

A Book of Life

The SolSeed Movement

November 18, 2012



Preface

Happy in the sun

Several years ago I happened upon a picture whose caption struck a chord in me that resonates to this day. Our family was in the market to join a community supported agriculture (CSA) program. As we browsed the websites for the various CSAs in our area we happened across a picture of some sugar pea sprouts along with the caption “happy in the sun!”

“Happy in the sun!” There was nothing complicated about the image or the caption. The sprouts were simply being sprouts. And yet, there is something profound about the phrase “happy in the sun!” and the way it was juxtaposed with those sprouts. Those sprouts were living up to their potential. They were in some sense “fully alive,” the very picture of thriving and flourishing.

If someone were to caption a picture of you with “happy in the sun,” what would that picture contain? What is it that you do that drops you into a state of flow? What engrosses you to the point that time stops passing and there is only you immersed in the task in the present moment? What is your happy in the sun? How do you even go about answering these questions? How do you live the answers once you have them?

More or less alive

There was a time in my life when the most common thing you'd hear from me was a sigh. Sitting on a couch in our living room every minute or two I'd sigh. Life was futile, tasteless and bland.

During this time of sighs I was a graduate student in Computer Science at the University of Rochester. I was working on interesting problems and getting paid to learn. Two years earlier I had married a woman that I adored and who loved me too. On the surface it seemed like I should be relishing my life. Yet there I sat. Sighing on my couch.

This "sighing" period of my life lasted for months. When I look back at this time, I'm struck by how little gumption I had. It took all of my reserves to meet the minimums. I was doing what was required, and no more. Any moment when I wasn't acting on some direct obligation was spent in a vegetative funk, punctuated only by the occasional sigh.

Things suddenly got better when I began treatment for depression. The contrast was dramatic. I was full of ideas and brimming over with energy to try new things. In my new state of anti-depressant induced mania, everything I ate was incredibly tasty. Every new idea I had seemed as if it would change the world. Each day was full of zest and I charged around inhaling life.

The contrast between these two adjacent periods of my life has made a lasting impression on how I see the world. I went from a barely alive vegetative fugue to a frenetic mania that oozed life. I went from sucking the life out of those who had the misfortune to be in the same room with me, to

pumping up those I encountered and filling them with a sense of new possibilities for their lives.

These back to back periods of stark contrast opened my eyes to how I, the same person, could be more or less alive at different points in time. Since then I've noticed that this same thing often happens to me on a day to day basis. Some days I am powerful, self-expressed, and the world brims with opportunity. Other days I am weak, stifled, and trapped in a dead-end life.

This phenomenon of more or less life is not limited to individuals. I noticed the same dynamic at an internet startup that I worked at for a number of years. Now it was not just an individual who was more or less alive depending upon the day, but a company composed of many individuals.

Have you experienced the same phenomenon in your own life? Do you remember a time when you were working with a group and the experience was fun and playful — full of life. Ideas came easy and everyone seemed full of energy to carry them out. Compare that with a meeting during which someone kills the energy in the group with a mean-spirited comment.

We're used to thinking of life as a binary property. Plants and animals are alive until they die. But maybe it makes more sense to think of life as a continuous property. An individual organism, a group of organisms, and indeed the body of all life can be more or less alive from moment to moment.

This book describes the SolSeed movement, a journey in progress to become fully alive as individuals, communities, and indeed as the "body of all life." I hope you find something

in it that helps you on your journey!
Bring Life!
Brandon CS Sanders, February 2012

Book I

A Vision for Life

Part I

Life . . . It's our Epic Story!



1 Life is Worthy of Veneration

The beauty of a living thing is not the atoms that go into it, but the way those atoms are put together. –Carl Sagan

Life puts atoms together in very interesting ways. One configuration of atoms gives us an ant carrying a leaf many times larger than itself. From another configuration we get an eagle slipping gracefully through the sky. Yet another configuration becomes a person who feels, thinks, and loves.

Without Life, the energy from our sun simply bounces off the planet. Life literally collects the energy Sol sends to earth, and stores it up for future use. Plants take energy from Sol and convert it into denser, more storable forms. The sugars and fats that our bodies burn are little pools of energy that originally came from our sun.

