

The Laughing Matters

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The Laughing Matters

The laughing matters so much.

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The Laughing Matters

These pages are dedicated to my parents:

*My father, Jeff, who didn't always know or understand what I was doing,
but always gave me the support and benefit of the doubt to help me do it
and*

*My mother, Jeanne, who stood ever-vigilant in her beliefs
and who I aspire to match in strength of love and spirit one day.*

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Shared

There are a great many things that human beings excel at, but one of the most fascinating ones for me has always been our obsessive desire and compulsion to share that which we have learned, discovered, created, or thought and the cleverness that comes by way of that need. We find or make something that is good, our first want is for others to have it too.

This, so we are clear, is one of those that gets to stand on the winners riser, holding a trophy in the category of *Best Thing About Us*.

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When you make something brilliantly, write an amazing song, find a clever workaround or gain profound wisdom, there is a very strong basic need that arises and demands that it be passed on. You want someone to hear that song, to see your art, to read your words, to learn from you and the big payoff is seeing the way it affected them.

There is a connection there and we thrive on it. We're compelled to share what we know, what we feel and what we've found that is good and we have created a multitude of ways to do so on our relatively small planet. We shape our internal wind with specific movements of our lips, tongues and mouths, all the while carefully pitching the chords that the wind passes through so that we can speak in a language. We literally created a spoken language out of the sounds we could make so that we could share what we knew with others. And then? Then we figured out how to make those words heard after the speaker has left and started bringing those words into a more permanent form, written language.

I remember reading *To Kill A Mockingbird* when I was in 5th grade and having my first real moment with how amazing reading and writing is. I was dumbstruck that out of nowhere this author could craft this story from their imagination, create these marks and their story would ring out to anyone that would pick up the book, be it in a year or a hundred from then. I'd come to find out in the years that followed that Carl Sagan had said it far more profoundly:

"A book is made from a tree. It is an assemblage of flat, flexible parts (still called "leaves") imprinted with dark pigmented squiggles. One glance at it and you hear the voice of another person, perhaps

someone dead for thousands of years. Across the millennia, the author is speaking, clearly and silently, inside your head, directly to you. Writing is perhaps the greatest of human inventions, binding together people, citizens of distant epochs, who never knew one another. Books break the shackles of time — proof that humans can work magic.”

But there were some things we knew or felt that literal language could not adequately capture. Some ideas, thoughts and feelings were too abstract to be put precisely into words, and so we went the other way. We spoke and wrote poetically or wove epic stories with lessons and wisdom embedded in them. Told fables and analogies, parables and metaphors. Or, if one was so inclined, wrote songs or composed sonic landscapes or symphonies. They painted, drew or colored, or choreographed, or photographed or danced. Our need to communicate and convey is so strong that we created art, language, music, and dance. We even merged art, storytelling, photography, language and music together and created films. Because that's what humans do; when we can't inherently do something, we figure out a way to do it.

We are masters of extending ourselves beyond our physical limits. To paraphrase Sigmund Freud from his book *Civilization and Its Discontents*, mankind replaces his muscles with motors, can now fly or swim hundreds of miles, correct defects in his eye with spectacles, see thousands of miles away with telescopes, permanently capture fleeting images with photograph and hear through telephones across distances which "would be respected as unattainable in a fairy tale".

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But, as clever as we are at creating ways to convey our knowledge and thoughts, our main go-to method of expressing our feelings is our first language: non-verbal sounds, facial expressions, and body language. It happens so automatically that we rarely even think about it actively and that is impressive given the range of subtle changes that can be applied to convey the subtleties of each emotion. They are iconic, instantly recognizable to most, and tend to be pretty universal across our species. Take a moment to think of an emotion and see if you cannot picture the sound and face that goes with it. Every single emotion, so far as I have been able to discern, has an accompanying sound, face, and body movement to it.

All of them save for one.

This is fairly alarming because that one emotion is arguably the most important of all of them. It's not only been compared to the very air we breathe in terms of necessity, but it's been called all you need, and the only thing worth both living *and* dying for. So, I ask you now... what is the sound we make when we love?

Go ahead and think on it. What is the social sound, face and bodily posture we make when we love? I've asked a lot of people this question and I've heard a lot of answers; my personal favorite so far was "dreamy sigh" (though I believe it is more indicative of "having a crush" or "longing", while definitely not at it's core). But every time people offer an answer, it sounds more like a question... like someone that doesn't expect their answer to be correct. I imagine some of you even guessed the correct answer already, but still aren't sure it's right. I completely get that. It's because it's a bit of a riddle.

The answer is located in a place you wouldn't think to look. You know, personally, I'd say it even seems to be deliberately hidden there, but you'll have your own decision to make on that.

I'll share that answer with you in this book, but first we need to lay the groundwork. The groundwork is definitely more shocking than the answer to the Riddle of the Missing Sound, but I promise that answer will stay with you for the rest of your life and you will finally see it for what it truly is when it truly is but, first. In order to understand the answer, we must first understand the riddle itself and what it's using as its main mechanic (in a magic trick, the mechanic is the secret that makes the trick possible). I want to do the best job I can of showing you why the answer is so very critical to understanding the real key to happiness, the one fear that all fear stems from, the root of where we have gone wrong as a species, and how to get everything you always wanted for yourself.

And an answer told will always be less than an answer learned.

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Cup and Contract, The Worthiness of Tea

When I was much younger, I was told an anecdote by a student of Bruce Lee's (and, apparently a story that Bruce told quite often) that has stayed with me ever since. There was a western philosopher who was considered wise by his peers and, one day, that philosopher began to hear murmurings of an eastern philosopher, a monk that had several new ideas and approaches to the questions that mankind has always asked: the meaning of life, why bad things happen to good people, is there a plan or is it free will, etc.. So, the western philosopher decides to make the journey overseas, so that he can converse with this monk and learn from him and hopefully further validate his own arguments.

After a long journey, the philosopher finally arrives at the monastery and is ushered inside to meet with the monk. They seat themselves at a small table and, after some pleasant small talk, the philosopher begins to engage the monk in headier subjects and some of the more profound questions that he had traveled so far to have answered. As the monk begins to speak, the western philosopher spots two inconsistencies with what he himself knows to be true and, at the appearance of the second one, interrupts the monk as politely as possible. The monk sits quietly and listens while the philosopher explains about how he believes the opposite to be true. Once he has finished, the monk thanks him for sharing his understanding of the truth and tells him he will meditate on that which the philosopher has proposed. Rather gracefully, the monk picks back up where he left off and, not too long after, the philosopher clears his throat with a finger raised.

"Ah, but have you considered what G.E. Moore said about..."

Again, the monk listens carefully and after a moment of consideration, thanks the philosopher for sharing such an interesting take on things. The monk promises to add this viewpoint to his daily meditations and then, with a slight knowing smile, picks right back up where he left off. It's a few more minutes before the monk spots a furrow on the visitor's brow and another objection rising to the lips of the westerner.

This time, it's the monk that interrupts. "You have traveled a long way. Would you like tea?" The philosopher nods and thanks him.

"And have you a cup and water?"

The philosopher raises an eyebrow, but hands over both items from his backpack without comment. The monk walks them over to a small kitchen area of the room where he pours the water from the canteen into a teapot and begins to boil it. They talk in the kitchenette while waiting for the whistle of steam. When it comes, the monk pours the philosopher's water into the philosopher's cup and sets it aside. The monk then pours water from his own stores into the emptied kettle, and that begins to boil while he takes down his own cup from the cupboard. The philosopher can't tell if this is a deliberate insult or a quirky custom and decides to let it go. As their talks deepen, the westerner barely notices the monk adding tea leaves to the boiling water in the kettle. The monk lifts the kettle before it screams and pours his own cup full. He then brings the kettle over to the westerner's cup and starts to pour. The cup, already pretty much full of boiled water, is only able to receive a little bit of tea before threatening to overflow. The monk passes the philosopher's cup to the now annoyed westerner, who remarks,

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"And why have you poured me such weak tea?"

The corner of the monk's mouth draws slightly up into that same small smile. He lifts the cup from the philosopher's hand.

"You are like this cup - so full of your own ideas and context.

You are surrounded by your own context.

I cannot show you the context of that which I find to be truths if you are preoccupied with using your own.

Anything I offer you will only dilute immediately in your mind and vanish, torn apart by your understanding of the world before you have even heard half of what I would say on the matter."

The monk starts to pour out the contents of the cup into the drain.

"If you truly wish to know what it is that I have found... whether you wish to live your life by way of these truths or you simply want to see if what I have to say is true, you must empty yourself of what you already believe to be true. This is a requirement for gaining understanding. One cannot remain full and yet, take on something else in its entirety. Ah...", he smiled, glancing as the water ran into the drain. "Now the cup is useful to us again."

The monk sets down the philosopher's now empty cup and begins to pour the tea in.

"Once you have set aside that which you are already full of, only then can you truly decide if my tea has worth."

I love this story and, now that I have something of worth to offer the world, I understand the importance of the story's message far more fully. During my journey to discuss the truths I have found, I've sometimes heard people arguing against *what they believe to be* what I am proposing before I have proposed it in full. This is problematic because what I will be proposing here is a giant, interconnected series of concepts that support each other but not in a linear a to b to z fashion. It takes all of it to support all of it. What you are reading is an attempt to walk people through these concepts, but the only way this will work is if you are willing to make a deal with me. For the duration of this book, I am asking you to set aside your current beliefs on these matters, whatever they may be (it's alright... you can pick'em back up after), empty your cup, so that you may reach the end and judge for yourself whether or not there is validity to what I've shared with you. To see what I'm proposing as it is and not as the knee jerk reactions would have it.

Now, as you may have already suspected, part of this book is rooted in the belief that there is a God.

I promise you, this is a different conversation. One that you cannot come out the other side of without significant shifts in your footing.

To be clear, though, I am saying that this particular belief is in something much bigger and more complex than we have a frame of reference for. And that life was intentional and that whatever made all of this intended that we care about each other. That's as much of a definition as I ever ask the reader or listener to accept as a probability. I say probability because after having spent years studying the patterns that emerge across history, religions, science, physics and mathematics, the existence of some deliberate creative force seems to be the safe money bet. Just about every tribal people that we have a recorded history of, even though they were on separate continents, separated by oceans and had never interacted, they all believed that there was something, something that fell within that simple definition, mostly in the form of many Gods.

I only use the term "God" because that is the name that I became accustomed to through my early years of Catholic upbringing and my early love for Greek Mythology. Though I may reference a religious text or ten, the definition of God that I use is not tied to any religion. Religion is mankind's interpretation of prior interactions with God and no group could ever know everything there is to know about God or what God wants.

That's part of the reason why, at an early age, I set out from Catholicism to find the truths that other religions might offer. I was barely a teenager when I left, admittedly, so I lacked the depth needed to truly explore these varying beliefs. And I also steered away from the rituals. They provide comfort for some, but I do wonder how much of it is simply a sentimental tone, striking a nostalgic chord in the place where one formed their relationship with God growing up. For me, it was the heavy emphasis on the rituals in Catholicism that ultimately led to my absences from Sunday masses. I felt no real personal connection to the rituals because they didn't further my connection to God. When I left the church, I was still pretty sure there was ... something out there.

I turned to several religions for a more satisfying answer and didn't quite find what I was looking for. Yes, there were a lot of truths in each, often accompanied with powerful wisdoms and meditations, but I couldn't find one that had the answers I was looking for. I knew that I'd know it when I saw it because truth is truth, right? That's why it's so hard to unsee once it comes into the light.

A large portion of my own personal supportive instincts for the internal argument of "Is there a God?" was born out of my time fascinating over some of the brilliant finds we've made in the fields of science and physics. I could blame teachers, but I think the initial blame was my father's subscription to *Popular Mechanics* during my adolescence. My favorite discoveries were where patterns in multiple fields would either line up or overlap in critical ways forming a system. I considered the possibility of all this existence being born out of unintentional chaos as a possibility for a time (or, as I would come to call it more frequently, the "What a Crazy, Random Happenstance Theory"), but the longer you look... the systems were just too precariously balanced to ever make "creation by chaos" a serious consideration for the explanation of all things. That Chaos model happens once in an uncountable number of scenarios. It just wasn't statistically viable enough to remain in the running. And the more I studied the natural and physical sciences and the fundamentals of mathematics (Mathematics, of course, being the language of all sciences), the more I believed there was some kind of God.

And I'm not alone on this, either, nor does it revoke my membership to the world of the scientifically minded. In one of the later interviews of Albert Einstein, he stated plainly, "The more I study the natural sciences, the more I believe in a God." He would then clarify that he didn't mean a religious God, but an abstract Creator and Designer of everything. When questioned about the interview in which he said this, Einstein wrote, "Everyone who is seriously

involved in the pursuit of science becomes convinced that some spirit is manifest in the laws of the universe, one that is vastly superior to that of man."

There seems to be this weird misconception out there that either science is right, or religion is right and I've never really understood the argument. I think a great deal of why some scientists have issues with religions is that the people in them have a more restrictive and detailed vision of what God is and I can safely say that most of the scientists and physicists that I've met or worked with believe that there's probably *something* that designed it all.

"If we need an atheist for a debate, we go to the philosophy department. The physics department isn't much use." –Robert Griffiths, Heinemann Prize winner in mathematical physics.

If they disbelieved or argued against anything, it was by far and away the specific beliefs of varying religions or some of the actions by said religions' followers or leaders and the all-too-common mentality of "If you believe in some of what this sect believes, then it is of the utmost importance that you get to work on believing the rest of what we believe too". Which is kind of the opposite philosophy to actual science, which has very few laws, but a whole lot of theories.

Scientists search for truth's hiding places, and they make every effort to recognize it and value it for what it is, regardless of whatever field of study/sect it was found in.

Sure, your first time feeling the cleverness of peering behind the veil of the universe can make one arrogant in their view, but eventually you begin to understand just how delicately everything behind the curtain has been put together.

Or, to quote Werner Heisenberg, the father of quantum mechanics, "The first gulp from the glass of natural sciences will turn you into an atheist, but at the bottom of the glass God is waiting for you."

I try to remind people that mathematics, physical, natural, and especially theoretical sciences... they're all rooted in the observation of patterns. The theories and the laws are written, but these fields are, at their core, the observation, recording, questioning, and testing of repeating phenomenon. At their very core, these fields of study are: "do it, this happens, do it again, this happens again, what if we do it like this? Well, this happens. Does it happen again and again like that?" The world happens first, the studies happen second.

They're predictive systems of study, but we'll get into all of that later on. The point is, if one reverses their view on these studies and looks the other direction, they may find themselves wondering, "How is it that these patterns repeat in the first place?" How is it that these laws came to be immutable?

Science does not inform our existence on how to operate, it's the study of how it is already operating. Put another way, science may inform the whole world, but it is the world that informs science first.

I bring all of this up because I am asking you to accept that it's *possible* that there is *something* for the duration of this book. I'm asking that those that already believe that there is something, for the course of this book, let go of the governing aspects that they believe of God(s).

If I begin explaining the concepts that are detailed in these pages and the reader holds on to a belief that God does not exist or that God does not exist *like that*, the connections will not form between these concepts for the reader because there is no internal motivation for them to do so.

You see, the brain responds to large potential changes in what one believes to be true much in the way that it responds to physical threats (the same areas of the brain light up with activity). Again, I'd rather you just hear out what I have to say before you pass your final judgements of the material. A lot of the criss-crossing supports for the structure these concepts form are detailed in the last third of the book.

And to that point, I offer one last word of warning: Most of the chapters are primarily laying out several different concepts that, at the time of reading them, may seem disjointed, unconnected or unrelated. In the last few chapters, and even as we journey toward those chapters of the book, we will begin to gather them all up and fit them together. The first two-thirds are the push pins and the last third, the strings.

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The best I can do for now is to lay out each individual piece on the table, explain what each piece is, and then assemble them together in front of you.

In summation? You're not going to understand what I'm saying until I'm done saying it. So hang in there and empty your cup before you go in.

I solemnly promise to you this, dear reader...

(and please know that you are very dear to me. The fact that you are reading this right now is a fulfillment of my purpose in this world and that is one of the many reasons that I love you; the other reasons will be addressed shortly. Reading is not like listening to someone speak; it is a willful act of decision and effort, and it is a decision that is constantly pointed at making the markings on the page form as my voice in your head. You are the first resting place of this book in its journey, the second leg of its route is what you do with what you learn from these pages, and the third, what those said decisions inspire in others.)

... I promise that if I have written it in this book, it has been put into the book because it is important to the total understanding of what I have found. So far as I have been able to find in the last 13 years of writing and rewriting it, it does not include a single unnecessary word.

Okay, in we go.

The Cacophony & The Granddaddy Fear

The world is a noisy place and navigating can be a fundamentally scary thing, but for some pretty big reasons that you may not have considered yet. The biggest and most core fear we will ever know is in charge of the scariness, and I think it's time you started calling it by its name, and start saying it to its face.

First, let's acknowledge a not-so-simple truth. A truth that can be rather scary if you're not prepared to hear it. The world we live out our entire lives in is a conglomeration of every single decision made by every single human being that ever lived. They/We have shaped every aspect of tradition, society, entertainment and knowledge. Whether we want it to or not, every single decision and indecision (because choosing not to choose is still a choice), it has an impact and we, as incredibly gifted as we are of a species, have nowhere near the sight to understand the overall impact of *any of those decisions*. Regardless, you make decisions and you get to be a part of shaping that world for billions of other people. You matter so much. You are a part of so many lives that you've never even met, echoing out into the entire future of the human race.

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Now, we live in a very unique position in dimensional space. We live fully in the first three dimensions of space, being three dimensional creatures, but we also exist within the most infinitesimally thin “slice” of the 4th dimension, time. The word “now” describes a constantly moving position. Imagine all of time at once, like a giant sculpture. And our position (the present), ever moving through it, marching forward and never reversing its progress.

If we lived as fully in the 4th dimension as we do in the first 3, we would see time all at once, and be able to move freely within it, backwards or forwards, fast or slow. But that is not the existence that was given to us. Either we’re moving through it at a mostly consistent rate over which we do not have any control, or it’s moving through us, and we still have no control. Either way, everything behind us is still there, left behind as we are pulled along, but every bit as real as what is happening now. We call this position that we are stuck in “the present”, the trail we left behind “the past”, and what has yet to be revealed from our position “the future”. What is so very fascinating about that particular position is that we find ourselves staring into a void ahead of us; a clear path cut behind us, but no way of seeing what the next moment holds for us and what decisions must be made. Is it dangerous? Good fortune? And other people have free will as well, making decisions and who’s to say they aren’t going to have their path come crashing into the routes you’re taking, knocking you off balance? We are all effectively blind pilots. But we are clever. And, ho boy, are we imaginative.

