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Good morning.

As you may have noticed Ross Perot sneaked into the Chapel early this morning and posted some charts that didn't make it onto TV last election. I apologize, and I promise it will never happen again—at least not until next summer.

### **CHART 1**

But let me tell you a little about these charts. They are, in fact, more like road maps than charts.

The first one is a map of time. You have probably seen other versions of it. Carl Segan has one designed like a clock. Others appear in the opening pages of World Atlases and Encyclopedias. This one represents the World Trade Center building in New York. It is still, I believe, the world's tallest building, about a quarter mile high, with 108 stories above ground and I know not how many below—probably about 30.

The idea is that, according to the best scientific opinion, our earth was formulated about 4,600 million years ago, at the ground floor. Simple living cells appear about 3,500 million years ago, or about the 25<sup>th</sup> floor. Multi cellular creatures did not appear until about 10 million years after that.

Fish appeared somewhere around the 97<sup>th</sup> floor. Somehow they managed to crawl from the ocean and became land animals at about the 99<sup>th</sup> floor. Dinosaurs were kings from about the 104<sup>th</sup> to the 107<sup>th</sup> floor.

Compare the Dinosaurs' 4 floors to the fact that the first creatures resembling humankind didn't appear until about 2 inches from the top of the 108<sup>th</sup> floor, at the very top of the building. Neanderthal man, with enlarged brains, tools, etc., showed up about 1/4 inch from the top. The place of human kind as we know it is so small that it is completely invisible on this drawing, even if it were entirely accurate and to scale. The Pharaohs ruled Egypt about a **fiftieth** of an inch from the top. The Renaissance appeared in the top **1/1,000<sup>th</sup>** of an inch. That's less than the thickness of a layer of paint. The whole of modern history appears in a microscopic layer.

The point of all this is that it puts us—you and me—into perspective. Scientific fact? Well, maybe. But really, it's more like a modern day Genesis story, or a Babylonian Creation Epic. You and I weren't there, so no matter how scientific it may be, we still have to take it on faith. But what I do understand from it is that this is *big* and I am tiny, minuscule, microscopic. In this one sense, you and I are insignificant. Except for the story, we have no idea where we have come from, and we have no idea where we are going.

## **CHART 2**

The second chart is equally enlightening as to where we human beings, we denizens of Wonalancet, actually live.

Lots of people, and maybe you, too, had their first introduction to this chart as a game in childhood. As game master, I would say to you, "I'm thinking of something. What is it?" And you would say, "Tell me if it's animal, vegetable or mineral?" That was the only real clue you would get. After that it was a matter of Yes or No questions.

Whether you knew it or not at the time, you were being introduced to "The Great Chain Of Being." I've added us humans as a fourth level, but as you remember, in the game version, there are only three: mineral, vegetable and animal.

I think the most important thing in this chart is the spaces between the levels—In other words, what's important is the differences. Vegetables have this thing called *life* that rocks don't have. Curiously, life is something we all know when we see it, but the best scientific effort can't say just exactly what it is.

The difference between plants and animals is just as obvious, but even more subtle. Our dog Arthur has something called *consciousness* that the Begonias in the window boxes at the Antlers don't seem to have.

What's most interesting, though, is the difference between humans and other animals. We both have consciousness, but there's something else Arthur is missing. A Spanish philosopher put it this way: When meal time comes—

"My dog Arthur is hungry.  
I also get hungry.  
Arthur knows that he's hungry.  
I also know that I am hungry.

But the difference is that I *know that I know* that I am hungry." Arthur doesn't seem to know sometimes he is hungry, and sometimes he is not. He doesn't abstract.

So, those are the four links in the "Great Chain of Being". You can play with them in lots of interesting ways. But this Great Chain of Being is not something new. Plato explored this idea. So did Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. People of our time, by which I mean a generation or two on either side of my own, have paid less attention to the Great Chain than thinkers of most previous times.