Ants carrying, eagles soaring, people loving ...none of these would exist without Life's awesome capacity for organizing matter.



2 Worthy, but not Perfect

Life is not perfect. This is obvious to anyone who has experienced cruelty or misfortune. And yet, Life is the only game in town. Without Life the Earth would be just another dead ball of rock.

Life cannot exist without death. This means that the alternative to death is the absence of Life. Imagine that everything that had ever lived was still alive today. There is not space on the earth for all those creatures. The only way there could be space for them all is if at some point in time they had stopped reproducing altogether. But reproduction is what powers evolution. Without reproduction there would be nothing but simple primordial slime, barely metabolizing in a stagnant stinking sea. But not to worry, there would be no-one to complain about the smell.

Life is also intrinsically messy. There is in the wake of every living organism a stream of refuse. In the words of Paul Krafel, consuming things we need and dumping our waste is an ancient and venerable part of Life. Consumption and dumping is an essential part of Life. And yet there is more to Life than just consumption and dumping. Life also creates the conditions for more Life in an upward spiral of ever greater possibilities. In addition to the get mine attitude it is also possible to cultivate a grow ours attitude. It is also possible to practice a way of living that considers the needs of others as if they were our own.

Life is what it is ... and it is worthy of veneration!



3 Destruction is Quick and Easy

Every one of us knows from personal experience that it is easier to destroy things than it is to create them. In fact, we don't even need to exert ourselves to destroy things. If we just ignore them for a while they will erode and disappear. A vacant house that starts out structurally sound quickly rots into a sagging derelict . . . unsafe for human occupation.

In the opening scene of his movie, *The Upward Spiral*, Paul Krafel contrasts two different scenarios in which a tower of blocks rises from the ground. The same two boys create the tower in both sequences. In the first sequence the boys slowly build the tower one block at a time. In the second sequence the boys simply raise their hands up from the ground and the tower springs up in their wake. The building of the tower in the second sequence looks like an explosion of blocks placing themselves one on top of the other in a trail of creation following the movement of the boys' hands.

The two videos of the tower being built demonstrate the asymmetry between creation and destruction. If you reverse the video of the boys building the tower you see them slowly dismantling it, one block at a time. This slow dismantling doesn't violate our reality detectors. It may be a little out of the ordinary, after all they could have just knocked the tower down and been done with it. But we can imagine the boys patiently taking the tower apart one block at a time.

The second video of the tower exploding into existence is clearly a fake. We know that no matter how sophisticated the boys are, the world simply does not work that way. If we reverse the second video we see two boys knocking a tower

down by moving their hands from the top of the tower down to the ground. The explosion of destruction lines up with our experience and we suddenly understand the nature of the fakery in the video. The boys actually destroyed the tower and the filmmaker played it backward to mess with us!

Building a tower of blocks requires sophisticated coordination patiently deployed over time. Destroying the tower needs only the clumsiest of efforts requiring neither care nor patience. It is easier to destroy than to create. The destruction of possibility is the natural order of things. Scientists call this tendency for things to run down the “second law of thermodynamics.” The second law can be summarized as “energy always flows downhill toward less and less usable forms.”

And yet many wondrously complex things do exist! In our world that is strongly biased towards decay and collapse, how is this possible?



4 The Upward Spiral of Life

*Life creates the conditions for more Life,
in an Upward Spiral of ever-growing possibilities.*

Life is the force that creates an upward eddy in the downward current of destruction. Creation by life is a process of slow growth. The laying down of one layer on top of another. This slow process of creation often spans generations.

Turning to Paul Krafel's "The Upward Spiral" again, we find succession as more than just a brutal competition in which taller plants shade out shorter plants. In fact, the shorter plants that came first created the conditions that allowed the taller plants to exist at all. The story is about competition, but it is not just about competition. It is also a story of multi-generational, multi-species cooperation to slowly raise up greater and greater possibilities.

The process of evolution that created the wonderful diversity of species is a long slow steady climb. And like the story of succession, it is a story of competition AND a story of cooperation. The long slow steady climb of evolution is the story of the creation of possibilities by countless individuals making countless contributions across countless generations.

