

A String and a Balloon

By Simon Pelletier

Consciousness is a subjective experience layered on top of an objective board. Each individual makes assessments of this objective portion through their own subjective binoculars. Our subjective sense lies within our mind, which is housed in our brain, which I am going to call a balloon. This balloon is our head floating up in the sky, detached from the base reality, which is down on the ground. Planting ones feet onto the earth, feeling the grass tickling ones toes, is how one can get closer to an objective reality. Rising above the earth can reveal to us a greater scope and understanding of the world around us. But if we rise too high the objects and people on the earth get smaller and unclear, the understanding of what is the ground begins fade away.

There is a string attaching our subjective balloon-head to the earth. There are three ways this can go. We can let some string out, rising higher and seeing less specific detail of the earth, but a larger and broader view. We can cut the string, floating away into the clouds never seeing the ground again. Or we can reach out of the basket, grab the string, and pull ourselves for a closer and clearer picture of the earth below.

The Sharpness of Youth

We are born into the world and began crawling around haphazardly, our faces dragging through the dirt. Eventually our brain, propelled by the growth of our body, is brought up and above the earth. It commands a view of the environment around us. We may think we can see a lot, but a short string has us attached just barely above it all. Seeing, touching and feeling, we sense what the natural environment has for us. This existence is vivid, compelling and perplexing. Each experience you have as a young adult, a freshly minted independent being, is novel and unique in the history of your life. And so when you go to those first parties the smells are strong, the drinks are crisp and the making out is intense. One of the reasons life is so strongly felt in youth is the novelty of each piece of life. Never before had you run from the cops, never before had your father yelled at you like that, never before did you bond over a campfire out in the boondocks with peers you never thought could be so like-minded. Each and every thing you do has at most been done once or twice – and just like a new movie, the uncertainty keeps you engaged. Very observant we are when things haven't yet been observed. One of the issues with having the balloon attached so close to the ground is that it gets battered and blown around. The events drive and consume your experience. It's hard to see a future outside of the immediate existence. It's both a blessing and a curse.

Wisdom Through Experience

The string is then extended, as is the analogy. By letting some of the line out, the balloon begins to rise. Eventually we gain a bird's eye view of the environment that, previously, we were so encased and consumed by. Up here our balloon can still be blown by the dominant winds, but those small gusts, the little storms and all the small localized events, don't seem to effect us up here. We can begin to grasp a larger view of the world. We see the family behind the person. We see the garden behind the gate. Yes, as we grow older those first experiences that were so fresh have faded. But we still remember what it was like. We still realize that it was all new and exciting. That it was scary to go out and meet new people. Uncertain of ourselves and whom may think what about who. But as we gained some distance from youth we began to gain some appreciation for the smaller things. The bird on a tree is much more beautiful, and its call sharper and clearer, now that we can block out something as pesky and distracting as a mountain vista. Instead of needing a stage, live band and fifteen thousand watts of amplification to hear beauty, we can kneel, weeping, as mother earth reveals to us her intricacies through the sound of the windblown grass on a summer's eve. I can lose my mother, the only person I ever felt fully and utterly loved by, to cancer and somehow in my grief start to see the bigger picture. How I'm just one of a vast sea of people who have, or one day will, lose their mother. By letting out some of the string you can rise up and see that the earth is round, that it isn't as big as you thought it was. That we are all on it, here, together.

The Calcifying Mind

For all the insight we can gain from the view afforded from a higher place. One can take this too far. There can be an inclination to pull out a knife and sever the cord holding us connected to the planet. Some might think that this will lead us to rise up and find something else, to break through the clouds and see the full and true reality. After one has released the string and sailed into the clouds, our balloon will meander and drift into a space where there is neither up nor down. The earth a faint speck far below, we becoming fully and utterly obscured by the clouds. A place where there is nothing to be found. As one gets older, one begins to see this perspective in all those who surround them. Each and every person has a solid, specific, utterly concrete way of viewing the world. They have completed the transition from open, exploratory, novelty-seeking behaviour too conservative, constrained and committed behaviour. Here they sever the cord of reality and drift off into an endless space that has nothing but their own mind's view of the universe.

When you stroll over to Harold on the corner of the street and have your Saturday morning coffee, he mentions how the fiscally irresponsible liberals are at it again – like clockwork,

each and every week the “god damn liberals.” Or Pauline tells you how she couldn’t imagine a world without Jesus Christ – “Just how could this world be the way it is without his creative hand?” Even your sister, a mere thirty years old, communicates this kind of behaviour. She talks of how there is one and only avenue for a female in a heterosexual relationship.

This is what happens when you double down on a world view. You take the bits and pieces of the reality that may have truth in them. Wrap them up in a simple story to convey the ideas. This then gets meshed into a concrete vision of the world, unavailable for critique. It provides useful ways of understanding the chaos of life but cements a myriad of additional thoughts, emotions and ideas into them through the stories we tell. We get a whole bag of dogma when really we should be grasping only a few nuggets of truth contained inside.

Some Ways to Make a Little Progress

How exactly does one survive not just five weeks in this balloon but an entire life? I don’t pretend to know, *but this essay seems too.*

I’ve noticed a few things that may help and not hinder too much. It’s wise to remember what the youth have to say. They are down there, close to the earth and wrapped up in the ways of their culture. They feel and hear things in the noise that you’ve gotten so good at blocking out. We can pull on our string and creep closer to the earth if we seek out novelty. If we lean into the beginner’s mind and appreciate that we might not know it all. That our sense of the world, while valid in our consciousness, may not be the only way of understanding. To embody humility will not only open yourself up, but others will open up to you when they see that there is a warm embrace and not an impenetrable fortress behind your eyes.

Another thing to realize is that life is more of a ride than you might imagine it is. How much have you really had control of in your past? Did you really have a choice when you decided to enrol in that university program. Are you sure that this partner and not that partner was right for you? We can hold two points, in a paradoxical manner, in our head. You are riding a wave. You don’t really get to decide when you are going to be swept into shore but you do get to decide how to ride it. The events of life will come crashing down on you, driving you into the depths and you can do nothing about it. Your agency will be in how you surf that wave. Which way will you stand? Goofy or regular? Boogie board style on your stomach. Will you turn here or skiff there? These are the actions in your life that you can have agency over. You’ll never stop that wave no matter how hard you try, but you can learn to ride above it or hold your breath as it crashes down on you.

The final point is a large pill to swallow – let me try and phrase it simply. Physics, computation, evolutionary biology, human existence and religion collapses all into the same base thing. Perception is unveiling a base object – the laws of physics try to explain this. Agents work on these base objects through their different lenses to strive for an existence – evolution biology. Computation is a way of clearly explaining these laws of actions – the actions are so complex and beautiful that often the rudimentary nature of computers doesn't really do nature and the world justice – in fact, for some it detracts. And human existence is these different modes of understanding all expressed in one vessel. We are human because we can see our agentness. We can see that there are base rules in the universe. We realize there are systems for making decisions and evolution biology seems to provide a mechanism for putting it all together. Religion and the mystical could be all of these points but extended into a realm beyond which our meagre minds cannot grasp. But fundamentally these are all trying to show us what the base reality is. Trying to pull the subjective binoculars away from our eyes.

So grab ahold of the string, notice the lightness of the balloon, and hold on for the ride.