We utilize our imaginations in these instances and fear is something that we live our lives by. Fear is what sets up most of the guardrails that govern which paths we see as possible avenues that we can take in our day to day life.

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As M. Night Shyamalan once stated, fear is an imaginary world that you build for yourself and then live your life by way of its rules.

But all fears, no matter what flavor they come in, originate from that one source fear, the granddaddy of all fears: the fear of the unknown. Think about it. You've never been afraid of something that has already happened, only that it will A) happen again or B) that, as a byproduct, something else undesired will occur as a result. Once something you were afraid of has occurred, the very moment that it becomes seen and known, we cease to fear it. In other words, say that you live in a small village and there were rumors of a dragon in the area. You are terrified that the dragon might discover your village. One day, the dragon lands and discovers your village.

The moment after this is known to you, are you still scared that the dragon will discover your village? No. That's already done now. So your brain fills up quickly with the next offering from our fear of the unknown. Will it eat us? Set fire to our thatch rooftops? Crush us underfoot? Recite Vagon poetry? And it doesn't matter if the fear predicted the situation correctly last time; if it demands to be heard, it is going to be heard and felt. Those who have let fear firmly take the steering wheel in their life choices don't often feel as if they have choice in the matter and have a tendency to feel trapped in their options for choice.

Many of us are taught that we don't have a choice. And we have seen a lot of education centered around making sure that we know that we cannot trust someone that we haven't already vetted.

It's a well established fact that human beings have free will. As a result, we aren't always going to make the choice that's statistically the most likely choice to be made. And, to a mind that roots its actions in fear and probability of outcome because it can't actually see past *right this very second*, this is a very, very real threat. Human beings cannot be predicted in how they may affect our personally designed paths. Sure, we have rules and consequences, laws and punishments to help increase the probability that people will adhere to certain behaviors (therefore, increasing our ability to make accurate predictions about what others will likely do or not do); fences, door locks, and security shutters. And we are a species that cannot thrive without one another, and so we find ourselves at constant odds. Add to that that most are moving in pursuit of My Own Path and it should be an absolute emotional disaster for each of them. Which it both is and isn't, but we'll get to that.

So we fixed our eyes heavily on probability and predictive thinking as a way to see further than our positions in time.

But even the absolute most astute of us cannot predict 1/100th of the total impact one singular decision will have. We make educated guesses but we are trapped in a very limiting viewpoint. You see, our brains are typically somewhat faulty at accurately recording memories and the future is unknown. One on which we paint that which we predict and hope for, and one on which we project our fears in order to plan for what may come and then start erecting our life's guide-rails. We soldier forth at a pace that we cannot choose, completely blind to the paths and the obstacles in those paths, but humans adapt. We can't see the future, so we built a way of life based on predictability. Door locks and work schedules, insurance and legal consequences. And one of

the most necessary components of this style of living is picking a path... choosing a path to call our own.

In a system of life that experiences time as we do, it is almost instinctual to design your plan and act according to it. To paraphrase Donald Miller in his book, *Blue Like Jazz*, "I never actually thought it and I never actually said it, but I damn sure acted as if I was the main character of this story." Most of us move through life, believing ourselves to be the protagonist and, sometimes treating the rest like supporting cast. And of course you do! It's a story that you view in first person and you get to decide what your character does. If literature hasn't done it enough, film and video games certainly cemented the idea that the character that we see the world through the eyes of is the main character.

We often become very focused on those plans, however big or standard or small they may be. I believe that the bulk of most people's planning is done automatically, without giving it much thought at all.

We have quite a lot of unpredictable obstacles in that path. I'll be referring to the path that one plans for oneself as My Own Path from here on (just a heads up). As I've already mentioned, we interact with each other on a constant basis and very little of those interactions are predictable. If what we choose to do, say or be affects someone else, it effectively alters their own personal experience, their emotional state or the paths that they now have available to them to choose from which, similarly, affects those that *they* interact with from there on and on and on it goes. And every change that you helped affect bears your signature; you are partially responsible for all of them.

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Imagine one of those fireworks that fires a large bulb into the air that soon explodes into several fist-sized burning balls. Now imagine each of *those* balls, after a moment, explodes into several more of the same sized bulbs that, in turn, explodes into several more bulbs. Now imagine that this continues forever. Each bulb is unique. Sometimes a bulb is a dud and sometimes it explodes into hundreds, or thousands, or even millions of bulbs. There is no way to predict how each decision will explode or what harm or benefit it may bring.

And with all of this focus on the paths we choose for ourselves, that kind of chaotic cacophony of cause and effect can be terrifying. I use “cacophony” because that firework visual represents just a single action from one person... over 7.7 billion people are adding to the fireworks show, one that approximately 101 billion people had already been contributing to. Anyone can affect you without deliberately meaning to, eliminating paths you would like to take or denying things that you would like to have for yourself. This dichotomy between human beings needing each other and the determination to minimize the world’s random fireworks show’s effect on our own chosen trajectory is dealt with by the common man by reducing trust... and by more broken empathy than we’d ever feel comfortable coping to.

We choose who we let in and through how many of the defenses we have erected, both mentally and physically, the chosen trusted people are allowed to pass through. This often comes from a place of getting to know someone enough that you feel you can predict them enough to keep yourself out of harm’s way. They show no patterns of them being distrust-worthy or dangerous to your path and so they can stay. The more love that one has for that person, the easier it is to trust them and vice-versa. Even if we get hurt

badly by a betrayal of our trust, we are compelled to eventually get back out there and to love and trust again. And why is that?

Well, simply put, we are compelled to love. It is one of (if not *the*) best feelings that we are capable of experiencing, the grandest and most motivating of motivations.

4

How God Gods

We are typically not conscious of it, but we tend to put God in a kind of a box, because our understanding of this world and its limitations are all we know from experience. We, as spirits and wads of gray matter laden with

synaptic firing (aka a brain), driving bipedal meat vehicles, are attempting to contemplate the something that designed all of this and made it. And one of those walls of the box that we put God in is time.

I believe that most people's perception of time gets in their way of being able to relate to how God does what God does (or how God Gods, if you will). If God created all of this, then God would not be subject to the laws of all of this. I think that far too many people, without really thinking on the matter, placed God in a position in which He exists in the same way that we do within Time when it's far more likely that God would exist outside of time.

From what I've seen, God likely makes small adjustments to the past that become help in the present. Ever had help come from an unexpected place? Sure, it almost never arrives when we expect it to (which is "right now would be good" 90% of the time) But when we ask for that help, it comes when and where it's needed and you'll never see what the first domino tipped by God was that lead to the domino that you actually needed landing into your lap exactly when you needed it to.

This typically wildly differs from what our idea of the help we needed was. God knows what opportunities are ahead in every single decision you could make. He knows which ones are ultimately bad ideas, though it seemed like good ideas at the time. He knows the roads available, He knows where they lead, He knows what can guide you, and He knows what will help and when it will help. Not every time is right this moment.

Another hurdle that gets in the way of belief is the argument/paradox of Free Will vs God's Plan. The argument essentially boils down to "If human beings have free will and can choose to do whatever they want, how could God possibly have a plan?".

Well, I think that it's the word "plan" that people get hung up on. What if we gave God a little more credit and say it probable that He doesn't plan like we plan; that each of the possibilities that we get to decide on with our Free Will is a path in an infinitely complex plan that includes all paths available. We have the ability to choose which route we take as each fork in the road occurs. And God, who built the paths in the first place, has likely bottlenecked certain paths to arrive at things that we need to happen as a whole; specific choices that we need to come to in our own individual lives and events that need to happen in the course of human history. In this way, there is no paradox. God designed the possible paths, and we choose which ones we take. AND...you can ask for directions literally any time from the greatest navigator in the world (by a lot).

Just don't expect to get them until you need to turn.

It's rather humbling to realize and understand that we are typically kind of wrong when it comes to knowing what it is that we want in life. How many parents have told the tale of how, from a very specific moment of interacting with their child, they realized that they would do anything for this child; that family is everything and everything else is just noise? Only God knows which great, fulfilling paths are which, which ones are ahead, and how you could get to them from wherever it is that you are; He's the only navigator that knows what it is that you desire most and, likely, *you* don't even know yet.

The Laughing Matters

They are your paths. God has put them there for you. Literally shaped every single possible path you can take. And you get to choose *how* you choose them. I can tell you for a fact that the absolute most cherished moments and people and accomplishments I've experienced, I had no idea that I had always wanted them, more than anything else. I just... didn't know about them until I traveled the paths that led to them. And, funny thing that. The ones that led to the things that I treasured above all others? Usually the result of acting with some form of love or kindness.

Quite a lot of this centers on the people around you. Small interactions to large, we are linked in so many more ways than we understand. There seems to be some kind of network that links every person on the planet, and probably any that are off of it at the moment (after all, quantum networks care little about such things as distance). Let me ask you... have you ever heard of The Hundredth Monkey before? For anybody that hasn't... In 1953, five well-respected primatologists (meaning they work with primates) were observing a troop on the Japanese island of Yoshima.

The monkeys were Japanese macaques and quite bright. After a while the observers decided to help the monkeys with provisions and left wheat and sweet potatoes out in the open for them. One day, one of the female young discovered that she could wash the dirt and grit off the potatoes by taking them to the river. Her playmates and mother soon learned this trick. It was unique because the elders are typically the teachers and the young the students on all matters of how to eat, and the only adults that knew to wash their potatoes were the ones that learned from their young.

Then, one day, an adult learned the trick from a youngin' as per usual and suddenly it was like a dam broke. Every monkey in the troop suddenly knew how to perform this washing. Not only that but the same behavior was suddenly recorded by other researchers on other islands watching other colonies, and even seen on the mainland performed by a troop in Takasakiyama. Sadly, the resulting paper written on the phenomenon was immediately "discredited" by peers that mainly attacked the author for his gungho-ness toward the idea that this incident showed some kind of quantum interconnection.

There is an intangible network that links all things. This network defies non-theoretical traditional physics. It exists on a level that we cannot see, only detect... and only by way of its footprints, so to speak. This network is not affected by distance or time, because it operates free of our limits in space and time. We have seen countless amounts of evidence of this. And recently, two brilliant men have stumbled upon quantum networking happening in our brains: Sir Roger Penrose, a highly esteemed mathematical physicist and Stuart Hameroff, a ground-breaking neuroscientist.

These two gentlemen have noticed that when the human brain enters into a thought process, neural pathways light up, racing down one line over here and suddenly firing a continuation over there, jumping from hemisphere to hemisphere instantaneously with no indication of having any kind of signal physically traveling from here to there to link them. One moment it's over here, the next, over there. There's no physical connection between the two pathways and yet they fire in perfect succession. They believe that it is our quantum mind that relays the signals. Sure, it's less than a foot's distance, but literally nothing *travels* the distance.

The Laughing Matters

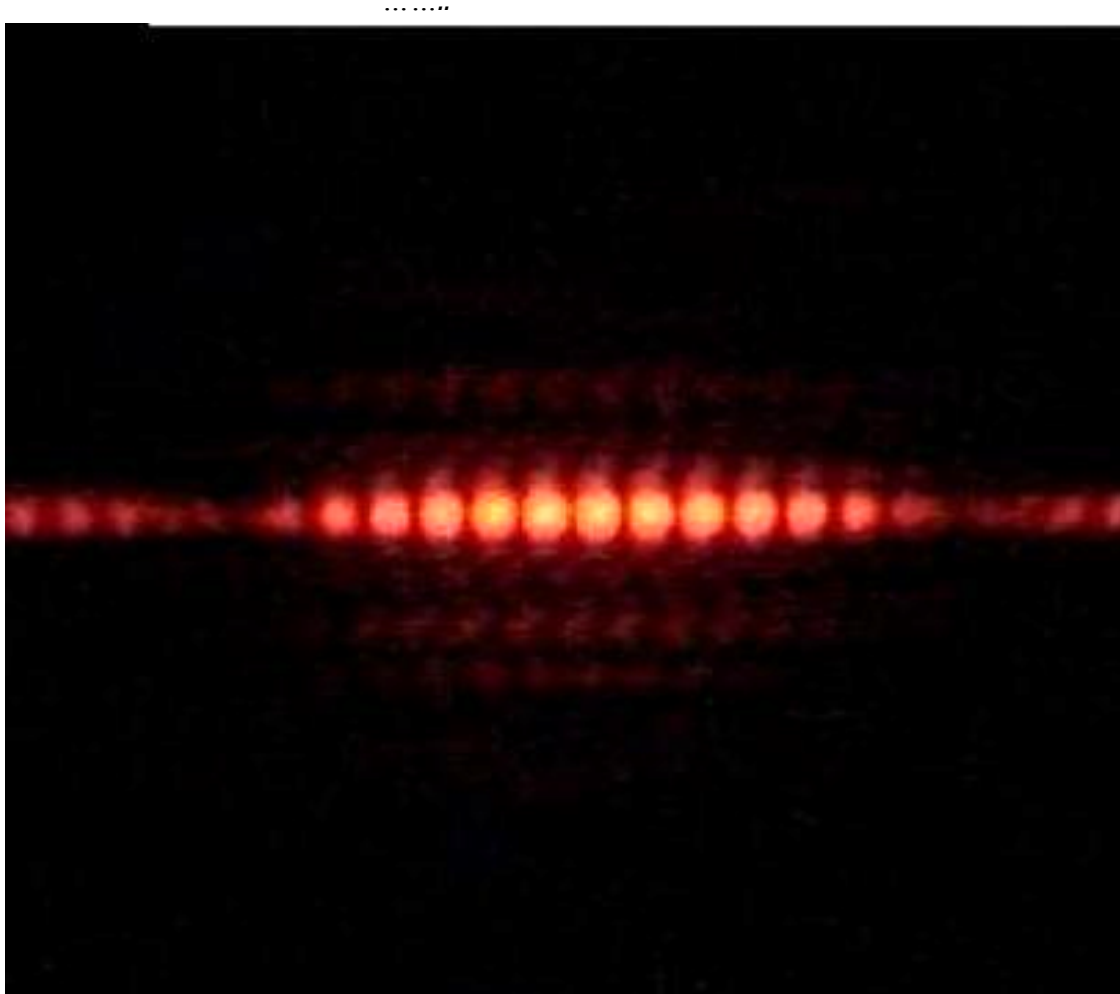


Figure 1: double slit interference pattern

The Laughing Matters

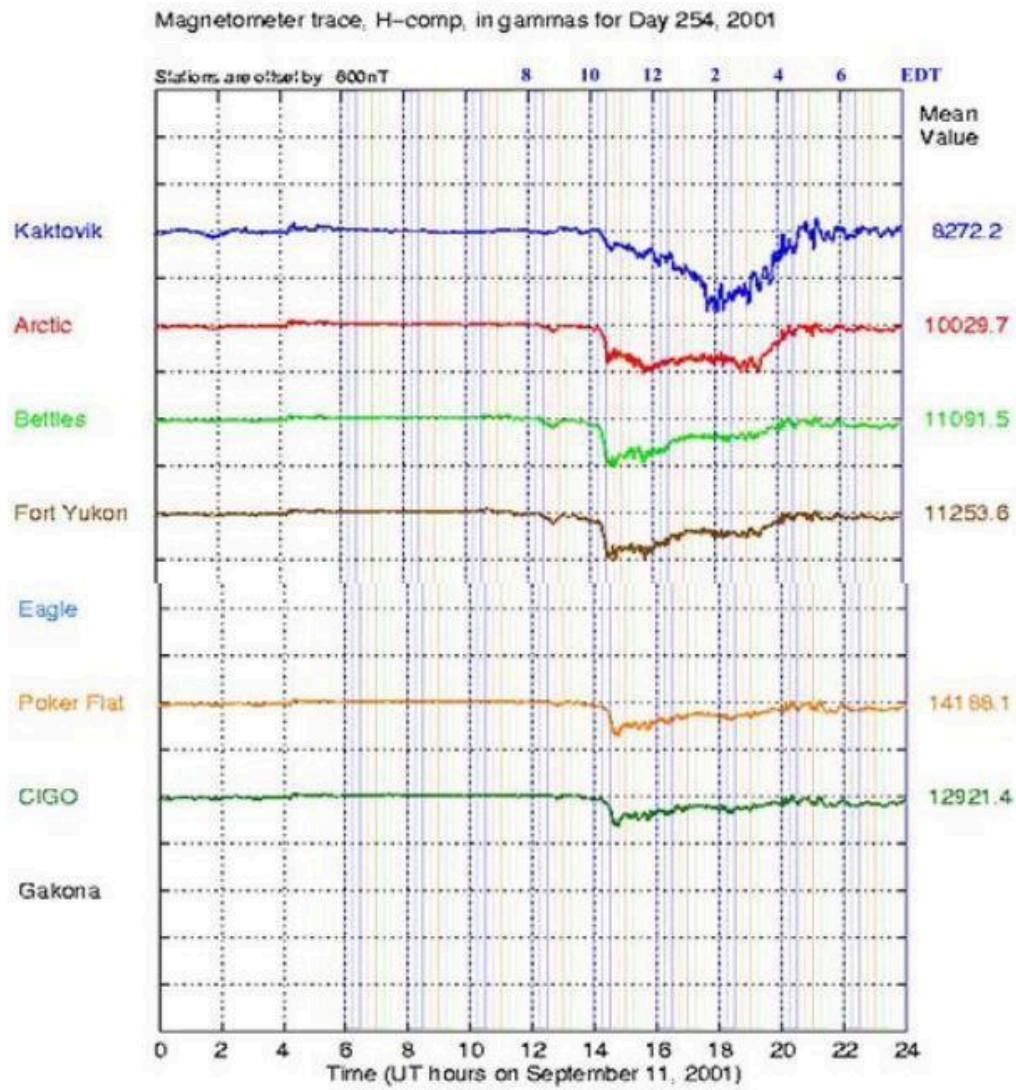


figure 2: Electromagnetic fluctuations in Earth's field on Sept 11th, 2001

Take a look at the fluctuations of the Earth's own magnetic field (*figure 2*) on September 11th, 2001. For reference, the first tower collapsed at 9:59am EDT (13:59 UT/GMT) and the North tower collapsed at 10:28 am EDT. Nearly everyone was watching at this point. With so many people's attention being so focused at one event, it reverberated through the very fabric of reality. It rippled outward through something that was attached to everything without regard for space or time.