Ants carrying, eagles soaring, people loving ... none of these would exist without Life's slow and steady creation. Life creates an upward spiral of ever-growing possibilities! And we are agents of Life!

Wherever we go, whatever we do, our sacred duty is to bring Life with us. As we pursue the work of Life, we must

create around ourselves the conditions that support us being fully alive, that help us flourish and thrive “Happy in the sun!” When we walk into a room full of other people, our task is to increase the freedom, expression, and possibility those people feel — to help the group itself flourish and thrive “Happy in the sun!” As we live in our local and global ecosystem, our charge is to give back more than we take — to help the body of all Life also flourish and thrive “Happy in the sun!”

The Ultimate Fate of the Universe

In our vast empty universe, things are running down. The second law of thermodynamics tells us that possibility will gradually diminish until the entire universe is nearly the same lukewarm temperature and there are only the weakest energy gradients to drive the flows of matter and energy that make life possible. Taking the universe as a whole, this arrow toward decreasing complexity and opportunity seems to be an absolute. Things ARE running down. This effect is called entropy and the future it predicts is called the Big Freeze.

And yet, there is another arrow that points back upstream. This second arrow is in the direction of life. In the cosmic perspective that encompasses all time and space, this arrow of life is simply an eddy in a vast current streaming toward the heat death of the universe. But this eddy, this upward spiral of life, is the most precious thing in all existence. This effect is called emergence and the future it predicts does not have a name.

Life has the potential to last an infinite amount of time. Although energy gradients are ever decreasing they will never completely run out. Life adapts to changing conditions through evolution. Dr. Freeman Dyson of Princeton University has demonstrated that life can actually rejoice in an infinite subjective experience with an infinite amount of time but a finite amount of energy. (Dyson, Freeman, 1988, *Infinite in All Directions* page 111)

But Dr. Dyson wrote this before the discovery of dark energy. Dark energy poses a dangerous threat to our distance future. Physicists have found that dark energy is increasing in power. They have not measured how quickly it is increasing yet but if it is increasing quickly enough then it will outpace entropy and eventually destroy the universe, tearing first galaxies, then stars, then planets and finally even people apart? This possible future is called the Big Rip.

How are we to be “happy in the sun” when we are caught between these two possible futures, the Big Rip and the Big Freeze? It is a frightening future that physicists paint. But we know very little about dark energy yet. The Big Rip, if it is coming is billions of years in the future. Is it possible for life to harness dark energy? In billions of years life can learn to grow on dark energy, and life can grow exponentially outpacing the growth of dark energy. Perhaps, in the distance future, life can learn to balance dark energy and entropy, growing ever more complex and creating ever more possibilities, using enough dark energy to prevent the Big Rip and leaving enough to prevent the Big Freeze.

Physicists prefer to look at the universe as a dead mechanism in which life is but an observer. But it was physicists

themselves who discovered that it is impossible to observe without changing what is observed. It may be life's destiny to control the fate of the universe and our destiny to help life take a crucial step toward its destiny.

5 The Body of All Life

The beauty of a living thing is not just in the atoms that go into it but in the way those atoms are put together. –Carl Sagan

The cells in your body don't know who you are and don't care about you. And yet, by each cell doing its own little thing in its own little context, this miraculous emergent thing called you happens!

Groups of people are more than the sum of the individual parts just as the group of cells in our body is more than the sum of the individual parts. When a group of people are talking together they will have ideas and think about things in a way that is different from what the individuals alone would come up with. To paraphrase Sagan the beauty of an effective team is not just in the living beings that go into it but in the way those living beings interact together.

Just like our body is composed of cells that each do their own different unique thing, so too there is a body of all life composed of living organisms of which we are a part. What stage of development is the body of all life in right now? Is it an infant that is yet to become self aware? Or at the other extreme, is the body of all life already senile and decrepit?

In the cosmic scale of time, conscious life is still very young. As a body of all life we're probably not even school aged yet. Imagining a human trajectory for the body of all life we expect the growth through childhood and adolescence to be attended by a growth in opportunities. The possibilities grow along with us. As we reach adulthood, we begin to make

focused investments toward particular callings. As we focus and invest in particular areas, some opportunities that we chose not to focus on become unavailable.