It's important to say that all of the Great Religions of the world took it foregranted that there is at least a fifth element in the Chain, and maybe more. Both the New and the Old Testaments talk about invisible worlds beyond our world that are inhabited by various types of Spirits: Angels, demons, "principalities and powers" as the author of Colossians liked to put it. I want to come back to that.

But even more important than just that there were more levels in the Chain of Being, our religious forebears all over the world took it foregranted that *the very purpose of being human was to reach toward that invisible world and to seek to unite with it*. In other words, it was assumed that it was the goal of all human beings to separate from these lower levels of the Chain of Being and to become more than we were. It was our purpose to become Spirit. It was our purpose to move being the levels of being that we can see, into the levels of being that we cannot see. That's something we have all but forgotten about.

So I hope you find my two famous maps interesting. But now you have a right to ask me why any of this might be important.

Well, let me tell you my secret. When I began writing this meditation, what I really wanted to do was speak to the question of human suffering. In this small New Hampshire valley, just now, we seem to have more than our share. You know who they are, most of you better than I. But there is something unbearably arrogant about one person, who is not in pain, trying to tell another, who is in pain, how to deal with his or her suffering.

As a tool for meditation, let me give you a completely inconsequential example from my own experience, and use that as an example of suffering. I deliberately choose an inconsequential example so that no one will imagine that I am setting myself up as an example of how to deal with suffering. The example is only a foil against which we may reflect together.

I recall walking Arthur in the woods in Cape Elizabeth one afternoon. As I do frequently, particularly if I am wearing wrong shoes, I turned my ankle, dislocating it. I fell, straight into a mosquito infested mud puddle. I lay rolling in the mud for a little while, waiting for the immediate pain to subside. This has happened often enough that I have a routine for handling the problem. I simply roll over on my back, hitting my twisted foot with the heel of my hand. Eventually, there is an audible "pop," the bone goes back into its socket, and in a few minutes, I am able to get up and walk away.

But while I was waiting there waiting for the muscle to relax, I looked around me. I noticed that neither Arthur, nor the mosquitoes nor the birds nor the woods were the least interested in my pain, which was at that moment, quite outstanding. But, though they were not, I was intensely interested in my pain. I found their indifference to be infuriating. I was involved in my pain. How could the rest of the universe, including my beloved dog, not care?

I return to my charts, because I think they help provide, not an answer, but a context. Together, these charts tell a paradoxical truth. They tell two truths which are opposite from each other, but which are both true. As I grow older, I am convinced that many of the important truths about life are paradoxical. The first chart, the map of time, is intended to put us outside of time and space. The one truth that it conveys is the realization of our nothingness. Of course, this is not the only truth about us human beings. But it is an important truth to know and remember. In the broad span of time and space, we are each individually, and all together unimaginably insignificant. Lying in my mud puddle, looking up at the trees, Arthur's dog breath in my face. I am nothing.

The other chart reveals the other truth. While we are insignificant beyond comprehension, we are also at the apex of existence. As one person put it, while we are nothing but a frail reed, we are a thinking reed. We are the creatures who live on the edge of existence, living our lives in the space between the visible and the invisible, living our lives sometimes in the visible material world, and sometimes living them in the invisible world, caught up in the tension between them. Lying on my back in the mud puddle, I am, in my own being, an incredible happening. I am a spark of awareness that *knows that it knows about pain*. I am a spark that can, even in the midst of pain, notice and record that the day is beautiful, the sun is warm, and that the sound of the surf is just over the next rise.

I suppose that I could, as I try to understand my predicament, decide that God has a plan for me, and that there is a reason I am in the mud. Maybe God did this to me so that I would learn something! Maybe I should learn to be a little more careful while walking in the woods. I recall a David Frost interview with Billy Graham, who declared that the reason why God caused him to break his hip on his front steps, was so that he would have more time to study and pray for an upcoming conference of Evangelists.

