful.

We experience it all the time, but trying to define it is surprisingly difficult. It seems to be related to a sense of proportion, of order, of “rightness”, of harmony.

Think of the experience of beauty like a thought in your head. Who invented it? Who made you able to perceive beauty and to enjoy it? It is clearly a capacity that is given to us, an instinctual response to life as we perceive the world around us or within us. It is a gift.

Next time you perceive something really beautiful, think of beauty as a kind of delicious perfume. When we smell a perfume we usually think of the person who wore it. Sometimes smell can bring back memories more strongly than anything else. Beauty is the Creator’s perfume, an indirect sign of his loving presence. It is a gift from Him to you. Beauty haunts so much of creation like the haunting of a wondrous perfume that is meant to remind us of the person who wears it. Beauty is a sign of the love God has for His creation, and He implanted that appreciation in you so that you could rejoice with Him.

Renowned atheist Richard Dawkins sneers at the fact that humans can only perceive a tiny sliver of the total lightwaves that science has now uncovered, and he compares our limited human sight to the wearing of a burka. But who determined the light waves we would be able to see, and are we less important because we cannot see radio waves or gamma

waves? As limited creatures should we complain that we do not have omniscient sensory powers? That science is uncovering a whole new world of light waves is wonderful - just imagine how the Creator of all enjoys every one of those bands of light, all to perfection, all at the same time.

When you behold beauty you do not need to rush to share the experience with someone - you can share it right then with the divine inventor of beauty. Each day can be an ongoing exchange as the creature beholds the created world and gives thanks back to the Creator.

## CONCLUSION

Even with our defects, man's position in the universe is utterly unique. We are not an afterthought, but rather the crowning jewel of the known universe, worthy of the billions of years the Creator chose to make our existence possible. We are the ONLY known creature with the spiritual qualities listed previously. Most religious and spiritual traditions believe in pure spirits with no material bodies (angels for example), but man is a unique mix of body and soul.

It is true that much of the universe, and even much of human behavior is "determined," in the sense that what happens next is based on the physical influences of what has come before. To that degree the modern materialist who rejects all spiritual realities is correct. But what caused creation to appear as it did, with its nearly infinite complexity and intelligence, with its ordered and purposeful laws of nature? And when you come to the human being, you are introducing the precious and powerful gift of free will. The Author of life has written the story of creation to allow for some of its characters to actually write their own story - not control it, but change it. The Sculptor of all forms has allowed some of its forms to come to life and have free will. The divine Painter, celebrating creation across the canvas of the universe, chose to allow some of the figures to come alive and make paintings of their own.

Developing a spiritual life is being more aware of our spiritual capacities, and putting them to work. The highest use of this gift of free will

is for us as creatures to turn around, look at our Creator, and say “Thank you,” and “I love you.”

No other physical creature in the known universe can do what you can. Your life is unique and has great importance, your use of free will impact all of history, and your soul will live forever (death is just a doorway between two worlds). You are already an expert at living on the horizontal plane, now begin the adventure of adding a new dimension to life, the vertical plane. To develop a spiritual life, is to recover the primary reason you and I have been added to creation. Rejoice, for all of the most noble intuitions of your mind and the deepest longings of your heart are true!

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