Imagine for a moment that the body of all life is your child. What investments has your child made in its future? What opportunities lie within arms length? Given who the body of all life is right now, what do you want for your child in the future?

juxtapose a homeless man or woman who's gone to drink against a happy family that is healthy and thriving in the sun.

Put together an art exhibition or some sort of creative thing that shows all kind of different visions for the future of the body of life.

SolSeed imagines the future for the body of all life becoming not just a lone individual world, but a family of living worlds with great diverse opportunity among them for what life can become. Each world perhaps specializing in the family. This world no longer alone in the universe.



6 Life has Invested in Us

Every item has its use, a role to play, a thing to do.

—From a SolSeed children’s song

Getting a good return of investment (ROI) depends upon making good use of the thing you’ve invested in. If you invest in a fine Stradivarius violin, you are tying up resources in the violin that could have been used on a different investment. To get a good return from the violin you use it to play beautiful music. If you want to be sure that the investment in the violin is a total waste, you use it to pound in nails. The violin makes a lousy hammer and its ability to produce beautiful music is destroyed by encounters with the nails.

Life is a lot like a human investor charged to manage a large fund. The “fund” that Life manages is the pool of diversity and other accumulated resources of our biosphere. Just like a human investor, Life risks resources on bets that may or may not provide a good rate of return. Good bets increase diversity and possibility, bad bets do the opposite.

Right now, Life has a lot riding on humanity. Consider the myriad species that have gone or will go extinct as a result of human activity. Consider also the human consumption of fossil fuels, a large portion of Life’s densest reserves of concentrated energy. We’re using up pools of energy that took eons to accumulate. These are significant expenses. What can humanity do that provides Life with a good ROI on its investment in us? What is it that humanity can do for Life that is unique? Has all the expense been squandered on con-

sumption? Or have those extinct species and precious fossil fuels purchased an infrastructure that could be of use to Life?

Investment is one metaphor. Paul Krafel, a teacher, has a different way of looking at this story:

“We are in a very dangerous part of a necessary learning curve. By degrading our environment, we are learning that we have the power to change it. Now we can begin to wonder what change in the other (harder) direction would look like. Now we can begin to practice patience, perseverance, and self-restraint. We can learn to listen and watch. If we can learn quickly enough, our current destruction of other species and habitats contains within it a seed of hope.”

Seeing Nature, p. 170

The metaphor of learning and the metaphor of investment can be combined. Perhaps humanity has just realized that its education, the long project of scientists seeking knowledge by studying the world around us and engineers using that knowledge to build useful things, was not free. Without realizing it, we’ve taken out a gigantic student loan from the Bank of Gaia, and the interest is now piling up. If we default on our debt, both debtor and creditor will suffer immensely. But by paying it back in the form of works that help ecosystems thrive (after first learning how to do those works properly), we can both provide just compensation to the Bank of Gaia for all the trouble we’ve caused, and ensure that it will still be willing to lend resources to us in the future.



7 Who You Are

*Ray of summer sun
Inseparable from Sol
Know yourself and thrive.*

Einstein as he developed the theory of relativity often imagined what it would be like to ride alongside a beam of light. I invite you to do something similar. Imagine yourself actually as a beam of light. A ray of sunshine from our star whose name is Sol. As this sunbeam, you have several different ways that you can think of yourself. On the one hand you are a transient burst of photons that will soon be absorbed and cease to exist. On the other hand you are the Sun itself. You are the provider of practically all the energy that animates life on earth.

The ability to sometimes perceive ourselves not just as the ephemeral ray of light, but as the sun itself can add a great deal of power and purpose to our lives. This ability to identify with the larger whole is an essential characteristic of spiritual enlightenment. It offers freedom from reactive grasping and the option to proactively create our lives.

I invite you to take a moment to close your eyes and imagine that you are not just your skin-bag, but that you are life itself! Think of the possibilities!

