

Earth Manifesto

Inspiration, Imagination, and the Deep Well of Human Impulses

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Writers have manifested a wide range of fascinating and mysterious motivations for their scribbling impulses ever since the advent of the written word. For the sake of simplicity, we might imagine the impulses that compel authors and poets to put pen to paper as belonging to general categories of either inspired Angelic motives or driven Demonic motives. Personally, I love the sublime inspirations of Angelic motivations, as opposed to a wide variety of darker impulses. Both will be given due attention in this essay. Foremost among the Angelic impulses is inspiration by a Muse.

Oh, Muses of divine Inspiration, your evocative powers are summonsed
Nine daughters of the supreme ruler of the Greek heavens, all-powerful Zeus
And of fair and reasonable Mnemosyne, the graceful Titan goddess of Memory
Please provide us with clear insights, and all the best understandings we can deduce.

--- Introductory Ode' to *Comprehensive Global Perspective: An Illuminating Worldview*

Jack London and Mark Twain are two of America's greatest writers, and both of them were poignantly inspired by feminine muses. Jack London was an adventurous masculine writer who invented a fictional young character named Martin Eden in one of his most self-revelatory novels. Martin Eden was a reflection, in many respects, of London's own character and life. Martin, like Jack, worked like a dog to make a living from the time he was twelve years old. At the age of twenty, he had already become a seasoned sailor on schooners crossing the Pacific Ocean. He had experienced vivid adventures, endured many hardships, and soaked in the sights and sounds and smells and thrills of many exotic ports of call. Before becoming a seaman, he had gotten only the rudiments of an education, and his hardscrabble years and lack of opportunities had given him a rough-and-tumble persona, so he spoke with a crude vocabulary and had a rugged, unambitious outlook.

"And then it happened."

--- Refrain from Jack London's greatest short story, *To Build a Fire*

Then Martin met Ruth. She was a young woman whose presence struck him with passionate inspiration like a hurricane-force epiphany. She had an alluring femininity that made his keen sensibilities quiver, causing him to feel a wistful but powerful yearning for a more noble and respectable life. Ruth was a student at the University of California in Berkeley at the time he met her, early in the twentieth century. She was well educated and unpretentious, and lived what seemed to him to be an eminently refined life. She read poetry and played the piano and conversed with a compelling intelligence. To him, her speaking voice was beautiful and her laughter was the most musical sound in the world. Martin fervently appreciated Ruth's ethereal and seemingly divine beauty, and her sublime spiritual blue eyes, and her wealth of golden hair.

Deeply inspired by his budding friendship and love for Ruth, and motivated by an embarrassed feeling of mortification at his comparatively rough and uncouth ways, he resolved to get a better education and to read as many books as possible, and to learn etiquette and good manners, and to improve his grammar, and to find ways to make himself worthy of this lovely muse.

And then it happened. Ruth lent wings to his imagination, and it was as if a sequence of great luminous canvases appeared before his eyes with titanic figures looming up full of romance and love. These feelings inspired

passionate impulses that drove him to strive to accomplish heroic and noble deeds. In a moment of instantaneous lucidification, a startling epiphany came to him: he would become a writer and thus be one of the eyes through which the world saw, and one of the ears through which it heard, and one of the hearts through which it felt.

"He wanted to glorify the leaders of forlorn hopes, the mad lovers, the giants that fought under stress and strain, amid terror and tragedy, making life crackle with the strength of their endeavor."

Martin Eden was London's semi-autobiographical protagonist in the compelling novel, *Martin Eden*, and Ruth was the fictional embodiment of the real-life Mabel Applegarth, a young woman Jack admired passionately during his formative years in Oakland, California. London's life makes a fascinating story of its own, a story entertainingly related by Irving Stone in his excellent biographical novel of Jack London, *Sailor on Horseback*.

Mark Twain and Jack London were contemporaries. Born in 1876, London lived a hard, strenuous and exceptionally adventurous life and then died young in 1916 at the age of 40 on his Beauty Ranch above Sonoma's "Valley of the Moon". Jack London evocatively expressed his life's "credo":

"I would rather be a superb meteor, every atom of me in magnificent glow, than a sleepy and permanent planet. The function of man is to live, not to exist. I shall not waste my days trying to prolong them. I shall use my time."