When the first tower fell, a great swell of empathy twisted inside a huge portion of the Earth's population. That feeling of stepping in the dark through a stair that you thought was there was felt by so many people at the same time, thanks to the near instant global communications network. And at least nine machines spread out all over the world felt it too.

We are all connected in ways that are not evident by way of the visible light spectrum. This existence spreads out a lot deeper than we can imagine or detect, but you can get a sense of it by the way our world interacts with it, much like we can't see wind with the naked eye but can get a sense of it by way of the debris caught up in it and the movement of cloth, hair and trees.

Physicists have seen examples of quantum entanglement in particles, atoms, and electrons. To simplify, if two particles are created out of the same point in space/time, those particles are bizarrely linked. If you took one

entangled quark to one end of the solar system and flipped it's polarity, instantaneously the other entangled quark's polarity would suddenly flip, regardless of the distance from its twin.

And there are countless accounts of people “psychically” having connections to those that they care deeply for, and I’ve definitely read all that I’m ever going to want to read about the eerie connection between twins (Seriously. Don’t Google “spooky twins connection” after sundown. It’s not a good time.) But it makes sense though, doesn’t it? Every atom in these bodies shared the same point in space/time a long, long time ago. The Big Bang theory is currently the widely-held belief in the scientific community as to how all of this started into motion. That is to say that there was this singular object in the middle of nothing and then, quite suddenly, the universe blew outward in every direction and within that singularity and explosion was every bit of energy that we’ll ever use and every atom that will ever exist. So, in a different way of saying it, we are all pieces of the same whole. Everything that we are made up of, every single molecule, element, and subatomic particle, is from one single source. It makes sense that we would be otherwise linked on levels outside of our ability to physically detect and measure.

Several religions also follow the belief that God created everything that we have a frame of reference for. So, let’s overlap a bit... what if we substitute “God” for “singularity”? In the beginning, there was God and nothing. In this view, what is it that we are all made of? What is it that everything that ever existed was made of? Is it made of nothing or God? The core law of our universe is that energy cannot be created nor destroyed and I would mark it unlikely that we are made of nothing.

5

Here's the Why

So you and everything and everyone else are made of God. Isn't it strange how impossibly big that seems to be when you earnestly look at the world around you through that understanding, how much it changes and

reorders priorities and moves the very soul, and yet it is so incredibly easy to get drawn right back into forgetting that, and going about life as if it were not so. Some forget, and some choose to willingly swat the idea out of the way because it interferes with something that they would rather have/see/be.

I've heard a lot of theories on the idea of all being of God and made of God, including in *Stranger in a Strange Land* where the protagonist becomes fond of proclaiming "Thou art God". It was once proposed that we are all God experiencing Himself through His own creation, which has a certain lovely ring to it. Imagine creating this universe, and then getting to experience every single atom of it. And a bunch of those atoms have got free will. Seems like a really great way to spend a few quadrillion eons if you are an eternal being. It would also add some incredible depth to several things most of us have learned about, particularly the reasoning behind the Golden Rule, don't do that which you hate to anyone else. "That which you have done unto the least of you, you have done unto me" truly fits the idea of each of us being a piece of God. But my personal favorite is also one of the most important parts of the New Testament. The New Testament was essentially Jesus Christ coming to us and presenting both a second chance and setting the rules straight. Some look at it as a complete rewriting of the rules. And this is where my favorite correlation occurs. Jesus is attending a wedding, informing people about the new way. The Pharisees convince an expert in law to try to trip Jesus up by asking, "What is the greatest commandment?" which is a massively important part of a rule book, no?

Jesus replies, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

I remember reading that again (about a year deep into discovering the Breaking Laugh) and immediately questioning the translation of the phrase “And the second is like unto it”. He makes a point of stating that the first commandment mentioned is the greatest and first among them, so that answers the law expert’s question, right? I mean, it seems a bit odd to that level of focus on stating as clearly as it can be made that the first one... that’s it. That’s the one. And then, to immediately turn back around and state “But this other one, which is similar? It’s just as important.” And how are those two similar?

Apparently, the Book of Matthew, as far as we can tell, was originally written in Greek, some 30 to 60 years after Christ died (passed along orally before this). There are some that believe it was initially written in Aramaic and translated to Greek soon afterward, but no real evidence has been found to support this. The phrase that originally used that was translated to English as “And the second is like unto it” was “δεύτερα ὁμοία”. The most agreed upon translations for those two words that I was able to find are:

δεύτερος (“děu-te-ros”) = second

ὁμοία (“o-my-os”)= the adjective version of ὁμός (“homós”), which means “equally, evenly, identically, the same as”. In the adjective version, it means “likeness” or “similar to”.

I got very excited.

We know that the Gospel of Matthew wasn’t written down until *30-60 years* after Jesus died. And as new discoveries were made, scholars now

believe that the Gospel was written by an anonymous Jewish person in the last leg of the first century. In all that time, not every word would remain the same. As the followers spread Christ's words from memory and lived within them, their understandings of these messages would likely grow. But what if there was a part that never sat well with them. What if it didn't quite sound right to them, like a seemingly extra word or one that seems like Jesus used the wrong version of the word? They knew Jesus was human and capable of mistakes (at least most theologians and priests I've spoken with on this point agree that Jesus likely made mistakes earlier in his life).

Most of the probable translations from the original text were that rule one is the same as rule two, which not only indicates heavily that we are all made up of God, but also supports that concept in the other two possible translations of ὁμοία. After all, if we are all *literally* made up of God, loving your fellow man *very literally* is the same as loving God. Once we plug in that knowledge to the statement,

And then another passage and Catholic practice occurred to me. One that got a lot of exposition but never really seemed to get much explanation (at least none really struck me as "the obvious, definitive truth of its meaning"). In Corinthians 1, Paul details a moment during the Last Supper that Jesus has with his apostles. He "took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, 'This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'"

When you think of this action, telling them that this bread and this wine are his body and blood, it makes for a rather simple way of demonstrating that these two things are made of God. God offering God to God. He tried to put a complex idea into a very simple demonstration. "These things are all Me so,

when you eat this or drink this, remember Me.” He might have grabbed water or grapes or a fork or a chair because all of them are Him.

There is a lot of this exposition of “I am this, and this, and this, and all of this”:

1 Corinthians 6:17 : He who unites himself with the Lord, is one with Him in spirit.

John 14:20 ESV :In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.

1 Corinthians 3:16 ESV : Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?

John 17:20-23 : "I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me.”

Come to think of it, if you think of about when God told Moses during that burning bush moment, "I am who I am", adding, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I am has sent me to you.'" If there wasn't anything that *wasn't* you in the whole of our reality, what would you adequately have them call you that would fit with the concept of totality of that magnitude outside of “I am”?

I believe C.S. Lewis ensnared a beautiful wording of it. “You can’t analyze God. He’s too awesome, too big, too mysterious. I know now why you utter no answer.

You, Yourself *are* the answer.”

Now, it’s also lent support from the whole “made in God’s image” statement, but I think there’s a whole other way that we’re made in God’s image as well.

The design of the human form is absolutely astounding. Even without examining it on a microscopic scale, our body systems are dumbfoundingly brilliant. We have bilateral symmetry that runs up the middle of the body, (external symmetry, of course... not all organs follow this pattern). We’re bipedal (walking on two legs) with toes on each foot for balance adjustments, perfectly suited for the amount of gravity we experience. Our primary method of information intake is seeing and it’s a masterpiece of genius. We capture errant radiation of a very, *very* limited wavelength with the eye. The current estimate of how much of the electromagnetic spectrum is made up of the visible light spectrum has been speculated as about 1/10 billionth, but also as theoretically 0% as the heights of those wavelengths could be infinitely short or infinitely long. Either way, the reality is that we don’t see much of what is going on around us. And even with that *extremely* limited scope, we still manage to be able to identify nearly everything we see. You really should just take a moment to look up how the eye works and just, you know, marvel at the brilliance of the design.

The Laughing Matters

When something moves or vibrates, the air molecules around that object get knocked into the surrounding air molecules, who do the same to the ones around them and that continues outward. The amount of times this happens to a fixed set of molecules in a fixed amount of time determines the pitch of the sound. And we have bones and membranes specifically designed to interpret these molecule bumpings. Not only can we identify a staggering amount of sound sources with only our ears, we can often determine where it is coming from by sound alone. My point is, our physiology is specifically crafted and coordinated to facilitate our very precise and delicate existence on this physical Earth. Our toes work in tandem to meet gravity's challenge and make tiny little adjustments to even the most precarious of balances. God, however, by all logic would exist outside the constraints of gravity, time, space, and all other laws of the universe that we have found to be immutable. In other words, it would be very pointless for God to have eyes as an omnipotent being. God don't need feet.

In fact, there isn't anything about us that's similar to an non-corporeal, omniscient being that's part of everything, not anything that shows up under our 1/10 billionth vision anyways... Everything about us seems almost... opposite of that. Omnipotence? No. Single point of view. Our cells and skin and bones are not eternal; they rot. Every part of our body is smellable, touchable, taste-able, viewable, weigh-able, and every inch of it is measurable and provable.

Except for one thing.

There's one thing about us that doesn't seem to age and then end; it just moves on after the body goes. We can't touch it or taste it and we cannot view

it. So far as we have been able to detect, it has not been measurable or provable. But we feel it, in the center of our torsos. It turns over in disgust when we act selfishly at the expense of another or when we've betrayed someone we care about. When we are in love, it absolutely glows within us. And when we lose a loved one suddenly, we feel as if there was a hole punched out of the center of us. It never lies to us. We feel so strongly that this center-chest area is the origin point for so many of our emotions that we refer to the origin point as our heart. The heart is a muscular organ that pumps our blood. While it is arguably one of the most important organs within our bodies, it doesn't think or feel. There are no pain receptors within the heart. And, to be fair, there is a small array of neurons in your heart, but their sole purpose is the regulation of cardiac activity. Put succinctly, the heart simply doesn't care.

But something in there does care. There is something that dwells deep within us, something that loses its footing when we get horrible news about someone that we love. That part of you? That's the origin point of our empathy, our compassion. The start.

We are still on the very edge of the discoveries of how our brain is involved with our emotions. As far as my research has taken me, we still have no idea where exactly in the brain is the origin point for love, empathy, sympathy and compassion and the emotions related to them. These emotions are all based in that direct connection between human beings... A connection that cannot be measured or detected by instrumentation, just like the emotions that connection influences. It's a connection that truly makes us thrive, that truly gives our lives meaning... that keeps us alive here after we

have gone. Books are the legacy of one's words like people are the legacy of one's emotional connections.

Every single one of us has this unmeasurable emotional source within us that, for the sake of brevity, I'll now refer to as "the soul", minus the specific connotations applied by religion in this field if you don't mind.

Imagine you are making a journey from a place you've lived all of your life. Let's pretend that place is warm a good portion of the time, but sometimes overbearingly hot. I'll leave it up to the reader to decide if this 'imagined you' is excited about this move, but either way, you are moving to someplace else that will be your home for a while. You know some people in town there, and it'll be good to see them and live in the same town together again. As you make your way to your journey, there's some cooler places and then there is a scattered variety of different colds that you run into. And you've been given the heads up that, one day on this journey, that temperature is going to plummet insanely hard, and it will remain that way.

Last night, I realized that being physically made of God might be an idea that most had not explored. I mean, I certainly hadn't thought of it until it really clicked for me that that was the case. So, I searched "are we made of God?" in Google, and found nothing on the first seven pages that was remotely on the topic. All of them were about being made in God's Image. Even when I searched "made of God" and filtered out any results with the word "image" in them, not one result was close to the topic I'm addressing. I performed one more search before moving on, and it yielded one result and a song. I have no idea if there was a good song, but that WordPress was an article from Richard

Bohr, the same man my Aunt Nancy insisted I read more of. Aunt Nancy is the first person to have read this book twice, by the way. Intrigued, I clicked the link, and saw a short post from him about Julian of Norwich. She's estimated to have lived around 1390-1430's and wrote the first book by a known woman author written in English. In the article, Rohr quotes this book:

Christ is the one who connects us to the "great root" of our being. . . [1] "God is our mother as truly as God is our father," she says. [2] We come from the Womb of the Eternal. We are not simply made by God; we are made "of God." [3] So we encounter the energy of God in our true depths. And we will know the One from whom we have come only to the extent that we know ourselves. God is the "ground" of life. [4] God is in everything [5] God is "nature's substance," the very essence of life. [6]

When I told God that I believed in Him, I told him that I would choose Jesus Christ to be my savior. At the time, I understood that the most important thing was that I chose to believe. And that I pick a prophet as my main prophet... my home speaker... my envoy. I picked Jesus Christ because I had some history with Him and felt closest to what He had tried to tell us. And not everything He said makes sense to me. But to be fair, it's been translated without any of the context or subtlety of the language these stories were first told in, and they are parables and speeches given to people of a certain time and context. People wrote down what Jesus said to others, but so much of what he said and used to explain is anchored in where they were and when they were. Bear in mind, our knowledge was pretty limited at the time. And different wordings may have wound up on the page than was said. The Gospel of Matthew was written down for the first time 30-60 years after Jesus was killed. In fact, the Gospel of Mark was the one that scholars believe was written the earliest... in 70 AD. 27 years after Christ died.

Think of how long it took us to accept that our world was not the center of the universe, that the world wasn't flat, and that people born on different parts of the planet aren't a different species because we all look differently... well, actually, all three of those are still argued against. Back then though, explaining the way the Big Bang occurred? To explain the incredibly delicate method of arranging the different forces in our universe to create the exact conditions necessary for life or how a being outside of our tenuous grasp on how time guides a process of evolution to arrive at us? Jesus may have understood it, but we didn't know enough about enough for Jesus to speak in parables and metaphors. So it's okay that I don't understand everything because I can't. But, nonetheless, I chose Jesus as my Prophet and as my Savior..

So the first line from Julian of Norwich's statement hit me hard.

"Christ is the one who connects us to the "great root" of our being."

It suddenly made so much sense. Jesus wasn't just at the gate. Jesus is the coat and hat and gloves and heater those that prepared for the cold gather along their journey. He's the connection point with, at one end, the sense-dulling physical world in which we live out our days, and at the other end, the ethereal, intangible soul's home. Jesus is a bridge between the two and the ease of transition; the guide rope in the blizzard and the dark.

In death, we suddenly find ourselves in the world of the ethereal, a much less restricted-to-laws-and-boundaries-and-constraints existence. It makes sense we would need a way to the next place. Imagine making your way someplace when all the sudden you have to relearn how to walk, you suddenly don't

know anything about anything... I imagine you wouldn't make it very far past that point. Jesus, in a sense, is that transition, bringing us the rest of the way safely.

I recently thought back on the idea of all of us being parts of God experiencing His creation and then leaving behind the material parts of ourselves to be reclaimed by Nature (also made of God) and the soul rejoining God; His pieces returning to Him, modified with an entire lifetime of understandings and experiences... and I did a bit of a double-take. This behavior is awfully familiar, isn't it? The desire to share what we know and have experienced, our accomplishments and our own creations, that which we put our time, energy and thought towards... these are the driving motivations to share that we already have. And I now believe that, one day, I might just get the chance to do that sharing with God in earnest.

With this in mind, it makes the staples of being in love make complete sense. They become every bit as important to you as you are. You feel complete. You laugh easily, and you feel... right. You feel great. I always felt like... like I was operating at max efficiency, you know? And kissing someone that I was deeply in love with always felt like I was finally catching my breath. When I feel myself falling for someone, I drop more and more of my defenses at their feet.

But, as we get more and more comfortable within it... existing for a long time with that love, we tend to notice it less and less. Our brains have a Sensory Gating setting in them... they filter out new information that is redundant or unchanging. If you spend time in a monkey house at a zoo and notice the place has a distinct odor, ten minutes later, you don't notice it unless you're thinking

about it. If you walk past a window and casually glance out the window at your backyard, and nothing catches your eye, the brain filtered out most of the information captured, because nothing new to report out there... nothing to waste mental focus on. Love can be like that sometimes. Sometimes we forget how great our lives are because we have love consistently in them, and because we are just too used to that love. We forget as a fish forgets to appreciate each gallon of water. We forget how loved we are by those that love steadily because it isn't in jeopardy. There isn't anything that's changing up and the brain slides past it to the next bit of informational intake.

And God is like that. Even more so, when you think about it, because He literally makes up everything. That is forever unchanging; there will never be something that isn't made of God. Our existence is so permeated by God, that He becomes the easiest thing to overlook. Especially when we are surrounded by manmade structures. In the earliest recorded histories of man, we see nearly every tribe believes that there was something greater than themselves that they owed a great debt of gratitude to. And I'm thinking that one of the reasons that belief was so prevalent in those early days of human history is because being surrounded by God was so unmistakably evident. Everywhere they looked, they saw God's designs as He designed them. And when they made something out of those designs, like tools, clothes, shelter, etc... a needle made of bone was still clearly made out of bone. They could see what it was made out of originally. The furs, leather, wood, stone, sinew... they still showed in the item made out of it. But now? Look around you. Unless you are in a room full of people or animals or outside in a non-big city setting, most likely more than 80% of what you are able to see, you are unable to see what the materials started their journey as. Abraham Lincoln once remarked, "I can see how it might be possible for a man to look down upon the Earth and be an

atheist, but I cannot conceive how he could look into the heavens and say there is no God.”

But that doesn't mean that it has to be hard to love God. I know... Loving God is hard sometimes, like trying to swim upstream. I get that. You never get to hug Him or nudge Him with your elbow. You haven't seen His face and you can't hear Him with your ears. But isn't it so strange that this is the case? I mean, that we should be designed to love each other and be created with the most important law out in front (Love God with your everything and, in a different wording, love each other and yourself) and yet, loving God would be difficult? If you've been in love before, you know how much the opposite of difficult falling in love with someone it is. It's effortless, like falling. In fact, some people are pulled into it despite their very best efforts to resist it.

Loving God is hard until you realize that you are seeing Him in literally everything. It's God or nothing that we are made of and I've learned to love the soul of the person and that which they are made up of. After all, I can get a lot closer to hugging a soul than I can God directly. When I look at people now, I see them as the created body that carries and conflicts with their soul. I see the enormous conflict between, as they say, the head and the heart. All those people... they are all flawed, sometimes cruel or hateful, but their soul isn't. It's easy to love someone's soul. It's the home of their love, compassion and joy. It's the brain that hates and assigns the blame; the soul does not. And a soul in pain is easy to pity, forgive and be generous to. The jerk it's riding along inside of, not so much. If you love their souls, you quickly find that human beings suck at choosing who to limit out their love to. Every soul deserves your love and the love of your fellow man. The soul is the puppy of the human body.