Excesses of the non-dual perspective

Inadequacies of the simply dualistic perspective. Anxiety paralysis self-loathing fear -reactive rather than proactive.

Your calling

Living a beautiful life

It's naive to think that there is only one job one role that each person can play. Thinking of this way leads us to spend our entire lives searching for who we are and what our job is. Perfect is the enemy of good enough and right now. living a perfect life is impossible our goal should instead be to live a beautiful life. Is there one perfect painting one perfect meal? No! There are many great meals many great paintings and there are also many lousy meals and many lousy paintings.

Our obligation to survive and flourish is owed not just to ourselves but also to that Cosmos ancient and vast from which we spring. –Carl Sagan

The history of life is a many branching tree and humanity is just one branch on that tree. When inhabitants of the far future look back on humanity as it is now, they will see not the pinnacle of evolution, but a transitional species that diverged into new branches in the tree of life. Our place in the body of all life is not one of special rights and privileges, but rather one of purpose and responsibility. As life's intelligent spark we are called to nurture the body of all life – we are called to ensure that it survives and flourishes.

We are called not just to live – not just to get by – but to create a life that brings honor to all the ancestors who came before us and creates opportunities for all the generations that will follow us.

Borrowing a metaphor from Erwin Ramsdell Goodenough:

*Life is a coral reef. We each leave behind the best,
the strongest deposit we can so that the reef can
grow. But what's important is the reef.*

Part II

Bringing Life to
Ourselves

8 Being is Where Doing Comes From

Since being is the fount from which doing springs, being deliberate in choosing who we will be is one of the highest callings for the human animal. No other part of creation has so many options for the being from which their lives spring. Humans can be artists, engineers, teachers, gardeners...the list is endless. Your vocations and hobbies don't even adequately define who you are. In fact, it is actually the reverse. Who you are being, your personality, values, and passions, will determine the vocations and hobbies that fill your life.

9 Getting Into Action

Many of us struggle with “procrastination.” Noted blogger Merlin Mann, who writes about “finding the time and attention to do your best creative work,” says that we only procrastinate when we forget who we really are. This is really a case of the doing getting before the being. Being is also not simply a function of personality, values, and passions. Being is to some degree a declaration. A moment by moment creation of an intention that you can live into. An intention that calls you into action with the rightness of its fit and the blissful inspiration it generates.

One of the sad forgettings of our time is the forgetting that we get to choose who we are being from moment to moment. While inertia tends to bind us into set patterns of being that are difficult to change, who we have been in the past is not decisive in determining who we will be in this moment. An example of this is the notion of being healthy. We often imagine “being healthy” as a state of being that will be achieved at some future time. If I weigh 230 pounds right now and have a flabby stomach, I’ll be healthy once I lose 30 pounds and have abs of steel. This is a fallacy of a future beingness coming from a history of doing. Being is always and always in this present moment. Even if I am 30 pounds overweight, I can be healthy in this moment. If I choose to be healthy in this moment, this being will call me into actions such as choosing a salad instead of a cheeseburger. The more that I “be healthy,” the more I integrate this into my habits and rituals, my patterns of being, the more healthy things I will do. The more healthy things I do, the more outward

signs of health I will have (e.g., the abs of steel). Being calls us into action. Be, do, have.

When we talk about being a starfarer now, in a world that has no starships, it has the same sort of impact. Being a starfarer inspires and call us into action that is consistent with that inspiration. Being a starfarer means tearing myself away from the pattern of watching banal TV shows about "true crime," "amazing veterinary emergencies," or even the fictional adventures of a starship crew, and instead calling myself into action to get online and catalogue other kindred starfarers. Then in a future moment, being a starfarer calls me into action to contact some of these kindred. Then again, as starfarer I arrange to meet some of them. Then it's suddenly 30 years later and I am part of a company, a community, a family, and a religious practice that are all consistent with me being starfarer.

10 Science-based Spirituality

When we say "religious practice," we don't mean what you probably think. It's possible to write a scripture that doesn't resort to the supernatural, and create rituals based around the sacredness of what we know to exist. In a way, we're already doing this as a society. Scientific research papers comprise the ever-changing scripture of a religion whose churches are laboratories and university lecture halls. Its "priesthood," the researchers and science professors, commands almost universal trust even though they all admit that anything they say could turn out to be wrong.