Yes, I could conclude that God put me in the mud and that I am supposed to learn from it. But while I appreciate Billy's determination to put a positive spin on his hip and my dislocated ankle, I'm not buying it. I might learn from the experience, but I don't believe that God goes around planting tree roots just so that I will learn to walk more carefully. In fact, the notion of a God who cruises through the world inflicting painful teaching experiences is too demeaning and too trivial to be tolerated. Would a God who built this **[charts]** do that? I don't believe so.

For what it may be worth, in the great religious traditions, there does seem to be a link between pain and suffering and the spiritual development of the great wisdom figures: Jesus, Gautama, the Prophets, the Christian Saints. I don't understand exactly how they are connected. That's another subject for another meditation. But I know there is nothing automatic about it. You can't just dump someone into a hot cauldron, like a lobster into a pot, and pick them out again as a transformed seer or teacher of faith. But there does seem to be a necessary link.

Perhaps the link has to do with this, that suffering sometimes calls forth supreme creativity in order to respond to it. And perhaps it is that God responds to that creative upheaving, and that he invites us to join in the act of creation.

I do not know if every event of suffering has within it the potential for a creative response. What I suspect is that this question gets answered, one suffering person at a time. Some find the creative link, and some do not.

Stephen Hawking, confined to his wheel chair, able to work his computer only by blowing into an activating tube, found it. I know a young high school student in my youth group of 35 years ago transcended never ending pain to become a surgeon himself. I also know that the parents of Norman Pitcher, a schoolmate who died in a senseless shooting in a parking garage never recovered. They lived out their days in cynical despair, and never able to let go their bereavement. There are those who can reach out a creative finger, element of mind, a creative thought and tap into the universe. There are others who do not.

To go back once more into the great religious traditions. There is somehow a pervasive belief that by dealing with the pain, by making the suffering conscious and being fully aware of it, that human beings become more than mere human beings. There is a belief that pain and suffering are, or can be, a gateway to the more than human.

Let me share with you one other set of observations.

I was driving up the Maine coast one afternoon listening to Maine Public Broadcasting, as I often do. The National Press Club was presenting a talk by Deepak Chopra. If you don't know him, he is a doctor, originally from India, a cardiologist. He has done a lot of writing on the subject of non-traditional medicine, and even on the role of love in healing. Though he doesn't speak of it much that way, what he has to say comes mostly from the Hindu or Ayurvedic tradition.

Someone asked him the suffering question. I could hardly believe my ears! Hear what he said, "I have bad days, just like everybody. I also experience pain, because I have a body. Like every one else. *But I do not suffer!*"

He went on to explain that He went on to explain that what he means by suffering is *attachment to our pain*. Pain and suffering are different. He suggests that we only suffer when we get stuck on our pain and give it a place of ultimate importance in our lives.

Look once again at the chart of The Great Chain of Being. Clearly, this is a hierarchy of being. And what makes the garden of Begonias greater than the outcropping of granite on the highway is in this mysterious space between them. What makes the sheep in the field across the street greater than the grass which they consume, is the mysterious space between them.

What makes the least of us or the greatest of us greater than our animal cousins is this mysterious, ineffable difference that fills this space between us.

Our religious traditions tell us that the greatest among us are those who have ventured into this space, beyond our kind. This space is somehow the province of suffering.

There is a quote you may have heard: "Those who speak of it do not know it. Those who know it do not speak of it." Those who venture into the realm of Spirit do not speak of it. Those who speak of it do not know of it. But the willingness to pick up the suffering and somehow turn it by a deliberate intention has to do with this Spirit transformation.

If there is to be any hope for any of us to deal with the pain of body and spirit that inevitably enters our lives, we must be able to let go of the pseudo—scientific pragmatism, the false practicality that we have been so carefully schooled to regard as ultimate intelligence, and to venture into this strange world of Spirit. Spirit is in the cracks between the links. Spirit is beyond the layer of paint atop the World Trade Center.

Oh Lord, I believe. Help Thou mine unbelief!