I say? Love 'em all and let God sort 'em out.

Because, if you spend your life loving and getting closer to people, it makes sense that, after your soul leaves this form, you would continue that trend. Think about it this way, in simplest terms. You, your consciousness, your soul, suddenly finds yourself no longer bound to its physical form, nor are you tethered to viewing the world through eyes like you have the entire time you've been attached to the form. You don't navigate with legs now... or have a "thought process" (you're brain dead!) ... you just ARE. The limitless directions stretch outward and you are so new at this that you can't concentrate because your body is brain dead and ... and then you feel it. Among the emotions flowing through you, you feel love. And following it back to its source is not a "go left, four blocks down, and hang a louie" kind of thing. You just start going toward it. You spent a lot of your life making those loving connections with other parts of God. Your desire to be near others and your familiarity with genuine love has led you back to rejoin the rest of yourself. Because you are made out of God.

But what if you didn't? What if you turned your life's goals toward that which you can get for yourself? Toward what you can get out of people rather than what you can do for them to bring joy into their lives? What if you didn't act out of love, but self interest? What if your trend is inward instead of outward? In my research for the book, I happened upon a quote from the Bahá'í faith that summed it up nicely. "Heaven is nearness to Me and Hell is separation from Me."

Now, theologians aren't totally certain where the imagery of Hell took on its heat. Some believe it's confusion over the lake of fire at the end of Revelations which is never named as Hell, some that it comes from being associated with

the underground and the belief that volcanoes were passageways to Hell. In the Bible, the actual description of Hell is a dark, cold place that those in it are outside of God's love. The name Hell is taken from Norse goddess Hel, who ruled over an underworld described as a cold, monotonous place. The word frequently translated as Hell, Geenna, is actually the name of a gorge near Jerusalem at which children were sacrificed to the Canaanite god, Molech. The method of sacrifice often was burning, and there has been a lot of speculation that this was the reason Jesus named Hell as Geenna. I believe Jesus latched onto this location for a different reason than the method of the deaths. That Jesus chose to name it so because of the murders themselves. It was where countless acts of the deepest of separations occurred. The murdering of children by one of the most horrific ways of dying in order to gain themselves the favor of a God. How damaged must your compassion be to do this to a child? How strong must your desire be for that which you want for yourself?

I believe that, when you trend toward self, when you do not put others as a priority, when you deliberately live against the very design of you and them and all of this... you put yourself further and further from that beacon in the dark and confusion. And you become less and less likely to head for it out of habit.

I don't believe it is God casting us out. I don't believe that there is a moment that a giant book of your life is opened and God brings down His gavel. I think that those that recognize Him in the dark and confusion naturally gather towards Him and rejoin Him. And that those that don't?... don't. And are lost, separated from God, in the dark and confusion and wailing and gnashing of teeth.

It gave a whole new understanding of “I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on Earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on Earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 18:18).

When you think about it, God’s been pretty clear across the board on getting the message out that you are supposed to care about the rest of them. Across all of the major religions (sincerely, *all* of them), we are taught the Golden Rule; a rule that flatly states to treat everyone well and subtly hints that we should be doing this because we care about each other. But I personally favor Judaism’s statement of the Golden Rule in the Torah, primarily due to the latter portion of it: “Whatever is hateful and distasteful to you, do not do to your fellow man. This is the entire Torah, the rest is commentary. Go learn.”

Even the design of how happiness works seems to indicate this.

Think about the last time that you were really excited to get something for yourself. Most of the happiness was in the wanting and acquiring. Once you had it, whatever it was, the happiness immediately began to recede and that shiny thing you just acquired begins to tarnish and lose its luster. It’s like trying to hold on to water cupped in one hand. Doing for self most often offers diminished returns in happiness. But doing for others... that’s a bit different. Sometimes you still pay for it with money (which is bought with your time, effort, and your attention) but, often, it is paid by just your time, your effort, and your attention. You take from yourself to help someone or to bring happiness to them. It’s a gift that so often becomes so much more to the receiver than what the giver took from themselves, but the happiness the giver

gets back is palpable...a happiness with the texture and consistency of real sustenance. It's the kind of happiness that nourishes the soul; you feel important as you watch yourself make an impact. It really is some of the best of what we do as human beings.

So, for the moment, let's stick compassion, empathy, and generosity in a little circle and label these things as "good". They are things that bring us closer to God and bring genuine happiness to those that practice them.

The opposite of course, under my definition, is evil. When I think of evil, I don't think of it as this sentient force. The way I most closely identify evil is that which separates you from God (here among us and elsewhere). If good is doing for others... sometimes at the sacrifice of self for others, bad is focusing only on self... and evil is taking from others for self. If good is getting closer to others, evil is moving further away from others. And when you do that, God gets quieter, because you're moving further from Him. If evil has a consciousness and had its pick to cause you some pain, to get you to sin, or to drive you a little further toward a removed and self-centered life, it'd lay money on the third one every time.

And those trends continue, I'd imagine. Countless intelligent people have stated that you become that which you spend your time, energy and attention on. Whatever you focus on, you become that. It is my sincerest hope that you will finish this book and decide to become more connected, and that this statement sticks with you: The truest and most concise path to one's own happiness is the pursuit of someone else's.

One of the other clues to this I've since come across is that, when we love each other, it charges those batteries within you and you have a healthy self-love as well. It's a sometimes hard earned self-love and happiness, but none-the-less, the best kind. But when we simply do for self, that self-love goes unnourished, as counter intuitive as it seems first glance. It's not real self-love because our real self does not love what we are doing to ourselves.

6

Genuine

Lo' and behold, I've just handed you the keys to as much genuine happiness as you care to convert from your time, your energy, and your attention. Huzzah! The search is over!

So why the hesitation?

What is it that keeps us from doing this? Well... *trust*, to be blunt. We don't trust each other... at least, not in a "I've never met you before and my defenses are down" kind of way. Go ahead, think of a few arguments against living with your defenses willingly lowered. *Don't progress in the book until you have actually done so. It's an important step.*

Seriously.

Go on.

I'd be willing to wager that most of the reasons, if not all of them, were provided to you by the big Granddaddy of all Fear. What if they take advantage of my vulnerabilities? What if I end up needing what I gave? What if, what if, what if? And all the while we are pondering it, your Fear of the Unknown is drawing up the building plans for all new defenses.

It is this type of thinking which leads to such ephemeral happiness and short-term love. When we love, we tend to do it with a fair amount of our defenses still up. And we tend to love with aim. We choose to love certain

people once we believe we can trust them. We fire our love out at certain people from the arrow slits in our defense walls. Quite a lot of us are very decisive about who is allowed to breach the gates of our castle walls. But that is not the only way that we love.

You've loved without aim before (I hope). And it felt amazing. When people say and genuinely mean "we had the *best* time tonight", I would bet there was a fair amount of loving without aim that occurred. You see, sometimes we become overwhelmed with joy. When this happens, our defenses tend to go down. Genuine love tends to drop those defenses. There are countless things that can trigger this. Imagine you are on a rollercoaster that you are excited to ride or sledding down a particularly good hill in the snow. You're madly in love and enjoying a stroll and conversation with that person. You're at dinner with a bunch of family members that you love dearly and haven't seen in "too long".

In those moments, we are happy. Our defenses start coming down. And seemingly out of nowhere, we start loving without aim. We aren't worried about who will take advantage of this vulnerability nor that trusting will lead us off the path that we have chosen for ourselves. We just... love. Just before the rollercoaster tips forward, we smile. As our feet punch through the snow and we mentally position our body and the sled while the lip of the hill is fast approaching, that smile widens out to a grin. And, as that person you are madly in love with does something on your walk that you find indescribably adorable, or you look around the table at all the loved ones that you've missed, that grin boils over, and you laugh the Genuine Laugh. And how fitting that it should easily be the most pleasant, infectious, musical and joyful sound we make.

The Laughing Matters

Earlier I gave you the Riddle of the Missing Sound, “What is the nonverbal sound of love?” Now I’ve provided its answer: The Genuine Laugh. It is a riddle by its very structure. The answer is always possible in a riddle; it’s the question that makes it *seem* impossible. In this particular case, when I asked you what the sound of love is, you made the assumption that I was referring to the type of love we tend to have the most experience with; love *with* aim... and that’s a big part of why the answer was not readily apparent.

And if you were about to argue that you do this while loving *with* aim, I would ask you to think back honestly and see if, in those moments, you didn’t drop your defenses a bit... see if you didn’t love a bit more openly in those moments.

What is one of the absolutely most common qualities that women cite as what they are looking for in a partner? They want someone who can make them laugh, and now we can have a much better understanding of why that is.

The laughing matters.

7

Not My Path

As mentioned before, human beings started as groups and tribes. In a tribe, there is a lot less focus on getting for oneself and a much greater focus on doing for the betterment of the tribe. Before we even developed our languages, we knew two crucial things: that there was something bigger than ourselves that we owed a debt of gratitude to, and that life is always better with other people in it... that we need each other and that what is best is to be together. Yes, you could go it alone, but it's a lonely and dangerous life. Together, we were stronger, and real joy could be had. Alone, one may have some periods of contentment, or appreciation of beauty, but happiness would be elusive. No one gets to happiness on their own.

So what was one to do if they wanted more for themselves? Well, you can separate from the rest of them. Because the less you care about others, the more easily you can take for yourself.

But we didn't stay in tribes. We built villages, and kingdoms... towns and cities. We retained some of the community mentality, but we no longer

relied on our small community to support us. You no longer necessarily knew the person who slaughtered the animal that you had part of for dinner, or the person that fixed something in your home. Nowadays, such a connection is exceptionally rare, with so much of what you use being made in an entirely different country. Yes, we were now much freer than before to gain for self, but we no longer had the protection of the tribe either, and the less tribal we became, the more fearful we became that there are people out there that had embraced the mentality that they could get more for themselves by caring about others less. We began putting locks on doors and not just latches to keep them closed against the wind. Bars on windows, alarm systems, wi-fi cameras, fences and gates... defenses against those that would take without care for the owner. And we began to see the death of the neighbor. People do not commune the way they once did with our neighborhoods. We've made ourselves much more efficient at being alone and depending only on a system and it's relatively faceless interactions. And without our tribes, I fear that many more of us have had an easier time embracing getting more by caring less.

I spoke before about the unpredictability of the Cacophony. We fear that others will do that which we would not prefer and our trust in each other takes a nosedive. This is problematic when we, the blind pilots, decide on a course that we would like our life to follow or, as I call it, My Own Path. Our fear of the unknown regarding the unpredictability of others increases the more we focus on My Own Path. It pushes us to stay even tighter on our own path, and to not take risks by making ourselves or our assets vulnerable to others. So we must make a choice, one that, today, most of us don't even think of as an active choice as our society has taught this as the norm for so long; it's not a choice, it's just what we do. We let go of more of our compassion. We release a little more of it each time we pass up helping someone else, or brush off someone that we don't feel like dealing with or walk the other direction, away from someone that is hurting. It breaks our compassion more and more, as if gripping harder to My Own Path creates fissures and cracks in our

connections to others. Not only are we not physically able to see the inexplicable connection that we share as human beings, but we cannot see the damage we are doing to those connections.

One of the effects of damaging that connection is that it fuels blame. You see, for most of us, we carry two different barometers when it comes to blame: one for ourselves, and one for everyone else. With ourselves, yes, we take what occurred as a result of what we did into account, but a great deal of it leans heavily into intent when assigning blame to ourselves. We didn't *mean* for that to happen after all. It wasn't our intent... whereas blame is assigned to others typically based almost unilaterally around what occurred as a result of the choice that they made. And that is largely because we cannot know others' intentions. We do not have the viewpoint and walking a mile in their shoes wouldn't cut it because they are far more than a mere mile, as are you. Their life consists of millions of interactions, decisions, outcomes, and observations that make up why they think as they think and why they believe as they believe. Not one of us stands a chance at replicating their thinking process.

What you *can do*, however, is start with you. I can say that most everything that I've decided to do or not do, I had a pretty good reason that made sense to me for me to do it at the time. My exact reasoning for why I believed it to be a good idea is not something that I could ever offer to another. I simply do not have time to explain every single reason behind the way I think or the decisions I make. I usually try to make good decisions. I trust that I usually try to make good decisions. I'd imagine that's a trust that you could extend to yourself as well? Good. Because that's the first step. It's the second step that's a bit more of a doozy.

Once you realize that about yourself, though, the second step becomes doable. Trust that the rest of them are the same as you and I in that respect. Not everyone that cuts you off on the highway is just some idiot driver. Not everyone that argues with you is an idiot or is just wrong. If they are passionate about their cause, you can trust that they've got damn good reasons for believing as they do.

So, that's all well and good, but how does that help me (outside of being more tolerant, less angry, and having a more functioning relationship with my fellow man, of course)? To comment on that, I would very much like to bring up a book that changed my life and kickstarted all that is taught within the pages of the book you are reading now. Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* is a rather unique book, as he had crafted a story that allowed the author to offer his unique perspective on human behaviors. The story centers on a child that's born during the first manned trip to Mars (most commonly called "Mike" among those that know him and "The Man Martian" to those that don't). When the astronauts arrive, they discover that a Martian race inhabits the planet. When a terrible thing happens to the crew (not of the Martians' doing), that baby spends 20 years being raised by the red planet's inhabitants. Finally, Earth, who hasn't heard from the astronauts in 20 years, arrives on a rescue mission. I bring this book up to discuss a very interesting part of Mike's upbringing.

Something very unique about Mike's foster parents' species is that they know there's an afterlife. When the physical shell of one of their own expires, they shed it but remain among their people. They can interact with the physical world and speak plainly with those that have not yet "died". But that's not the best part. They can continue their "life's work" from beyond the grave.

So many of them will spend their whole lives perfecting the first few measures of a song they are writing, because they know that they have an eternity to finish it, and to write however many songs they wish with the same level of attentiveness. And this unique part of their existence lends to a beautiful aspect in their culture: grokking. The Martians understood what I just wrote about prior; every being has their own unique perspective that is the culmination of everything they've experienced. Each person is, therefore, afforded a view of the world and its many truths that no one else in the history of man will ever be able to view. Imagine a large complex object in the center of a large crystal; a crystal that has been cut so that it has thousands and thousands of facets (or flat surfaces). Each person has their own facet that they can view things through, but they only get one angle of a small part of the whole picture. They can't move over and view someone else's facet for reasons you already know, *but they can ask them about theirs*. The more one learns about other people's facets, the better one's understanding of the actual true nature of that which is being observed. Once one has amassed enough facets... enough that they feel they understand the truth of the observed subject, they "grok" the subject.

I've become a big fan of grokking. It allows me to put new spins on old ideas. You know, you really don't learn how stagnant your thinking has become until you start incorporating grokking. When someone doesn't agree with my view on something, do you know what I do now? I start asking questions. Not trying to trap them into realizing that they are wrong, but trying to find out what it is that they're seeing from their facet. I don't know about you, but hearing the truth... it resonates when you hear it. And I trust that they have reasons that make sense to them for them to believe as they do. Not everyone will describe their facet to you... sometimes because they haven't looked very carefully at it (sometimes for fear of finding out it isn't showing what they

believed it was showing)... and sometimes they are staring at it and convinced they know what it shows ("It's bristles on a large paint brush! It's so obvious!"). But if enough people tell you about what *their* facets show, you can piece together that it is actually an elephant, with bristly hair at the end of its tail.

There were several parts of *Stranger in a Strange Land* that I found to be quite clever observations about human behavior that the author made through Mike. The character gave the author a unique platform. Here is a person, raised in a culture of civility and a focus on grokking all that they encounter. The character is meeting humanity for the first time, with a fully-formed adult mind at the wheel. Mike spends a large portion of the book offering an outsiders' perspective on several behavioral mannerisms of people. And the motivation for him to do this is strong. He is also a human being that doesn't know why his people do the things they do. Eventually, he feels he's got humanity pegged, but still doesn't "feel like people" due to one simply fact: he does *not* understand why something is funny and has never laughed. Ever.

This conundrum plagues him throughout the story, keeping him from finally feeling human. After years have passed (I assume, Heinlein never really specifies) Mike and his companion, Jill, are out together at a zoo when they happen upon a monkeyhouse and, during an ugly incident between three monkeys, utters his first real laugh. In fact, he absolutely shrieks, hacks, and wheezes his way through a large swath of the laughter spectrum. He laughs so hard and for so long that Jill has to take him home. Finally, he stops and explains to her that he finally gets it and he finally feels human. When pressed, he tells her that he's "found out why people laugh. They laugh because it hurts so much... because it's the only thing that'll make it stop hurting."

This statement perplexed me greatly. Something inside myself recognized the truth within it, but also that it was part of another truth. It sat heavy in my mind and was the subject of several meditations. It stayed with me like a small sliver of glass in my mind that would periodically flare. That statement and his next. Mike goes on to explain that every gut-bustingly funny joke, gag, prank, etc has at least one victim. There's always someone taking the hit. That has the worst luck in a situation. That gets hurt or embarrassed or made to be a fool. That things go ironically or poetically wrong for.

Think of all the story jokes you know and see if this fits for yourself. Sometimes, even the listener is the victim.

INTERMISSION

Seriously.

Take a day to let that one process
before continuing.

7

Theories

Mike was not the first to spend countless hours meditating on why people laugh. It's a question that some of the most respected intelligent men have stepped up to attempt to answer. It is now believed to be the very first vocalized language human beings developed, its purpose being a social gesture to gain others' trust. It is the simplest sound that we make, merely a squeezing of the lungs in a rhythm and most people don't even modulate the sound with their vocal cords. It seems to be something that is at the core of us and is frequently synonymous with being happy. No wonder it's drawn so much attention.

There've been many theories on why we laugh that span centuries and centuries of research and observation. And yet, it's a question that most people pull back from instinctively. I spent hours as a teenager sitting in a chair in our living room, posing one query after another, exploring the nature of man, the universe and philosophy by way of logic and recalled observations, and I flinched back the moment the question "why is something funny" came into my mind.

It was too abstract... too nebulous... and, honestly, frightening in a very unique way. It was as if the answer to that question was hidden in a place I dared not go; something within me recognized that. Eventually, after I found the Breaking Laugh and began to see it for what it was (and what we use it for), I plunged into these theories, unfocused my eyes a bit, and started seeing how they were all related. And I began to see why I had instinctively recoiled.