When there is data available, we use it. We believe the scientific method is currently our best mechanism to learn, codify, and share information about our world and universe. The distillation of the scientific method is essentially this:

- Create a recipe that includes how and what you should expect to see
- The community of the adequate can then perform the recipe and interpret the results, honestly reporting whether the expectation was met or not
- Recipes that are confirmed by others are elaborated on

But where do the recipes come from? Ideas for experiments and models with predictive power are not generated by science. They are generated by Life's creative spark. The same creative juices that stir one person to pen an opus stir another person to create a theory to explain cosmic background radiation. This creative force is mysterious. Where

does it come from? We choose to see it as an emergent property of life that occurs when the input from your senses combines with memories and ideas stored in your brain in a unique way that generates a sudden burst of thought, which synthesizes experience and memory in a novel way that gives rise to a new idea. Again, we don't need to invoke anything supernatural to describe this wondrous occurrence. Of course, it's possible that there is some input into this process from a "higher realm" beyond the everyday world of matter-energy-spacetime, but we don't have much to say about that possibility because it's currently beyond the reach of scientific study.

The community of the adequate is a concept we first learned about from Ken Wilber. He makes the point that unless you have a super-collider, it is difficult to play back the recipes that are currently being run at CERN - The Large Hadron Collider. This requirement keeps the community of the adequate quite small to test out the recipes they propose. Likewise, many mathematical proofs involve concepts that are beyond the ken of most people. Evaluating whether the proof is sound requires a level of expertise that comes only with special aptitude and training. This too limits the size of the community of the adequate. Mathematical recipes are no less real for being entirely within the realm of mind. They are inner recipes rather than outer recipes.

So truth within many different realms can be communicated via the scientific method. This is true within the objective physical realm as exemplified by the "hard sciences" like chemistry, geology, neuroscience and the like. It is also true within the realm of mind and can be seen in mathematics,

logic, philosophy and the "soft sciences" like psychology, sociology, and anthropology. The scientific method even applies to the spiritual side of life to some degree, and can be applied to meditation and other recipes for altering one's perception of the ground of beingness. But this kind of research must be approached with caution for a number of reasons, such as the fact that subjective experience is very difficult to measure, and science works best with quantitatively measurable results.

One of the degenerations that comes from the science being most successfully applied to the objective outer space is the collapse of inner and outer realms and the collapse of spiritual with objective. An example of this can be seen in experiments that try to show there is some sort of telepathic force field that operates within and across life. These experiments confuse the essentially subjective, spiritual feeling of "oneness with the world" with phenomena like root systems or computer networks that objectively link things together. The subjective feeling is important and valuable even if it doesn't correspond to anything in the world around you, other than the impressions it makes on your ordinary senses, which may combine with your learned knowledge of the objective interdependence of people, species, and ecosystems within the global biosphere, to trigger your spiritual experience.

11 Religion-shaped Hole

Human beings tend to have a religion-shaped hole, that is, a set of desires that are fulfilled only by participating in a religion, or at least in an institution that resembles a religion. We don't know whether this was selected for by memetic and genetic evolution because it confers reproductive advantage, or whether the tendency toward religion is more a byproduct of selection for other desirable traits. In the first case religion would be a kidney, a critical piece of a fully functional organism, there for a specific and clearly beneficial purpose. In the second case religion is an appendix, an oddity mostly ignored except when it's blocked with feces and becomes a life-threatening ball of inflammation.

For our purposes it doesn't really matter whether religion is an appendix or a kidney. Identity is fluid, and for millenia one of the most powerful forces shaping identity was that of the religious culture a person belonged to. Rather than trying to untangle the causal chain of how humanity and religions co-evolved, we would like to assert that for most humans, religion of some sort is part of their makeup and a source of meaning in their lives.