And use his time he did. He lived in the San Francisco Bay Area and traveled widely, including an adventure to Alaska during the Klondike Gold Rush, and later a long voyage around the South Pacific on a beautiful 45-foot sailboat named the *Snark*. He wrote great adventure stories like *The Call of the Wild*, and *The Sea Wolf*. My favorite novel of Jack London's is *Martin Eden* because of its dramatic and interesting parallels to his own life.

Jack London sympathized with political socialism since he identified with the causes that sparked social unrest during the Gilded Age, with its extremes of inequality and great wealth and dire poverty. His hard-knocks personal experiences during the muckraking Progressive era stimulated his avid interest in such ideas, and he felt intense umbrage at the "iron heel" of domineering authorities. He also had a strong affinity, in contrast, for rugged and virile individualism, and for hard work and personal achievement. These sensibilities were oddly inconsistent with collectivist aspects of socialism, so they created significant contradictions in his thinking and feeling and living. But his philosophic open-mindedness was nonetheless admirable, and his struggles to advance socially just and egalitarian causes deserve considerable respect.

Mark Twain's Feminine Inspirations

Jack London's infatuation with Mabel Applegarth is reminiscent of Mark Twain's feelings for Laura Wright, the girl who fired the imagination of another of America's most iconic writers. Mark Twain, who was still Sam Clemens and 22-years-old at the time, was so enamored when he met 14-year-old Laura Wright that his passion could have been a character study for cartoonist Charles Schulz in imagining Charlie Brown's infatuation with the intriguing "little red-haired girl" in his famous *Peanuts* comic strip. Sam was working as an apprentice steamboat pilot on the Mississippi River when he met Laura, who was the niece of a fellow pilot, in New Orleans in May of 1858, and he fell hard for her. She was gentle, enthusiastic and down-to-earth, and he regarded her as having a compelling authenticity and alacrity of being.

Fred Kaplan describes Laura in his biography *The Singular Mark Twain*: "She was both child and woman with a purity that appealed to him. So too did her emerging womanhood, the charm and innocence of the Victorian archetype of the perfect wife. She was not yet fifteen, and Mark Twain remarked years later that "she was a very little girl, with a very large spirit, a long memory, a wise head, a great appetite for books." ... "Her innate wisdom transcended the limits of her experience. Her very nature was goodness; she was the kind of woman Sam Clemens hoped he would one day marry, but at twenty-two and with so little to offer, he was not in a marriageable position."

Sam had spent only two days with Laura in the Crescent City on that fateful occasion in 1858. Then Laura steamed off on her uncle's river-going ship, the *John J. Roe*, and returned from her holiday trip to her hometown of Warsaw, Missouri. Sam apparently would have rowed or waded anywhere to see her again, and he did visit her at least once in Warsaw, "attempting to woo Laura and convince her parents that he was a desirable son-in-law, but he had no success. She did remain for a long time in his feelings, and in his imagination as the object of his erotic

longings." Ooh, la la! Sam, she was so young! Fourteen!! A good muse is a wonderful thing, however, so I salute Sam's inspiration.

Author's Invitation

These words are written as an exploration of some of the underlying motivations in human experience. They delve into humankind's goals, purposes, drives, intentions, impulses and desires. As it turns out, all *Earth Manifesto* essays have been written partially in hopes that young people in high schools and colleges will study the wide-ranging understandings conveyed. The importance of deeper perspectives and clearer ways of seeing is crucial in motivating people to become agents of positive change in a world seemingly going awry. Chapter #31 of *Comprehensive Global Perspective* provides a fuller explanation of my perspective on the enervating potentials of open-mindedness in young people. In summary, an exposure to the rich world of expansive ideas is a valuable and life-affirming experience, and a vital preparation for wholesome awareness, good citizenship, rewarding life and positivity of understanding.

"You can't depend on your judgment when your imagination is out of focus."

--- Mark Twain

It would be gratifying to me if the observations herein about young love and intriguing females in literature were to lead to a resurgence of interest in reading. On the off chance that they do, one of the books I heartily recommend and have much enjoyed is the great Brazilian author Jorge Amado's *Gabriela, Clove and Cinnamon*. The main character Gabriela is one of the most beautiful souls in all of literature, a simple, tenderhearted woman who is free-spirited, enthusiastic and happy. She laughs easily and loves to go barefoot. She has a delightful persona, and becomes a sexy muse in a charming coastal town in the state of Bahia where the novel takes place. Yay! for Gabriela.