The Laughing Matters

As I said, great minds have undertaken the task of determining what humor is, why something is funny, and why we laugh. Aristotle, Socrates and Plato were among the first of philosophers to try their hands at the subject, though you may find that they held a very negative viewpoint of why we laugh. Plato preached that we should avoid laughing as it can cause one to lose control of their emotions. He stated that someone that gives way to violent laughter provokes a violent reaction. I'm going to guess someone punched him for an inappropriate chuckle at some point.

Plato also proposed that when we laugh at someone, it is usually at the absurdity of the person. That we take pleasure in how ridiculous someone else is, and that this is a evil vice. Aristotle agreed with him, referring to "wit" as educated insolence, the mean between boorishness and buffoonery. Aristotle was likely punched for the same thing at some point, unrelated. Those thinkers gave us the Superiority Theory; we laugh as a form of ridicule when we feel superior to someone else. Most of the context for laughing in the Bible follows this school of thought.

Thomas Hobbes generally agreed with this way of thinking. He stated that "the idea that laughter is self-applause can nevertheless be defended by pointing out that, even though somebody else's joke occasions my laughter, what I am laughing at, what produces my joy, might be that I can see the point and thus appreciate my superiority." In short, when I laugh, I'm both patting myself on the back and, simultaneously, being a jerk.

Rene Descartes came to a very similar conclusion in *Passions of the Soul*. He wrote:

Derision or scorn is a sort of joy mingled with hatred, which proceeds from our perceiving some small evil in a person whom we consider to be deserving of it; we have hatred for this evil, we have joy in seeing it in him who is deserving of it; and when that comes upon us unexpectedly, the surprise of wonder is the cause of our bursting into laughter... And we notice that people with very obvious defects such as those who are lame, blind of an eye, hunched-backed, or who have received some public insult, are specially given to mockery; for, desiring to see all others held in as low estimation as themselves, they are truly rejoiced at the evils that befall them, and they hold them deserving of these (178–179).

Or, put another way, we laugh when we see someone getting what we think they deserve. Now, Francis Hutcheson came on the scene and, while he agreed with some of the things said, largely denounced Superiority Theory as the universal reason for laughter. He points out that we often feel superior to animals and people and don't feel the urge to laugh. In stressful situations, people on the verge of crying start laughing and that doesn't really fit the model either.

Several thinkers, including Sigmund Freud, proposed that laughter was a release of pent up tension or nervous energy, eventually forming Relief Theory. They believed that emotions built up energy. Anger builds to striking out, fear builds to fleeing or fighting. Nervousness builds nervous energy which, in contrast, doesn't really build to doing anything but laughing. Freud believed this to be the case but thought that the two most pent-up energies were hostility and sexual desire. He strikes a very compelling point as most jokes that get big laughs are either sexual or hostile to one degree or another. One of

the other laughters proposed by Sigmund was one in which we release the energy that we psychically build up as we are preparing to pity the victim of the joke; that we are given an out in the form of a punchline to laugh off that pity instead. Remember this one. We're going to be swimming in the same pool as that idea shortly.

Around the same 18th century period, an opposing argument arose: Incongruity Theory. This one stated that it is the surprise, the unexpected "ah-ha" moment that garners a laugh from us. This theory explains that humor is setting up one expectation, only to find it turned on its ear at the punchline. This was the theory that Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer, along with countless philosophers, pushed for. We laugh at that which we did not expect and that which seems out of place. Typically, the punch line's ah-ha moment occurs when the listener makes the connection between the seemingly random turn of events and the setup of the joke.

"I once shot an elephant in my pajamas. How he got in my pajamas, I'll never know." ~Groucho Marx

The last thing I want to do is insult you. But it IS on the list.

Sure, I'd love to help you out ... Now, which way did you come in?

I started with nothing, and I still have most of it.

My mind's made up, don't confuse me with facts.

Bureaucrats cut red tape, lengthwise.

Take my advice — I'm not using it.

We are made to believe things are headed one direction, typically by cleverly having the outcome be a different meaning of a familiar phrase that is used in the setup of the joke or the payoff. It is our predictive nature that provides a platform of incongruent humor.

For a long time, Incongruity Theory was the most current and accepted theory of humor. Until McGraw and Warren hit the scene, these were the main three theories that the human race had generally determined was the truth behind why we laugh (or, at least, the closest we've ever gotten to answering it; not one of those theories accounts for all instances in which people laugh, especially tickling and play fighting). Then, in 2014, a two page theory published by Dr. Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren changed everything. McGraw, who had previously spent a great deal of time focused on the study of emotions and expectations, had uncovered the first universal theory on why we laugh.

The gist of the surprisingly short paper is that there must be a balance between benign elements and violation elements for humor to occur. Benign elements are things that are unchanged, comforting, normal, non-offensive, non-threatening, predictable and safe. Violation elements are a bit harder to describe: something that's not right, something unpredictable, something that threatens, ... that element that makes a joke "too far".

The Laughing Matters

There needs to be a bit of both in the balance, but the balance of the mixture is set by the nature of the relationship between the listener of the joke or viewer of the situation and the victim of the joke or lander of the pratfall. If the two people are close, then the benign will normally outweigh the violation. Something as simple as a very small stumble while walking with someone that you love dearly can be funny enough to produce out loud laughter, but the violation must be kept relatively light. Inversely, a person you have never met is allowed a lot more violation.

And I can't sell you hard enough the sheer brilliance of the theory, particularly when it comes to the part regarding the relationship between humor and... well, relationships. If you don't care about someone, we can laugh more easily at their pain, anguish and ESPECIALLY their embarrassment, even more so if that person is fictional.

And for anyone that has ever been thoroughly humiliated, they know how crushing it can be. It's a totally different hurt that takes you down from within. But if we know or care about them, simply missing the straw in their drink while trying to capture it with their mouth and making a derpy face can send a best friend into heaving laughing fits. It's like the optimal zone of humor (the area in which something garners the biggest laugh) slides into different positions up and down a gradient scale of clean to dirty, care-a-lot to not at all, Benign to Violation... the Genuine Laugh to the Breaking Laugh.

8

Breaking

Both the Genuine and Breaking Laughs come out of the relationship you have with the person... and another way of saying it is that the amount of

benign in the joke directly equates to how much love you have for the victim. How close they are to you. The closer they are, the cleaner the laugh. The more you love without aim, the more Genuine the laugh. The more violation it has ... the more Breaking of a laugh it is. Or, at least, that's what I had come to call it, the Breaking Laugh. Simply put, we care about others in general to an extent, varying degrees from person to person. There are a lot of times that we laugh off a moment where we could have had compassion. I mean, most of us don't like to see harm come to others, right? Okay, we make a lot of exceptions there, to be fair but, for the average general person that you don't know, you don't typically want bad things to happen to them, right? It'd be nice if good things happened for them, right? BUT... we don't necessarily want to be responsible for having to use our time, energy and attention to make nice things happen for that person we don't know.

Well, the Breaking Laugh is the other option. It's a salve we put on a wound that we keep open; one that never closes and breaks off a little more compassion for our fellow man each time it is applied. We are actively training ourselves to care a little less about others with the Breaking Laugh because, in its simplest form, feeling bad for someone doesn't feel good. Yes, that feeling of connection when you are compassionate feels good, but feeling terrible about something that happened to someone else isn't what most people would describe as a "good time". And that wound that doesn't close? That's the raw edge of the compassion that keeps breaking off as we delve further and further into the focus of ensuring the safety of My Own Path. After all, that's the other reason that we step away from that compassion for them... because feeling that compassion is to be open to the possibility that they may need your help. And who knows what they might need from you and how might that alter the course that you've set for your own life? You can't know until you've already done it and found out, and so, once again, we hand control over to that

Granddaddy fear of the Unknown who promptly pulls us back from those that may need help. And the more the wound worsens. And the more salve we need. And the more compassion crumbles and breaks off. And once the “I can get more for myself if I care about others less” mentality really takes hold, it gets easier and easier to deny others your compassion, and to laugh that Breaking Laugh.

Let's take a look at a comedy show that I have a guilty pleasure for: It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia. This quick-witted group of actors created one of the funniest shows on television. Dennis and Sweet Dee, Mack, Frank and Charlie are the core characters.. Dennis is a complete narcissist and, frankly, a dangerous sociopath that preys on women (and anyone else, for that matter, should it suit his desires). His sister, Sweet Dee, is a talentless wannabe that would likely be the voice of reason among the gang if she didn't immediately lose her moral high ground at the first sight of something that she wants. Mack is pretty delusional as well; he's obsessed with his body image (without really taking care of his body) and sees himself as a dangerous, clever authority figure when, in reality, is a bit of a moron and fails miserably at his attempts at toughness (particularly when showing his karate moves). Frank is disgusting. He will swindle anyone if given half a chance and has become very rich several times over by doing exactly that, he's often the voice of betrayal, lives in absolute squalor and is the frequently completely emotionally absent father of Dennis and Dee. His favorite christmas gift to give his children is a box with nothing inside (while recording their reactions). Everyone of these people is someone that should be pitied. They are horrible, wretched people, or they are pathetic. We should feel bad for them but, instead, we laugh at the unfortunate situations that they get themselves into and that they frequently “I don't care” their way out of, often at several victims' expense.

Lastly, we come to Charlie. Charlie is an illiterate young man that works at the bar the gang owns. While Dee and Dennis serve, Mack does security (I think?), Frank drinks and handles the business side of things, and Charlie is in charge of bashing the rats to death, cleaning the bathrooms and dealing with any refuse... usually burning it in the back of the bar and calling it "recycling". ("Uh, because I'm recycling the trash into heat for the bar, and lots of smoke for the bar, giving the bar the smokey smell we all like.") Charlie is Frank's roommate in that disgusting apartment, a place where alley cats yowl so frequently and loudly that he has to feed himself a lot of liquor and cat food to make himself pass out in order to get any sleep. Charlie is about as uneducated as people get, and is the unpredictable wild card of the group. His neural pathways are fried from his frequent glue and spray paint huffing and he obsessively stalks a waitress, frequently getting her fired from her jobs. But don't worry... as it turns out, she's kind of a terrible person, too.

My point is that their situations are manipulated carefully to show some of the worst within these people without deliberately crossing a very tricky line. And by doing so, we are very rarely reminded that these are human beings and that we are supposed to care about them. Charlie is one of the most pitiable human beings that I have ever seen. He's likely the victim of child molestation by his creepy uncle who is constantly over at Charlie's mother's house and creepily hits on Charlie no matter who is in the room, is constantly taken advantage of by his friends, or even outright betrayed without a second thought. He is constantly lied to and has become convinced somehow that he is an expert in bird law. Yet, instead of feeling horrible for this poor, wretched creature, he is the "funniest" character on the show. So much of what is funny about each of the characters is how little they care about one another. The little they do care is typically predicated on having the approval of the others. Or their admiration. But for the people themselves, meh, not so much. Their

compassion for one another is near gone, which just makes it funnier. As the incomparable Mel Brooks once brilliantly stated, “tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you fall down a manhole and die.”

Moving on. Let’s take a look at jokes. I cannot think of a better joke to examine than “the oldest joke in show business”: The Aristocrats.

For those of you unfamiliar, The Aristocrats is not a joke that gets told by comedians to an audience. Nor is it something you would find on the Joke page about 2/3s of the way through an issue of *Reader’s Digest*. No, this particular joke is a joke that comedians tell each other. And it’s one of the best examples of a journey joke that exists. The teller begins, innocently enough, by introducing the players in this unfortunate performance: A man walks into a talent agent’s office and proclaiming, “Buddy, do I have an act for you.” Insert comedian’s adlib on what the act is. The manager declares that it is an impressive act and asks what they call themselves. To which the person replies, “The Aristocrats.”

Doesn’t sound like that funny of a joke, does it? That’s because “insert comedian’s adlib” doesn’t nearly cover it. When the agent asks what their act consists of, the comedian launches into what is essentially the most vile, heinous debaucherous acts people can perform (although, technically it often involves the family’s pets as well), often trying to outdo the last comedian they heard telling the joke. Horrific acts intertwine often, and the comedian runs wild constantly describing in detail all of the action. The dirtier the better. But most of them draw a line at some point. I’ve often wondered if that was their own personal, internal line that was drawn, or just the line beyond which they

believe the listener(s) would stop laughing and start to be genuinely horrified. Telling this joke has often been recommended to comedians as good creative practice and can really make a positive impact on one's improvisational skills. There's even a very successful documentary that is solely about this joke and has a surprising amount of the most famous comedians in the world either talking about the joke or telling it.

This joke was famously told by Gilbert Gottfried at the Friar Club Roast of Hugh Hefner. This was significant for two primary reasons. The first being that this is a joke that comedians tell other comedians; this is not a joke that a comedian takes to the mic with. The comedians in the audience and seated on stage, according to others that were there, looked somewhat confused as soon as they recognized the set up... and then immediately lost it. For several of them, I'd imagine that day still lives in infamy.

The second reason was that it was told right after he made a joke about having to make a connecting flight at the Empire State building... two and a half weeks after the attack and the collapse of the World Trade Center's twin towers. The joke was met by silence, boos, a small smattering of nervous laughs and a general sense that it was far too soon, a too far joke and a highly offensive joke as a result. Instead of backing down, he told the most offensive joke a comedian knows. Instead of turning to empathy and compassion for the 2,996 lives taken in the 9/11 attacks and the 6,000+ wounded, Gilbert made a decision to jump the other way. Most comedians would agree, it was the funnier of the two options. I'll note here that Gottfried's version of the joke that will go down in comedy history was very family based and, instead of having the man explain his act to the agent, he brings in the whole family

(including the dog) and they perform acts of extreme incest, bestiality and mass defecation right there in the talent agent's office as the audition.

I would venture that, outside of the confines of the joke (if this were to actually happen in front of us in our own office) most of us would immediately do everything in our power to get those children away from their psychotic parents and that sadistic grandmother. The man telling this to the agent would likely be thrown down, pummeled, and held until the authorities could arrive. What is being described in this joke is horrifying and deliberately the stuff that pushes the absolute limits of what the comedian can get away with describing without having the laughter abruptly stop. And you'd be surprised just how dark some comedians take it and the laughter didn't stop. And, if you think about it, there are some that laugh the hardest at the darkest jokes, almost like

We break our empathy more and more to cope with all the horrors that occur in our world, the guilt of not standing up for the victim and the fear of not knowing what will come our way if we did the right thing by way of all of those around us.

It would seem that this is actively worsening the situation as we go. Our progression of humorous entertainment has been... exploratory would be a word for it. Shows like Jackass and Most Extreme Elimination Challenge with the emphasis on people hurt or injured or in pain or discomfort or humiliated in new and interesting ways for our entertainment. And the typical response to this entertainment? The Breaking Laugh. So many of us are actively training ourselves to be more readily able to defend against our compassion should it put itself in the way of what we want for ourselves.

What could we possibly use as a salve for something as big as the pain of not being the thing that you are? It would have to be pretty powerful to soothe the agony of opposing the design of happiness, right? Unless, of course, we trigger the best feeling that we have: love. Or rather, the illusion of love. The Breaking Laugh is an okay bootleg version of the feeling of love. Laughter is the sound of love, and we have been triggering it in response to our pain. Nowadays, we preemptively strike out at our compassion. We make jokes about spouses cheating on their partners, obesity, cancer, third world conditions, mental disabilities, AIDS, the struggle of being unattractive in an increasingly looks based society, crack addiction, leaders that are actively ruining or abusing a country and its population, terrorism, pedophiles (say what you want about them, at least pedophiles drive slow through school zones), public embarrassment, and pretty much every single thing that causes people to suffer, not realizing that this further allows us to protect My Own Path by breaking our compassion with the topics

And that compassion? That is your tether. That is your bond that links you to the rest of us in the most important of ways. Love and compassion are the joining points between those other parts of God and ourselves. In a very real sense, and in the simplest possible terms, to break your compassion here is to know God less. When I did for others without worry? God became louder and closer. I felt Him all around me. And when I was focused on myself, he became quiet and distant. It seems logically sound that we were designed with two gigantically main goals to achieve in our lives, and the first of those is to care about one another. When we love, we feel important, we feel full, we feel good and when we don't love, we feel unimportant, alone, and unfulfilled. The Genuine Laugh is the one we laugh when we love all; The Breaking Laugh is the one we laugh when we just love on one.

I would very much like to share with you what I have found to be the Genius of Happiness's Design. Think about the last thing that you were really excited to get for yourself. Most of the happiness was in the wanting and acquiring. Once you had it though, whatever it was, the happiness immediately began to recede and that shiny thing you just acquired begins to tarnish and lose its luster. It's like trying to hold water cupped in one hand. And how much more excited were you when you were headed out to get whatever it is than when you had owned it for a day? Doing for self most often offers diminished returns in happiness. But doing for others... that's quite a bit different. Sometimes you still pay for it with money (which is bought with your time, your effort, and your attention) but, often, it's paid by just your time, effort, and/ or attention. You take from yourself to help or to give to someone else to bring a bit of happiness to them. It's a gift that almost always means more to the receiver than to the giver when it's given, but the happiness you get back is palpable... it's a happiness with the texture and consistency of real sustenance. It recharges batteries you may not have realized were empty. I will say that, when it's tools that help the buyer create that are purchased for one's self, those tools for creation tend to have a bit of a longer shelf life in the happiness department, but I believe that this is because they are used to help you share something inside you with others, be it a better cello bow, a new set of paint brushes, or a new camera lens. They are using those tools to create something with the intent of eliciting an emotional response from others through that which they create. So, it's more of a "doing for others" situation.

See, part of the problem with self-based happiness is it pales in comparison to happiness born out of connection. It's like having for dinner a handful of candy you enjoy, versus having something savory and delicious, nutritional, and that's just the right amount of hardness, leaving you comfortably full and satisfied from your socks up. And yet we go for what it is that we are convinced we want at the cost of compassion and connection.

All of the things that I treasure the most in my world share two things in common:

A) I had no idea that they were everything I never knew I always wanted until I was in their path

and

B) They were all born out of interconnection with others and I was led to those things as a byproduct of caring about others.

But we are so convinced that we know what is best for us that we go to some pretty extreme lengths sometimes to “stick to the plan” or get back on My Own Path. And we’ve both trained ourselves *and* been trained by society since birth to believe that fear is our savior. That caution shall protect. That trust is to be earned with a watchful eye and given with a tentative hand.