One way to judge the worth of a particular religion is by how satisfied people are with the meaning it creates. This is important because without some system of thought and belief imposed on it, life is intrinsically empty and meaningless, so it falls to our minds to create meaning. (We prefer to build our structure of meaning by thinking about the actual facts of life as we empirically observe it; others prefer to add belief in unseen supernatural forces to help create a satisfying meaning

to life.) Another important way to judge a religion is by its fruits. Are the people who are a part of the group happy, productive, and free from suffering?

Surprisingly, it turns out that within nearly every religion there are common subgroups that emerge. At one end of the spectrum are fundamentalists, for whom strict adherence to the code of the religion is essential. The fundamentalist seeks to protect the religion from compromising with, and therefore becoming undifferentiated from, the rest of modern life.

At the other end of the religious spectrum in nearly every religion we find those who believe there are many paths to spiritual enlightenment, and the path from their religion may not even be the best. While welcoming difference whenever they can, these folks rarely claim that "all" possible beliefs are equally valid, and are typically "intolerant of intolerance," i.e. strongly opposed to any religious sect that preaches "death to infidels," subjugation of women, or similarly harmful ideas. They seek a middle ground between an overzealous certainty in their own rightness and an empty relativism that denies the value of believing in anything. From this place of balance, they teach that bliss is available for all to experience directly, usually through a process involving an opening up and emptying out of self.

The fruits of the first group are confrontation and war. The fruits of the second group are peace and acceptance of diversity and a doctrine of the interconnectedness of all being. Identifying with this second group of religious practitioners, we recognize the deep meaning of spiritual practice both individual and collective.

12 Multiple Selves

So who are we really? It turns out that answering this question is complicated. It turns out that there are many different good answers to this question. Each of the different good answers is useful at different times and in different contexts. That said, many people are stuck with just one of the good answers that paraphrased goes something like this: I'm this skin bag and all the fleshy bits inside it. While this is true, it is incomplete.

To illustrate the problem with being stuck with a single perspective on who we are, let's take a trip back to in time to 1987. 1987 was Brandon's freshman year in high school, and most of his friends couldn't drive. They were too young, or didn't have access to cars. Watching the older kids pull into the parking lot, they would wonder what it would be like to possess that kind of power and freedom. One of the older kids drove a 20-year-old Renault that wouldn't go into reverse. He was very careful to always park with a clear escape route in front of him. Every now and then he would find himself boxed in and be vividly reminded of his car's dysfunction as he pushed the car himself, or had to enlist others to help him.

That old Renault that was stuck going forward serves as a useful metaphor about how we view ourselves. In "Big Mind Big Heart", Dennis Merzel compares the different ways we view ourself to the different gears on a car. Each of the different ways of looking at who we are is useful some of the time, but not all of the time. If we are limited to a single particular view of ourselves we are like that old Renault. Our view may be adequate much of the time, but when circum-

stances would benefit from us adopting a different view, we find ourselves stuck and without the necessary perspective to respond powerfully to the situation.

13 The Divided Self

Metaphors are incredibly powerful. They are how we make sense of the world and our place in it. Perhaps no metaphor is more important than our metaphor for our selves.

In an age of cars, machines, and computers it is tempting to adopt a metaphor of self that places our conscious mind in the role of operator and the rest of us as the machine that is being operated. This metaphor is highly inaccurate and provides little in the way of insight about how to create what we seek to create in the world.

One of the ancient truths that has been discovered over and over and commented on by many different authors is the notion of the divided self. We are not simply a conscious mind operating a piece of biological machinery. We are actually a collection of different systems cooperating and competing to accomplish their own individual goals. Not all of these systems are equally intelligent, nor equally powerful.

In his book "The Happiness Hypothesis", social scientist Jonathan Haidt takes a look at various metaphors for self that have received widespread attention throughout the years. He then suggests that we adopt the model of our conscious mind as a rider on top of the elephant of our unconscious mind and body. Roughly speaking, the rider represents advanced reasoning and the elephant represents instinct and emotional reactions. This simple metaphor does much to explain day to day life.

The model of a rider and an elephant is particularly good at explaining the differences between what we say our goals are and our actual behavior. The only part of the ride-

elephant combination that we have direct cognitive access to is the rider. Any time we say something voluntarily, it is the rider who is speaking (while the elephant is responsible for things like the reflexive yell of pain on touching a hot stove). So when we talk about our goals, we give a one-sided account that only incorporates what the rider wants.