I want you to do something for me, really quick, if you’ll indulge me...

I want you to imagine this (and not just the frilly, lovely version, but the real life way it would actually go down in the real world): Picture yourself getting out of bed tomorrow and deciding to drop your defenses. Openly loving all of them without remorse or recoil. Helping wherever you see need and whomever you see needing. Try picturing your day tomorrow spent strengthening your compassion and interconnection. How would that go down in the real world?

Run through the scenarios in your mind’s eye and then turn the page.

The Laughing Matters

Go on. Do it, please.

I imagine quite a lot of bad things happened in quite a lot of your heads. After all, you are essentially letting go of the rudder while boating at fairly high speeds. You're at the mercy of the current, one which you cannot actually see to predict. And prediction and predictability are so important in those pursuits, aren't they? Having a good grasp on the likeliness of up and coming outcomes? Rather essential if one is to stay on My Own Path. And loving openly is basically pure unpredictability aka pure unknown aka just about the closest thing to pure Granddaddy Fear there can be. No wonder things went so

wrong for your imaginary self when you were imagining spending tomorrow openly loving everyone. We poked the main nerve. Stared it straight in the eye.

And there is only one completely effective weapon against that main fear that I know of. But it is, as I understand it to be, the antithesis of fear... the base to its acid, the water to its fire. It's counterpart.

Faith.

I hope that, as you've gotten this far in the book, you've agreed that it's probable that there is a Creator and that we were created with intent... and that there is meaning to the design. I believe that whatever that Creator is, it cares about each of us and wants us to care about each other. In fact, from what I've managed to see in the designs of us, our physical world and our reality, a lot of importance was placed on us caring about each other. We were designed to and were told to have compassion and to love.

Let me ask you something. If everything is made of God, how difficult do you think it would be for Him to nudge you out of oncoming danger without you knowing you'd been nudged?

If you one day decided to try it, to love openly, to help when needed, to cause joy among the others, to live as you were designed to and do as has been asked of you... don't you think such a Creator might steer you around those dangers that were featured so heavily in your predictive imaginings of what

could go wrong? That, if you finally decided to do something that He's all but begged us to do, He'll just leave you to be dashed against the rocks of chaos? He is the only one that knows how to navigate the waters safely, and the places to dock that will bring real happiness are only known to Him. He knows what will make you happiest better than you ever will. You aren't taking your hand off the rudder so much as you're letting someone else navigate and shift your angles where they need to be shifted. It can be so difficult and so easy at the same time to override the fear that has had so much control over so much of your life, partially because you get no real guarantees (outside of God and His prophets' word on the matter) but placing your life in the hands of the one that made all life is a leap that one must make before they are reassured in their decision.

For me, one of the most essential components to finding faith coincidentally, and a bit ironically, was the most intelligent thing I've ever said: "I don't know". After spending years and years searching religion and science for the parameters of God and how it all worked, I finally started moving in the right direction. That direction ends up running an interesting parallel alongside the direction that leads a lot of mathematicians, physicists, and scientists to a belief in a creator being. Quite a great deal of one's time in these professions is spent finding the patterns in the details. We zoom in further and further in and try to make sense of what we are seeing. Molecules being made up of atoms being made up of subatomic particles and further. We also zoom out to see how it is that smaller systems affect bigger systems, biomes to ecosystems to planets to nebulae. But many find themselves, one night, traveling in a third direction, a sort of sideways zoom. One that bubbles to the top of the mind the thought, "All of these systems support all of these other systems. The patterns overlap all over the place. How is it that these systems

ever came together in the first place? How is it... that these patterns ever came to repeat and *become* patterns?"

I had a bit of a sideways zoom. I had realized that God could never be proven because if literally everything was made of God... then no contrast exists. I realized that God couldn't, by definition, be defined. There was no way that He operates within parameters that I would have any frame of reference for. His exact nature would be beyond any human being's comprehension and that I was never going to have the answers that I had been looking for, but, to be fair, I now understood that I didn't even really understand what the questions that I had were! Ultimately, I believe that it had been extraordinarily helpful to the understanding that I now have that my search had been something of a blanket search, an absorption of knowledge, instead of a pursuit of a specific question to be answered. Because of the way that I had looked for God, it definitely made it easier to say, "God, I understand that I'll never fully understand. I know that I'm not allowed to know. I will always be blind so please lead me. I can't know your will, I can't even guess it, so please help me to know it when I see it. I can't *know* that you exist, but I can choose to believe it."

9

The Journey

Some time passed and, eventually, I got as close to complete faith as I've ever been. It occurred during the journey I took during the blizzard in Tennessee in late January, 2011. The shortest possible version was that God asked something of me. At that time, I had reached a point where I was stuck on these concepts, failing to make any progress in my understanding of them. I had started growing stagnant in my search, though I had come to a place where I now decided that I believed with certainty that there was a God and started learning to listen for Him in the world.

And they were there... small nudges in certain directions as if the fabric of reality was doing the nudging; an opportunity would arise over here, or a new avenue would suddenly be available just as I needed it. God had spurred my writing along quite effectively through December of 2010 and I returned to my college dorm room for my spring semester. At that time, I was studying to become a science teacher. I was fast tracking my way through my Professional

Education degree and my 9 month love affair with the newly found concepts of the Breaking and Genuine Laughs had definitely affected my GPA a bit. But, on Thursday, January 20th, 2011, my priorities in my life were shifted and have remained so for the last nine and a half years. I had spent a few weeks searching for the ends of threads to pick up related to the concepts I had found. I had been spoiled prior, making new connections daily and having just spent a month in December writing and puzzling as fast as I could at a break-neck pace, being awake as often as possible, and sometimes forgetting to eat, and *still* barely keeping up with everything that I needed to get down in writing. But now? Now I was in waiting, but I had no idea what I was waiting for. I hadn't read the Bible from cover to cover yet in my life and so I decided to fill some of my time, after spending one day with The Old Testament, with reading the New Testament. Just before the 20th, I had started Matthew and already found interesting parallels to the concepts, and would even get the occasional gentle nudge of a scripture number that was always perfectly timed and one I hadn't come across in my own reading yet. On the 20th, having asked God for guidance on how to progress with these concepts and where to find those threads that led out from them, providing new insights into whatever they led to, God offered a solid nudge toward, what had looked like at the time, the edge of a cliff. I had just started Matthew 10 and everything around me changed. I could feel God drawing nearer. The air itself had texture to it and I could feel importance imbuing and emblazoning the words ahead of where I was reading. It was like being right in the middle of an orchestral swell that got louder and louder and as it rose as I got closer to what I was supposed to read, and I could feel my skin and my core vibrating. At last, I came to Matthew 10:9 and 10:10. It was like a gong went off in the room. That vibration rippled out and immediately raced back to watch as I read.

I remember my hands shaking as I read it. I like to think that, now, having seen how the last nine years have played out, I have some understanding of why I was asked to do what I was asked to do the way that I

was asked to do it, but I also acknowledge that the reasons likely extend well beyond my capacity for thought.

Matthew 10

9 “Do not get any gold or silver or copper to take with you in your belts— **10** no bag for the journey or extra shirt or sandals or a staff, for the worker is worth his keep. **11** Whatever town or village you enter, search there for some worthy person and stay at their house until you leave. **12** As you enter the home, give it your greeting. **13** If the home is deserving, let your peace rest on it; if it is not, let your peace return to you. **14** If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, leave that home or town and shake the dust off your feet.

I paused. There was no way that this was the answer God was responding with. My college semester had just started and I was coming up on my residency and would be teaching my first classes soon. I had to put in a bit more effort this semester to pull my GPA back up to as close to 4 as I could get it...

As I read, that permeating presence had reached a crescendo, but held steadily there. God was always there, but right then? His “eye” was fixed on me. Anyone who has ever hit a crossroad in their life and suddenly felt God’s attention focused on what you choose to do next knows this feeling. Suddenly, you feel more real. Every detail of your surroundings feels like it retreats a bit.

The Laughing Matters

I asked God if He was asking me to do what I thought He might be. In that moment, I believed that I was about to do a completely defenseless walk into the unknown and leave everything and everyone behind.

I could feel Him there, watching me as I waited for my answer, but not offering one. The thrum was still there and palpable, but gave no indication either which way. This was to be my choice and mine alone. Openly weeping for the life and love that I was giving away, I wrote 9 letters, one to each sibling, my parents, and my two closest friends. Each held different sentiments and things that I needed to say to them before I went. You see, in those moments, I did not believe I would ever see them again. I knew there was a very real possibility that this was the endgame I was walking into. I was about to travel by God's directions and offer up my compliance to whatever He wished for me to do. I was terrified, but not as much as I could have been. It would still be some time before I realized that faith stood opposite of those fears, and neutralized their paralytic effects. And, the next morning, I stepped out my front door with a surprisingly light heart.

I opened my heart to every single person I met on what I've since referred to as The Journey, completely defenseless, helped where I could help, and left without a dollar, scrap of ID, or change of clothes. Just a satchel with a briefcase umbrella, two mechanical pencils, a pen, two empty books that would become my road journal and, ultimately, the very first handwritten draft of The Breaking Laugh (which you are now reading as The Laughing Matters). I took a hoodie and a coat.

During that 44 day journey, I was not harmed once nor made to want for anything. I only remember feeling fear once the entire time; a moment of... not doubt, but of non-understanding. I was out in the open during a downpour in freezing conditions. I was homeless during the journey and I had been dropped off in Cookeville, TN at an exit ramp. At the time I was going wherever I wound up, hitchhiking the interstates. Unfortunately, the exit where I was deposited at was designed with interstate stops in mind; hotels and fast food chains and little very little else. None of the buildings seemed to have awnings or covered recesses or overhangs or anything someone might sit underneath and not be on the soaked ground. None of the businesses had a lobby that was open... and I was becoming afraid. All of the people I had met that day while hitch-hiking warned me out of concern to make sure that I found shelter for the night because it was supposed to drop into the single digits and the rain would not be stopping. I spent my first three hours in Cookeville exploring the buildings for a possible shelter for the night to no avail. I had a glint of hope at one point, but it was quickly undone. There was a small portable barn-style shed behind a Japanese restaurant that looked promising. The business was already closed, possibly permanently and I approached the shed, only to note an old padlock fastening the door shut. I was about to continue my search, concerned, but not yet afraid, when I saw that their back patio area had about a foot and half clearance from the ground. The wood slats weren't *too* far apart. I looked underneath the patio at the dirt ground and, though it was mostly a freezing wet mud slurry that would have to be crawled through, it looked like there was a dry, dirt area just big enough for a person about 15 ft back. I shuddered and tucked it away as currently the best option. I marveled at how depressing that was and used it as new motivation to find a better place to stay.

For several hours more I walked and walked, finally sitting down on the side of a building where a tiny overhang offered a bit of protection from the ceaseless rain, but not the wind or the cold. The temperature had already

started making its descent below the 20's and I knew that I had exhausted the options that I would be able to find. I had only a small briefcase umbrella with me and I had gotten pretty thoroughly soaked on my search. The businesses had all shut their doors though some restaurants still had open drive thru windows. I had realized that I had to find or build shelter for the night, but it was then that I really began to understand that I might die that night; that that was a real, *real* possibility that was quickly becoming a probability. Thus far on the journey, I had been acting at God's whim, including the small nudge to seek shelter in Cookeville instead of getting back on the highway with my thumb out... I had gotten this far by praying for direction and something would happen that would point me in a direction. This time, however, there seemed to be no response.

I sat and I prayed and I tried to riddle out what to do for a long time. My shivering became violent and I felt fear. Not that God had abandoned me, but that this was where my journey came to an end. Perhaps my writings would be discovered and get out into the world and that I had played as much of the part as had been written for me. I didn't feel ready to die, but I had faced a lot over the last few days in the last nine months and, if that was what was being asked of me... well, I'd face that, too. Even though the temperature was steadily dropping, my shivering was beginning to subside. I didn't feel the cold as much. I just felt tired. Drowsiness kept trying to sneak in and trick me into closing my eyes. I just couldn't keep my eyes open any more when I heard three words very clearly.

Get up.

Walk.

I didn't want to, but I did. I shuffled along the road, with gentle inclinations guiding my heading, looking for something, anything, passing buildings I'd already passed several times... and suddenly found myself in front of that Japanese restaurant again which I was lightly urged toward. I walked around back and stood in front of that patio again for at least a minute, trying to work up the courage to slide on my belly, inch by inch, through the icy slimy mud before me when I felt compelled to turn around... to check out that storage shed one more time. Still padlocked. I lifted the lock slightly and gave the small tug. A resistance, ever so slight, gently gave way with a small, metallic snap and the lock popped open.

I quickly stepped inside and shut the door. In the dark, I was able to make out the only thing in the shed; a single wooden box in the center of the room. Folded neatly on top of the box was a single large movers' blanket (like the ones that come with a Uhaul truck rental that look kind of like the inside of a gray fruitcake?). I cried from relief, stripped off my soaked clothes and bundled up in the cold blanket. It was horrible. For the first several hours, my sleep was wet tissue paper thin, the lightest of sleeps that was ripped to shreds instantly with every shivering fit. The blanket barely seemed to work, was rather stiff, and itched everywhere. My body bucked against the plywood floor as wave after wave of racking shakes and shivers ran up and down; my teeth chattered so hard that I feared that I would either break them or accidentally lop off part of my tongue. At some point I lost consciousness and fell into a deep slumber.

The Laughing Matters

When I woke, the first thing I noticed was how blissfully warm I was. The entire shed was flooded with warm bright daylight. It was then that I saw an unusual addition to the shed: a large window that took up more than half of the wall that faced east. As I looked, I saw that the shaft of light had been beating down on my discarded, sopping wet clothes. I reached out and touched one of my socks. Dry as a bone, as were my shoes, clothes and satchel. The moisture that had evaporated in my enclosed room seemed to have been absorbed by the blanket, transforming the stiff and scratchy fabric into a fluffy comfortable comforter. I dressed myself while seated (to avoid being seen from the window) feeling enormously refreshed, having had the best sleep that I would get during my journey and then approached the window to see just how much ice had hardened around my world. I remember having a fleeting thought that perhaps I had been encased in the stuff, hard as it had rained that day and all night, and was now trapped in a frozen-over shed. And then I saw it all. While I had slept that morning, the pouring torrents of rain had become gigantic snowflakes. The world was blanketed in it. Each flake looked like it was a cluster of ten to twenty individual flakes, some growing to the size of my fist. I remember being dumbfounded that some of them were so big, you could hear little “piff” sounds as they landed. The world was surrounded by warm daylight filled with gentle tufts of the stuff. I have never seen their equivalent and I doubt I ever will. Between the reflected light of the snow and the uncharacteristically large window in the shed, I had been warmed back to life.

Upon opening the door, I was met with no biting cold. The air was cold enough to hold the snow, but the sun was bright enough to warm anything not made out of the bright white stuff. I walked in the snow for hours without a chill. My small briefcase umbrella kept the snow off me without a problem. As I recall, I spent most of the walk that day, singing loudly, and wanting for

nothing.

There will come a point in this book where you will make a decision on how to proceed. And I want you to underline or do something to this next bit I'm about to say so that you can flip back to this easily when you get to that point... to remember this at that time: If you are so concerned with what will happen to you should you choose to live as you were designed to, then yours is not belief. It may be on the way there, but it is not believed yet. And then... then the real decision will take place.

There's a rather simple, but lovely part of the Bible that addresses this:

"25 Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? 26 Look at the birds of the air: They do not sow or reap or gather into barns — and yet your Heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? 27 Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his lifespan?..."

It can be terrifying to jump in with both feet aimed at the unknown and care about everyone and love them. That is your lack of faith, not a total lack but a not-quite-enough lack, and I want to tell you, writer to reader, that it is perfectly understandable for you to have that. You've literally been raised from birth in a society that teaches against this and that makes it as subconsciously clear as possible that it is suicide to do so. You haven't made the leap yet. Or you have and you need another leap. The leap I'm referring to is, of course, famously known as "a leap of faith". It was a phrase I grew up hearing as a common term, although it existed to me only as a phrase used to illustrate an

act of showing trust in someone else until I turned 30 years old. While the start of my Journey held my largest leap of faith so far, it wasn't the first one.

I remember being in my bedroom early December, 2010, prior to my journey, working on some of the concepts, typing away at my little laptop. It had been nearly seven months since that splendiferous, disastrous date with Alyssa and the subsequent removal of myself from the comedy career scene. In short, I had been on a date with her, attempted to impress her with some of my musings on why we laugh (including *Stranger in a Strange Land's* Man Martian's theory), and three of the main concepts snapped together suddenly. Needless to say the evening had been fairly ruined from there for that poor woman; I'd had one arm around her during the movie and the other hand was furiously scribbling out notes on Post-Its with only a minor effort put toward hiding my diverted attention. During that period that followed that night, I had undergone some radical changes. I had still attended my fall semester at Austin Peay, though my afternoons had been filled with long contemplative walks, writing, and reading rather than working on standup comedy bits, playing guitar, doing up close magic or playing video games with the other residents of Killebrew Hall. During the summer and winter breaks, I'd head back to Nashville and stay with my parents as it proved to be too difficult to secure and afford a place for 1-3 months at a time. I worked a full time overnight job in Nashville that agreed to keep me on so long as I worked during the school breaks. This was particularly useful for my needs as most of the world was asleep while I was awake, which afforded me plenty of thinking quiet. As I fumbled with one particular concept, it hit me. I believed there to be a God. I had seen enough to know it was likely but never enough to be certain without a doubt and I finally realized that I was never going to know for certain. Not in this lifetime, at any rate. I had a choice to make ultimately. Yes or no. For me, is there or isn't there. And here was that moment. It was time.

And I did.

Now, a good friend of mine, Jay Seals, told me once that miracles do happen to people, but that they are only miracles to the people they happen to. So many parents refer to their own children as miracles, and only they understand why it is that they consider them miracles. It cannot not be told in any way that would properly convey the enormity of it to another person. I mention this now because, in that moment, I experienced something that I cannot explain and that I cannot convey properly. I fell to my knees and spoke out loud to God. "God, I will never be able to prove you. I know that now. Instead, I'm just going to go ahead and believe in you." I was already fairly certain of God's existence, but hadn't spoken to God without prefacing with "If you *are* really there, God..." since I had left the church. I was speaking to God for the first time as a believer and suddenly felt ashamed for a lot of things I had done in my life. I asked Him for forgiveness and really genuinely meant it. I wasn't after absolution; I was just genuinely ashamed of so many of the choices that I had elected to make so far and I was genuinely sorry for them. There was a brief moment of pause, and the sound seemed to go out of the air. Absolute silence. And then I felt the strangest sensation, as if a drop of some liquid had landed on top of my head. It spread out, soon engulfing my face and neck, leaving behind something akin to that pins and needles feeling of a limb falling asleep everywhere that it touched. It spread and spread until it covered my whole body and... well, I don't really know a better way of saying this other than I felt cleaned. All of the physical exhaustion in me was wiped away, and not just from the months of study and research and writing, but from a lifetime of life spent how it had been spent thus far.

It's a funny thing, faith. You don't really get the confirmation that you want of there being a God until after you make the leap. And, just like a miracle, a

confirmation is only a confirmation to the person it happened to. I got mine a moment after the first leap, and first thing the next morning following the second leap. For those that make the choice, your faith is often cemented shortly after. This, at its core, is problematic for those that have not or will not make their own leap. "Sure", they say, "of course they get their confirmation! It's a self-fulfilling prophecy! You believe all things are God and that everything happens within God and so everything that happens is proof of God to you!". As I said before, this is an argument that goes nowhere. Either there is a God or there isn't, and neither side will ever be able to offer definitive proof one way or the other.

The argument isn't the point. The point is to arrive at belief without immutable evidence, and the universe seems to have been designed in its mechanisms to support this, but we *are* allowed to have just enough evidence to choose to believe and to solidify our faith. Our blindness to the future path, the core of all fears being the unknown, that God is not only a much better navigator but also happens to be everything that is being navigated... they all make our very existence something of a test, don't they? A test that is, across the board in the many beliefs, very important that we pass. One that the very blueprints of our universe were drawn with in mind.

10

Not Allowed

It seems to be that we are only allowed to know so much. That we should never be allowed to glimpse behind the curtain. It's coded into the very fabric of our reality and we see the byproducts of this everyday. Think about it. How differently would you think about your death if it was already proven beyond a shadow of a doubt, absolute scientific fact that God exists, and if we were to know exactly what happens to us when we die. But this is not the case for us. Anyone who has studied any field of scientific study extensively can tell you that there is a baffling amount that is 'going on' that we cannot detect or do much more than hypothesize over.

Let's look at rods and cones. These are photoreceptors of the eye. They each capture a different wavelength. By far, the cones outnumber the rods. Cones capture light wavelengths that are within the range of the visible spectrum. All of those colors we enjoy are brought to you by cones. In fact, these receptors are the benchmarks by which the bookends of the visible light spectrum were set; if we can't see it, it's not on the spectrum. The cones are L-cones, which see the color red (64% of the visible light spectrum and the longest wavelengths), M-cones, which see green (32%), and S-cones, which see blue (2-7%, and the shortest of the wavelengths). On the outer edge of this cluster of cones are the rods. These are responsible for peripheral vision (the corner of your eye). The rods pick up a wavelength just below the visible light spectrum by only 40 nanometers, infrared light. Infrared light doesn't appear as color. The rods are effectively blind to bright daylight. Because there are fewer rods than cones and because visible light is much brighter and more varied and more energetic, the visual cortex is typically lit up with the input from the cones, which drowns out the input from the rods... with one major exception. When it gets pitch black out, know how you can kind of still see? Once your eyes adjust to the light (aka your visual cortex quiets down), you can still sort of make out objects and obstacles but notice that they aren't any particular color. Because the visual cortex is quiet, you are able to see what your rods are picking up, much like only being able to see the smudges on your cell phone screen when the screen is turned off. You are seeing almost exclusively with your rods, and viewing a part of the spectrum as clearly as you'll ever see it.

Why do I bring this up? Well, most people have experienced a weird phenomenon casually referred to as "seeing something out of the corner of their eye". It's typically "blobby", out of focus, and it lacks color. And, when that

happens, what is it we do to confirm or refute the existence of whatever it was we saw? We look directly at the spot where it was, absolutely flooding our visual cortex with information from the visible light we are capturing and then immediately shoving our visual cortex into processing what we are looking directly at with the attention level of “what in the hell was that?”. If there is something there that only the rods are capable of seeing, we definitely aren’t going to see it now. Most of our information that we gather is through capturing visible light. It is easily our primary source of information intake about the world around us. Yes, the other senses are very important but, for those who have the ability to see, we have tied an enormous amount of our trust in what we see with our own two eyes, hence the phrase “I’ll believe it when I see it with my own two eyes.”

I understand that line of thinking, but we see less than 1/10 billionth of what is going on and “seeing is believing” is somehow a belief held by an alarming number of people. I believe this to be a major factor of why so few physicists are atheists; because they have a much better understanding than most of how little we are able to detect. There are so many of us out there, acting like we’ve gotten at least *most* of all of this figured out.

No. Not really at all.

We’ve figured out some of what we can detect... but even then there’s a vast drop off. Somewhere past the line of subatomic particles, our logic starts coming apart in ways that we have no frame of reference for. As Richard Feynman so simply put it, “If you think you understand quantum mechanics, you don’t understand quantum mechanics.” He also notably stated “There’s no shame in not knowing things! The only shame is to pretend that we know everything.”

There's one really fascinating section of Physics that professors seem to universally look forward to lecturing about: the Copenhagen Interpretation. I'll give a simplified summary to save myself having to add in another few chapters because that is a topic that I could happily speak at great length on.

Though the journey begins a bit earlier with Niels Bohr, Albert Einstein and Werner Heisenberg, we'll begin at the double slit experiment. The purpose of the double slit experiment was to determine once and for all the correct side of an argument that was raging in the world of physics. The heated debate centered on the behavior of photons of light. Did they act as particles or as waves? A photon emitter was placed at one end of a pitch black chamber with no other light source. At the other end, a negative plate, much like photo film. A photon of light hitting it would make a small light mark on the plate. In between these two ends, a parallel thin metal sheet was placed so that it blocked the path of the photons except for two small slits cut out of it. The photon could either go through the left slit or the right. If light acts as particles, after running the experiment for a while, one would expect to see two distinct groupings of markings on the negative plate, right? One for the left slit and one for the right. Instead, what they saw was a pattern of interference, as if a wavelength of light had split in two at the slits and they had traveled side by side to the plate, creating interference (*see figure 5*). The experiment seemed at first to support the wavelength theory. However, upon closer inspection of the plate, there were individual dots where the particles had hit. Somehow, these photons were simultaneously showing traits of acting as both a particle and a wave.

They tried the process with a detector so that they could see in real time what was actually occurring in the chamber but, whenever they observed the

experiment this way, the photons of light would simply go through one slit or another, forming two distinct blobs.

Now, there were some very interesting ideas bandied about on why this was happening and why it would act differently when observed, but eventually the Copenhagen Interpretation was proposed by Niels Bohr and Albert Einstein. This became one of the most taught theories in physics. The theory was that the particle of light, unobserved, existed in both of the states that it could have possibly existed in until observed. You see, this interference pattern could occur on the plate if there were two photon particles of light traveling side by side. It would produce the same interference pattern and the same individual dots on the negative plate.

Now, an Austrian physicist named Erwin Schrodinger had some real issues with this interpretation. He took so much issue with this that he developed a thought experiment that would become famous, known to most as Schrodinger's Cat, to illustrate just how wrong their interpretation had been. *Again, this is an oversimplification and is leaving out a lot that isn't strictly required for this discussion so that a wider audience might understand what it is that I am writing about.* The experiment was essentially having a cat in a non-see-through box, with a random chance of an airborne poison being released inside the box, killing the cat. Perfect 50/50 chance scenario. He proposed that, if the scientists had no way of knowing if the poison was released or not and if the Copenhagen Interpretation is accurate, then it stands to reason that until the box is opened and the scene within it is observed, the cat would be simultaneously alive and dead, a dual state of both and neither. Erwin brought this up and pointed to it as evidence that this clearly cannot be the case. That was 1935. What Schrodinger had unknowingly done was give

the physics community a very simple way of communicating the concept of *superposition*. The current theory in modern physics is that all things exist in all possible states until measured. This means that, until someone pays specific attention to something, that something exists in all the possible ways that it could exist. This is much easier to wrap your head around if you remember that all forms of matter are just energy in a different state.

One of the coolest aspects in my opinion is that, in each of these positions that it is possible for it to exist in, the amount of energy that something has is the same as the percentage of probability (or likelihood) of existing in that particular position. So, 5% chance that it's over here? 5% of it *is* over here.

Picture that we have a bag with ten marbles in it. This is a long-necked leather drawstring pouch, and inside are 9 green marbles and 1 blue one. The bag's neck is such that the marbles inside cannot be seen until they have left the bag. Let's say I asked you to reach in and pull out 5 marbles but don't open your hand. Let's assume that you are holding the bag by its bottom in your other hand so that, between the both of your hands, you can feel exactly the positions of all 10 marbles. With this setup, we now have 10 positions "locked in place". We know exactly where all ten of those marbles are, but we don't know which marble is which. Now, let's discuss wave function collapse. This occurs when the state of something is observed. Until your hand is opened, the blue marble has 10% of its energy in each known marble position. The other 90% of each marble is in 9 other marble positions. Imagine then that you open your hand and look. By whatever factors that made it more likely to be in the bag, there are only green marbles in your hand. In an instant, wave function collapse occurs and all five of those marbles' quantum superpositions snap into one single position for each, their "scattered" energy rushing into a single position instantaneously. And, in that same instant, 50% of the one blue

marble's energy rushed into the bag and distributed itself among each of the 5 remaining unknown marble positions, making each marble still in the bag 20% blue marble. The point is that, once a marble is observed, all of the possible positions it could have been in (and technically was in) collapse into one singular position: where the marble definitively is. Most believe that all of the other positions' energies rush into the position with the highest probability/most energy.

This sounds... hinky. It sounds wonky and implausible. It pushes the boundaries of "what makes sense" and to first-timers to the world of modern physics, it seems completely unreal. However, this is the prevailing theory today. The math adds up. Most physicists will tell you that even this is just a drop in the bucket of our bizarre reality. There is a point, that past it, logic seems to fall apart; a place that I lovingly refer to as "the subatomic shoreline"... a place where logic seems to be dashed against the rocks of reality.

Particles, for the most part, are one of two types. Composite (atoms, hadrons, and molecules) meaning that they are composed of smaller, subatomic particles, and Elementary (leptons, quarks, and bosons) meaning that we cannot determine if they are made up of subatomic particles or not.¹ It's around the subatomic level that we see some serious mind-bending craziness. Einstein's own Spooky Action at a Distance Theory for example was discovered in the behavior of subatomic particles. When two particles are created in the same instant and point in space, they become what we refer to as *quantumly entangled*. They become connected in a way that seems to have

¹ For the physicists and scientists, here's a little joke I wrote years ago that I doubt anyone but you will get. What is the atomic weight of a lepton found in ice cream? Depends on the flavor.

no regard for distance. For instance, if you had two quantumly entangled particles that were taken to opposite sides of your city, of your county, of your country, of your planet, and you changed the polarity of one of the particles, *instantaneously* the polarity of the other particle would flip. Doesn't matter how far away. It could theoretically be across the galaxy or universe.

We see examples of this bizarreness in time-traveling electrons and boson theories, and the sudden teleportation of neural pathway firings, jumping from one portion of the brain to another.

There is so much about elementary particles that, not only do we not understand, but that seem to bend and break the laws that govern everything else. Some particles seem to exist in two places simultaneously. The theory that Higgs boson particles have the ability to reverse their own position in time to prevent being discovered has actually gained a surprising amount of traction among the physics community, particularly among the physicists at CERN's Large Hadron Collider. Neutrinos are constantly passing through us and cannot physically be contained, lest they form a superfluid, forcing their way out of the container, no matter the container's strength and density. It's even theorized that there is only one electron in our universe that travels backwards and forwards in time, eventually holding the position of every single electron in existence.

"The bottom line is, the quantum world just doesn't work in the way the world around us works. We don't really have the concepts to deal with it." - David Lindley, an accomplished physicist, author and a man who has spent much of his career pondering the very fringes of human understanding.

My point in bringing up the subatomic shoreline is that there seems to be a very steep drop off past that line. We can reach out, like we always do, extending ourselves with our cleverness and mathematics and hypothesize what is going on beyond it, but we can only detect so much and we only have a frame of reference for so much. The human mind, amazing as it is, is limited. And the further out that reach in our understanding goes, the less solid of a grasp a person can have on each of the rungs that they climbed to reach that point. We have a limited lifespan and every single thing that is learned takes time. Every single connection mentally-made takes time and attention. One can only learn so much, and quite a lot of the human race really isn't that interested in reaching out over that line enough to learn everything that's needed to be learned to extend said reach further.

I'll bring up one more study before I finally cut to the chase here. In 2013, I reached out to a large group of people and asked them to submit to me a detailed account of a very specific phenomenon that I, myself, had personally experienced... one that several people I had known in my life had experienced. It was a powerful and moving moment, and due to hearing my brother explain his own encounter with it, I had come to believe that a pattern was emerging, one that I had seen elsewhere.

When I was 16 years old, my father died rather suddenly. I would love to spend the next twenty to eighty pages gushing over the kind and brilliant person my father spent his life being, but we need to keep moving. His death devastated me completely. It came suddenly and I still have a hard time thinking about that moment and just how much we lost in our family and how suddenly it was gone. Lemony Snickett once wrote that losing someone you love unexpectedly is like climbing stairs in the dark and thinking there's one

more step, only there isn't. That sickening moment that your entire world gets completely turned upside down and you lose your orientation and your certainty...only not a moment. Stretched out over months and months.

About a week after the aneurysm took him, I had a dream. I had just exited the previous dream and found myself in a white room. My family all stood side-by-side in a line in front of me. My little sister, my three younger brothers, my mother and... my dad. They all stood there stock still, looking off at some distant point behind me. I looked at my father again and I felt it creeping up to my throat. In a dream, I'm not great at actively pulling knowledge from my awake life. But, even in a dream, I knew that he wasn't supposed to be there. I wasn't supposed to be able to see him anymore. I didn't understand in the dream that he had died; I only knew that I was in a great deal of pain over not being able to see him anymore. As it overtook my throat and the pressure pushed the tears forth, I saw his face soften and his eyes turn to me. He had that expression one wears when they wanted to surprise someone they love and that person unexpectedly starts sobbing uncontrollably. He shed the statue-like facade and rushed to pick me up and hug me. I remember him squeezing me so tightly and me hugging him fiercely and just being buried in that smell that was so distinctly him. Being surrounded by his warmth and the slightly muffled and rumbly sound of his voice trying to soothe me. "Hey, no...no no no shhhh". I know that he said something to me right before the dream ended, but I was just so far gone down the freefall of fresh grief sobbing that I can't be sure of what it was. I have since become convinced that he had offered the same goodbye/advice that he had when my siblings and I left for school in the mornings. "Be sweet."

That fatal moment to any dream, when there's nothing you can do to hold on to the dream and you slide against your will back to the waking world. I was clutching my pillow, practically trying to squeeze my way back into the dream through it, sobbing loudly, and feeling the pressure of his arms and chest disappearing. I sobbed for a few minutes straight, once again dealing with relearning that he wasn't by some miraculous stroke of luck here again, but had died and was still gone and that this wasn't something that would ever change.

Mid heaving sobs, I sucked in a deep breath and stopped. My pillow smelled exactly like my father's flannel shirt that I had just had my face buried in moments before. He, like most of us, had a very distinct scent.

There is an aspect of a visit dream that no one can convey to someone that has never had one. There is something about that visitor, something that you can feel. They feel like the person themselves, and not some generated version of themselves in the dream. Something deep within you recognizes that it is actually them.

In 2013, I collected the written descriptions of close to fifty submitters' visit dreams to check for a pattern that began to emerge after hearing about my brother's visit dream from his best friend shortly after he had been murdered.

They had been hanging out at our family home in the dream and headed over to a fort/hangout that they had built together (one of many). Clayton had

come to realize that Frank was dead, but refused to show it, and played it casual. They got to the fort and hung out a bit longer, laughing and reminiscing and just... being in each other's company. After a time, Clayton looked up and said, "Frank... how is it where you are?" Frank just smiled at the question. "I'm good." And with that, the dream left Clayton to wake. Clayton confided in me about this as we stood outside the building at Frank's funeral, sharing a cigarette.

Once I'd looked over the many stories I'd been sent, the pattern became so much clearer. You see, once the dreamer lets on that they know that the departed loved one is gone or lets on that they know that they are not supposed to be able to be in their company again, a very interesting thing seems to happen. There are a precious few seconds left after that moment... and then you begin to wake. Sometimes the dreamer asks them a question or the departed says something to the dreamer, but in all 48 cases I read, not one of the question askers got a definitive answer and the dreams ended directly after that. "I'm okay. It's okay." was one. Often they just smile. Or tell you that they love you. Or hug you extra tight. And then the dream is over.

They don't seem to be allowed to tell us anything definitive. No answers that tell us if there is or isn't an afterlife. No "The good news is, yes, there is a heaven and we play baseball all the time. The bad news is you are scheduled to pitch next week." Only sweet, if sometimes cryptic, communications of love or peace.

With the subatomic shoreline, the tiny range of human detection, the rods and cones, and rules of the visitor dreams, we finally arrive at the point of this chapter. I'm pretty certain that we are not allowed to know, with any degree of certainty, that there is a God and that there is an afterlife. It seems to

be a very important rule in the design of our universe that we don't get to know for certain. And we are not allowed to know... for good reason.

It's important that we choose to care about each other, be kind to each other, and that we make those choices without ever being given definitive proof of a creating force. There are so many people that are only kind to one another because their religious text says that if they are kind to others, they'll get riches in heaven and that, if they are bad to others, they'll burn in Hell. Hopefully I've given you a better understanding of the logical side of why we should be kind to each other. Not *because* you'll get treasures, but because you love these other people... the treasures should be considered as the reward for doing the right thing, not the motivation. The design of our reality shows emphasis on not being allowed to know for certain there is a God and, most likely because of that other biggest thing we seem to have been designed to do... to find faith. After all, by the core definition of the phrase, it isn't a "leap of faith" if you can see how you're going to land it. So we are stuck in a point that steadily progresses through time with only our predictions to guide the way. This is so terrifying that it literally is every single form of fear you've ever felt, just in different flavors. And there is only one thing that seems to deflate that core fear of the unknown. It is faith.