It takes a tremendous amount of gumption for the rider to overcome the elephant. In a direct contest of wills, the rider is doomed. A skilled rider understands this and works sideways to create an environment in which the elephant can be successful. This means shaping the stimuli that the elephant has access to, in order to limit exposure to undesirable situations that take the elephant down a destructive path, and to increase exposure to situations that lead to instinctive or emotional responses that motivate positive action.

14 The Motivation Paradox

While it may be true that service of others provides happiness and life satisfaction for the person who is doing the serving, the motivation for the service is very important. When the service is done to look good or even just because we know that service leads to a happier life something is missed. It is only when service springs from a depth of character from which it is simply the right thing to do that it brings the most peace and satisfaction.

There is a trap of motivation that may be called spiritual narcissism. People who seek after spiritual enlightenment, satisfaction, and peace as if they are the ends themselves rather than the byproduct of a life of service find themselves continually lacking peace and satisfaction. The more they focus on peace and satisfaction, the bigger the hole becomes that they are trying to fill.

Part of the paradox stems from the realization that the person we have the most direct influence over is ourselves. This makes it seem like we ought to be working directly on ourselves. Growth and development of ourselves is helped most by developing in ourselves a focus on others. This can be illustrated by the attributes of a great conversationalist. The best conversationalists are those who are actually interested in what the other person has to say. When the other person pauses, the interested listener naturally rephrases what they heard to verify they got it, or asks a question about something of particular interest. Contrast this with the person whose main motivation is being heard. The talker doesn't listen to the other person, instead they organize their own thoughts

so they can start talking in the first gap that is left.

Good religions must then in fact demand that we live a life of character and that we help others because it is "the right thing to do." What this means in a more concrete sense is that we must empathize with the people we help, talking with them and learning about their lives, so we can see the world through their eyes and understand what will bring "them" the most peace and satisfaction. This also helps us avoid seeming to take a condescending "I know what's best for you better than you do" attitude.

15 Passion, Empathy, and Wisdom

We like to talk about all these ideas in shorthand through the lens of three key virtues that we try to cultivate in ourselves. The first is Passion: focusing on what we really want from life and what we feel driven to accomplish, or to use Jonathan Haidt's analogy, asking the elephant where it wants to go and helping it get there, because that's how it can use its massive energy most effectively. This virtue has been described in many stereotyped ways, like "live your dreams," "follow your bliss," "be true to yourself," and so on, but that doesn't make it a useless cliché. On the contrary, those catch phrases are designed to remind us that the mind-numbing routines of modern life that we often fall into in life are not permanent, and that with a little effort, our lives could be much closer to what we truly want them to be.

The second virtue is Empathy, which must be used to guide our passions into channels that lead to benefit for others as well as ourselves. If we made no effort to deliberately cultivate our feelings of empathy, we would tend to act only in our own self-interest and in the interests of immediate family members, and society would quickly collapse. Conversely, if people learn to experience much more empathy for the feelings of others beyond our immediate families and peer groups, and even beyond our species, it will powerfully focus our passions toward building a happier and more harmonious world. This can take the form of working to ensure that people's basic needs are met, but it can also include helping other people to discover and follow their own passions.

The third virtue, Wisdom, is the hardest to describe,

because it includes many facets. One aspect of wisdom is learning to change the patterns of our behavior and establish better habits of thought and action; these habits conserve our limited willpower by allowing us to automatically make choices in line with our values. Another aspect is cultivating the intuition that helps us to decide on the most positive and effective course of action in uncertain situations, where our habits aren't enough to guide us. A third aspect is learning to balance and synthesize the reasonable and emotional aspects of our minds, so that we avoid making unreasonable choices based solely on emotion, but also accept and celebrate the fact that without emotion, reason could never tell us the best choice to make because no choice would "feel" better than any other. And finally, wisdom is fundamentally about accepting reality as it is, not as we would wish it to be (which is where science comes in handy), and only working to change things after we've determined, to the best of our ability, where and how we can actually make a positive difference in the world.

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