Being stuck in our current state of existence in time, we can't see the whole picture of what might happen, and what that might lead to. However, a creator would exist outside of the rules and constraints that it created. It would view time like a sculpture that's ever shifting with probable outcomes and possible choices. Not only that, but that sculpture is literally made of God, and so it knows every molecule, photon and wavelength in the universe. We

are blind pilots and we have the option of trusting the voice on the other end of the headset, the one that knows every possible path that can be safely taken and how happy each destination will make us in the future. Sure, God's guidance isn't always as simple as a voice on the other end of a radio giving us answers and directions right after we ask the questions. We are so fixed in our position in time that it conditions us to expect results right away. Even the wiser of the human race sometimes gets frustrated with this and just wishes that whatever it is that they were waiting for would just hurry it up already. But God does things in the time in which they are best to happen, *and not everytime is right now.*

In the meanwhile, faith. Faith that God will do what is necessary when it is best to do so. This means trusting God, a critical component to the joy and peace that I felt in so much abundance during my Journey.

A lot of the time, though, you won't get that confirmation. When most refer to making leaps of faith, they're typically talking about the big jumps... but it doesn't mean there aren't smaller jumps as well. I get confirmation when I actually need confirmation and, more and more often, I find I don't need confirmation to figure out if it's the right thing to do or not. After all, good, when you're not afraid to do it, is pretty easy to spot. And there will be some unpleasant things that you'll need to wade through in this life and, sometimes, have to survive through and emerge out the other side of, in order for some of the truly wonderful things to occur. And, often, those truly wonderful things happen for someone else. Sometimes, you may be a big part in helping someone else's prayer or need or reward. Not every story being told is about you, after all. But, no matter what may have happened, those that keep faith and do for others will wind up exactly where it is best for them to be in this life

(where, in others' lives, it is best for them to be as well). Complete faith defeats all fear completely. It is the only effective antidote that I've ever found.

"There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. Fear is a painful emotion that arises at the thought that we may be harmed or made to suffer. As long as we must trust for our survival to our ability to out-look or out-manuever the enemy, we have every good reason to be afraid. Fear is torment. To know that love is of God and to enter into the secret place leaning upon the arm of the Veloved, this and only this can cast out fear." - *A.W. Tozer, 1961*

I think the struggle of loving your fellow man and God (which means trusting them, too) and the struggle of coming to faith in a God that you cannot prove are the two most important struggles of human existence. So much so that our reality has been carefully constructed to support the struggle for *and* against both.

Strings and Keys

There was a study done in the 1960s in which they had IV drips attached to the jugulars of rats that, when the rat would press down a lever, would inject a drug into the animal. They performed multiple studies with multiple drugs like heroin, morphine, cocaine and amphetamine. In each of these studies, the rat would hit the lever with increasing frequency, constantly abusing it, sometimes administering lethally high doses to themselves. The media had a field day with the results. Here was proof that these drugs were addictive.

Approximately 40 years later, a group of scientists decided that the data from that study might not be relevant. You see, people are normally not kept in featureless metal cages in isolation from others. The only times that the rats had contact with anyone, rat or man, was when the handlers would clean the cages every few days, including the sheet metal walls that kept them from being able to socialize with the rats stacked on every side of their cage. The rats had nothing to do with their time, had no one to be with, had a needle sticking in their jugular, and had a happy lever. They didn't get any exercise or sunlight; their lives were devoid of options for happiness.

Canadian psychologist Bruce K. Alexander did a different variant of the study. He and his team built the rats a large wooden enclosure that was 200 times the size of the cages used in the original experiments. Gone were the barren sheet metal floors and walls, replaced by a wooden perimeter and wood chips. They did away with the needles, too, favoring the two water bottle system (one laced with morphine, one not). They frequently would sweeten the morphine water to negate any unsavory taste to the drugged water. The enclosure had ladders, tubes and platforms as well as bedding but, most importantly, the rats had each other. Each study group was 16-24 rats that had plenty of room to play, socialize, and mate.

They quickly discovered that the rats that had only lived in Rat Park preferred the regular water significantly more than the morphine water. They also recreated the conditions of the first experiment and housed two groups in the isolation cages, but with the water bottles and no IV drips. In one group, the rats lived for the first portion of their time in the cramped metal cages with access to both bottles and heavily abused the laced water, and were moved to Rat Park afterward. These rats immediately began to show a strong preference toward the regular water.

The other group that lived in the metal cages for the first half of the experiment only had the morphine water bottle during their time there. Once the second part of that study began and they were introduced to the Rat Park, they immediately avoided the morphine bottle (sweet and unsweet) altogether. They occasionally showed minor signs of withdrawal (slight twitching) but, by and large, none of the dramatic withdrawal seizures or symptoms that accompany morphine addiction. They were rats that suddenly had a community, something to do, and other rats to be with. They no longer

hated their life. They actually avoided the drug that was the one source of dopamine release in their brains while they were in those cramped cages.

People can be much of the same. When we are unhappy with our lives, a lot of us turn to escapism in the form of video games, obsessive eating, drugs, alcohol (okay, technically also a drug), television, random hookups, etc. But, when our lives are full of love, trust, joy and happiness, we only occasionally nip at that bottle. When we are living the way we are designed to, we see a pretty drastic reduction of the use of the Breaking Laugh. Why? Because we have the Genuine Laugh in our lives and nothing quite substitutes for that. Sure, we may go back to it for the occasional nip... but we just don't need the escapism behaviors to ease the pain as much because we're just not in as much pain. And when you don't *need* the Breaking Laugh, you tend to lose your taste for it.

And here we are. The promised place of the book, where we pick up all those pieces that we've been laying out on the table and examining, and start snapping them together to see what they form (as well as why it was so difficult to craft a linear "a to b to z" narrative that does it justice). Get excited.

When one undertakes the task of loving all, they are quicker to a Genuine Laugh. If they already have a belief in a God, they find it much easier to talk to Him and can hear him quite a bit more loudly and clearly. But the thing that becomes easiest is loving God. Finally, it becomes effortless, like falling. I believe this is because you are loving Him here through other people and, as mentioned right there, between the two greatest commandments, it's the same thing as loving Him there. And when you find yourself loving God this way, it becomes so much easier to trust Him... to put your faith in Him leading you to the paths that will bring happiness and steer you clear of

danger, for you *and* others. So why don't we do this? Well, we're afraid of where that'll land us. When you drop your defenses, the cacophony can be a terrifying place. You are essentially doing away with the predictive guidelines that have been cultivated by yourself and everyone else and you are staring directly into the void that is what lies directly ahead. You are acknowledging that anything could happen at any moment. Of course, one minute from now, your instincts to predict the likelihood of what will be waiting up ahead are going to pester you and attempt to take over and I cannot offer you any way that I know of to stop them.

But I can tell you how I stopped hearing them, how their voices became less important and imposing. How I reduced their clamor to a soft din. I was always too busy marveling at all the clever ways that God had navigated me thus far, or simply stopping them from trying by saying, "Yeah, I know, right!? You'd think that would happen! Luckily, God's got quite a bit more authority than my prediction, so..."

So far in the book, I've been stringing a concept to a previously explained concept occasionally, but I think we've reached a point where we need to go ahead and put the rest of the strings up, now that all the main concepts are on the table.

So here we go...

Laughter is the sound of love unaimed, but it can also be "misappropriated" in order to avoid feeling bad about not caring as much about your fellow man as it seems we were probably designed to do. The thing that typically gets in the way of that caring is the unpredictability of our fellow

man which leads to distrust. We can't see the future so the fear of the unknown becomes a governing force in our lives and we try to make our lives predictable. We don't just try to predict either; we attempt to carve our path towards that which we choose for ourselves and the less we care about others, the more straight, probable, and predictable you can make that path, and the more you can get for yourself. That way of living requires that we sacrifice universal love and trust/faith and generosity, which is something that seems to be designed to be the three main keys to real, substantial happiness. The Breaking Laugh can be used as a salve while we do this, because living in the opposite direction of our design produces the opposite result; from together to alone, love to jealousy, a sense of significance to feeling pangs from your unimportance.

We are continuing down a gradually declining path in our humor toward violation that is leading us further and further away from compassion and trust for those we haven't yet vetted. And those people count; every single one of them is just as important and real as you are.

And of course they are as important as we are; we are all made of the same stuff and that stuff is probably God... and we all have something within us that is unlike anything else in this physical world, something that resembles God more than it resembles this tangible world. God has very clearly stated that we are all to care about each other, to love your God, that these two ideas are the same. "That which you have done to the least of you, you have done unto Me."

The only way to do what's been asked of us is to open ourselves to everyone else. To trust and to love. But the biggest obstacle is the fear of the unknown. So big and governing is that fear in most people's lives that, even though I've just walked you through how it's easily the best way to live when you trust God, to drop your defenses with others, to love and increase love and happiness in others, that imaginary world of prediction still rears its head and asks you, "You aren't seriously considering doing this, are you?"

...

Hey, I need you to say 'no' or I will start screaming right *now*."

The core of real solid, high-quality, true sustenance-caliber happiness is reached by giving of yourself to others and loving others and yet that fear demands that we don't do it openly. But the people that take the leap, clear over fear's head, into faith, they find that love and they find that happiness. It's like that split second when you are climbing stairs in the dark and your foot passes through a step you thought was there. The ground will be there, just probably not where you expected. And it's such a simple thing without that fear. Just be kind and love them and help where you can. Don't fear the consequences of your vulnerabilities when you help..... just help. And if you still feel that fear, it's okay. But don't let it stop you anymore. For those of you that are still waiting for proof to make the leap, the proof you need appears to be on the other side of the leap. Somewhat similar to courage in that it doesn't appear in earnest at the start of what you needed it for, but rather once you've pulled yourself up and headed into whatever you needed it for in the first place.

The morning I set off on my journey, January 21st, 2011, I stopped at the door of my dorm room. I had everything I was taking in a small satchel, and had left my wallet on my bed. I had paused at the door, teetering on the edge of the scariest tipping point I have ever stood upon. By far the biggest cause of my pause was that the only other explanation for everything that had happened was that I had gone insane with delusions of self-importance, and my fear had pushed all of its chips into the center of the poker table on that one. And so I asked.

“God, I just need some help knowing that this isn’t all in my head. Please. Anything.”

I’d had no idea what I was standing there waiting for, but I waited for a full minute and a half for it.

I finally nodded, gripped the doorknob and smiled to myself. “So it’s to be faith then,” I said, trying to keep the choke at my voice as I made my final decision and took the first step into the true unknown.

I stepped out to a bright world blanketed in snow, reflecting light everywhere. And as I turned to pull that door shut behind me, a bright color stood out above all the white. A neon green Post-It note had been slapped to my dorm room door, written on in ecstatic handwriting.

“Smile. Life is wonderful.”

I suppose I’d do well to mention that no one had ever left me a note on my dorm door, save for the R.A.s leaving event announcements in the two and half years I had lived on campus. As I stepped away from the door, I saw that

every single door on my floor had a note, brightly colored, and brandishing messages of hope. I read them as I walked down the hallway and I still remember the first three.

“Great Job!”

“I’m proud of you!”

and “I believe in you!”

So far as I understand, this was not an organized event by the RAs but simply a single person that felt compelled to share some statements of positivity for no other reason than, among those notes that were put out on doors, a few of those doors probably had tenants that needed to hear what was on that note.

I should like to add that, very shortly after, any suspicion of all of these concepts being the result of my having gone “off the farm” mentally was officially disproved (for me, I mean) and laid to rest. All it took was talking to people I met about the concepts. To see them realize the same things that I had wiped out my concern quickly. Truth resonates, and people’s reaction to hearing a truth they weren’t prepared for is pretty easy to spot. It’s also a grand catalyst for loving them; a peek behind the curtain as their defenses slip for a moment.

We are all connected on levels that we have no way of detecting other than to spot the patterns that emerge by way of those connections’ existences. Everything points to us being good to each other, helping each other and that it is that behavior that God enjoys most and has been very clear that we are to do. As Maya Angelou said, “If you find it within your heart to care for

somebody else, you will have succeeded.” Do for them without fear of reprisal. Be kind. Act from love. I have never heard God so clearly or felt Him as close to me as I did when I had opened up my heart to my fellow man. Love without aim, and let that smile boil over into a laugh. Loving God becomes a lot less like swimming upstream like this, and a lot more effortless, like falling. Loving others is the only way to truly feel complete. Loving them here is, in a very real sense, loving Him there. And, besides, God knows what paths lead where and the paths where your defenses are down have special attention paid to them to make sure you have what you need and that there is always ground beneath your feet when you come down from those leaps.

And the paths that we find our feet land upon? Those paths are hidden from us and I believe that this was designed that way for the same reason we are not allowed to know with scientific clarity if there is a God or an afterlife. Love and faith... these two things are the point of this life, and it is not really faith if you already have absolute proof. And so God’s hands are hidden throughout those paths, pushing and nudging through the skin of our world and leaving just enough evidence to sustain those that have made *the choice* to believe. Have faith that if you try to do the right thing by way of others and treat them as if they were just as important as you are, and you have to know that those hands will protect you and they’ll help you along toward real substantial happiness.

After all, happiness is only real when shared. Notice how rare the Genuine laughter is when we are alone. Here’s a few things about laughter that I thought I’d wait until now to share with you. Cultural anthropologists (the study of human behavior over the course of man’s history) believe that

laughter was the very first form of social vocal communication we developed with each other. These scientists believe that it was primarily used to communicate that everything is okay after a tense or scary encounter or *convey that they could be trusted*. It was a sound that was used to bring others closer.

The Breaking Laugh doesn't have to be used to lessen our compassion. We also try to use it for good and to display our compassion. When a friend is down, sometimes a cleverly worded joke at the expense of whatever their misfortune is is all the excuse they need to laugh and for the laughter to help make the hurting stop. And human beings are good that way. No matter how much our empathy gets shoved aside, our compassion still makes us want the hurting to stop for the ones we love.

There's a lot of them out there that are hurting. Your love and trust can go a much longer way to helping the injured than you could ever hope to predict.

12

Final Words

Now take these concepts and plug them in. Tint the glass that you see the world through with what I've shared in these pages. See what sticks for yourself. Ask questions to yourself about moments in your past where you've seen some of this stuff, and see if you don't already have the answers just waiting there for you to ask. This part of your journey is over. You've made it through the book. I've done my part on this. You have arrived at a point where you will have to make a conscious decision, and by way of that, a very important declaration. You can choose to admit to yourself the truths in this book when you see them for yourself out in the world from here on and act from that knowledge of what is actually happening... or you can choose to ignore it, and let it be or more voice that you try to keep quiet while you do things "your" way. Sure, you can always go back to the way things were, promising yourself that you'll try to incorporate a few things you read about, or that you'll make more of a move to follow what you read down the road a bit, but I have to warn you that inspiration is a sudden flare that burns significantly less brightly each time it's lit. You should always fire your forges in inspirations' initial flares, or those forges stay dark. But a forge that is lit in that moment and fed? Very quickly, that fire begins to feed itself, and lights a few forges of its own.

This book is a tool to start the conversation; one that feeds the forge, and one that I hope you continue to have with yourself and others for the rest of your life. Much like the Bible is a tool to start people on their relationship with God, it isn't the beginning, middle, and end of God. This book is not nearly all that there is to these concepts, no religious texts are... just an introduction to them. Pull at the threads like I did after you make the leap, and the answers you actually need will be there to welcome you.

And on the Bible note, I hope that you know that I do not hate religions, you wonderful person who made it this far into the book (I know that some of those concepts are very hard to hear and I truly am just so... *proud* of you). Religions introduced me to God, gave me a name to call God, some insight into a partial history of God interacting with mankind in the past, and showed me some of the beauty in community. But the long standing histories of mankind's time with these religions has left a certain rigid feel toward God, particularly to the public perception held by those that are not part of a religion or are non-practicing*. (*Insert footnote:* I love it when people tell me they are "non-practicing [*insert religion*]"). I shake their hand vigorously in congratulations and emphatically state, "Me too! I started doing it 'for keeps' instead a few years ago and I've never looked back."). But it is this "it's either this or it's wrong" rigidity and passive competition that doesn't give an active mind much of a choice *to* believe in any of the Gods. So deeply have these perceptions of God been locked in place that a fair shake of people out there that believe that there is something out there label themselves as atheists, subconsciously trying to distance themselves from the well-known versions that they don't necessarily believe in. Most of the atheists I've spoken with and/or befriended believe that there is something or at very least believe that it's not only possible, but also has a decent likelihood as a possibility. There seems to be almost a subconscious message that hangs under the shadow of

these religions that states “It’s these or you don’t believe in God.” Contrary to a very popular belief, you are allowed to believe only some of it and gather wisdom from any of it. You are allowed to find God out in the world, in the math of the universe, in the eyes of anyone you love, in the Genuine Laugh or any feeling you are capable of feeling. Find Him wherever you find Him, but *find Him*. If you are looking, He will be there when the time is right... *because not every time is right this moment*.

The Gospel of Thomas quotes Jesus as saying, “The I am the All, and the All has gone out from me and the All has come back to me. Cleave the wood: I am there; lift the stone and thou shalt find me there!”

Yes, learning backwards about what God was like in the past is good but living and learning forward about God is best.

“Believing in God is as much like falling in love as it is making a decision. Love is both something that happens to you and something you decide upon.”

— Donald Miller, *Blue Like Jazz*

The Laughing Matters

I believe that you have a decision ahead of you that I warned was coming up. How will you treat them? Can you live in a path that you were designed for? Which, in essence, boils down to “Do you actually believe?”.

Now that you have all the pieces and know how most of them fit together, I recommend reading the book again (I’m told it’s much better the second time as you can see more of how it all fits together knowing what all the pieces are through the second read, and the people that have read it twice are affectionately called “Seconders” in the Could Help youtube channel videos, and The Laughing Matters Podcast). You’ll see each concept slot nicely into place in a large intertwined series. Then? Go talk about these things to people. The book is here as a tool. When I finished writing it, I found I was becoming one more rung on the ladder on our collective climb to Him. Get a hold of this rung and create the next one.

The Laughing Matters

About the Author

W. S. Walker was raised in Nashville, TN and was generally considered to be “a bit weird but a nice enough fellow”.

The Laughing Matters

I truly thank you for giving my words a chance and for chancing upon my words.

They are my words, but these are not my concepts.

*Much like an explorer shouldn't be credited with how beautiful a portion of land or sea is,
only that they were the ones that made the decisions that lead to the finding of them.*

The Laughing Matters

*They were already there; I merely found them...
and I know that you, dear reader, will find them as well
if you but look to where I am pointing.*

•
;

The Laughing Matters

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