Some men are inspired to emulate the knight-errant Don Quixote in his chivalrous quest in the name of Dulcinea, an idealized woman. Ah, Dulcinea! "To dream the impossible dream"; "to fight for the right, without question or pause". Bravo for noble sentiments! Bravo! -- even if they are delusional -- for at least they are admirable delusions!

While some actions and intentions and aspects of human nature are noble, others are decidedly ignoble. We should encourage young people as they grow up to seek purpose in nobler involvements, and to refrain from ignoble ones, and to believe in honest things and true things in which appearances and perceptions correspond closely with reality. One secret of life may be to embrace purposes that are personally inspirational, and not to merely conform to unthinking duty, self-abnegating conformity or subservience to strict orthodoxy. The best courses of action are those that are sensibly beneficial to one's own self AND to society as a whole.

It is vitally positive to be driven by a good purpose in life. To me, it seems so much more desirable to be inspired by a lovely muse or high-minded civic dedication than by darker impulses. But a study of the biographies of those who have accomplished great deeds, or created important works, shows that there are many harsher motivations that have driven men and women throughout history. Some of the less noble motives include materialistic drives, egocentric control impulses, vanity-driven needs for approval and/or status seeking, obsequious compulsions to conform in order to satisfy belonging needs, along with religious delusions, guilt, dysfunctional anger at traumatic circumstances, profound insecurities, desires to ameliorate outrageous injustices, terror-filled hallucinations, alcohol or drug abuse, and other dark forces that sometimes compel people to do the things they do.

The great novel *Don Quixote*, incidentally, was a farcical satire published in 1604 by Miguel Cervantes. In this fanciful story, the delusional Don Quixote persistently engaged in the futile activity of "tilting at windmills" in La Mancha, a high plateau region of central Spain. It is a grand and pleasant irony of history that Spain today has become one of the biggest producers of wind power in the world, and a figurative beacon of hope for success in replacing the use of polluting fossil fuels to power our societies. One might even speculate that the renewable-energy revolution in Spain may have been facilitated by a kind of serendipitous poetic justice in which the errant and quixotic imaginings of this early seventeenth century author is leading to salubrious modern developments! Ah, Home, sweet Home!

Two provocative quotes from Jack London's *Martin Eden* inform my thoughts herein:

"What he sought was an impassioned realism, shot through with human aspiration and faith."

"... the more he knew, the more passionately he admired the Universe, and life, and his own life in the midst of it all."

Quixotic Imaginings

[Dark Blue text paragraph] Imagine yourself on a journey to South America. You find yourself spending the night two thousand feet above the rumbling Urubamba River near the inexpressibly exquisite and mysterious Inca ruins of the long secret ceremonial city of Machu Picchu. The sun has just set in the west, and a luminous full moon is rising in an impressive orange-hued ball to the east. You bribe the guards to allow you into the extensive evocative ruins at night, and as you walk around the silent structures in their ancient and striking natural setting, you experience a feeling of awe and mystery. You realize, in an epiphany of wonder, that both the transcendent beauty of the place and the technical achievements revealed in the extraordinary Incan rock architecture are impossible to adequately comprehend. A tangible oceanic sensation washes over you in these environs, and a sensation of eternity becomes almost palpable. These feelings confirm a cogent yet inarticulate sense of the lovely potentialities of rich experience and living well. You ponder the original purpose of what is today in ruins. You wonder if the sacred Incan astronomical 'Intiheatana Stone' that is found there can really do what shamanic legends say: to open one's vision to the spirit world.

[Dark Purple text] Imagine traveling 'Across Asia on the Cheap' on a year-long journey around the world. You recognize that travel is one of the best ways to achieve a healthy change of perspective, and to broaden the mind, and to cultivate better understandings. After visiting the exquisite Taj Mahal in Agra, India, you arrive in Nepal and spend three weeks trekking in the Himalayas. Your ultimate destination is Kala Patar, an 18,000-foot prominence on a ridge that looks eastward across a watershed toward Everest Base Camp and the world's highest mountain. On the day you finally ascend to this spectacular vantage point, it is astonishingly clear. The views of Mt. Everest and Lhotse and Nuptse and beautiful Ama Dablang are all framed in a deep purplish blue sky. The strenuous exercise of the long trek in those foreign environs has given you an invigorating feeling of fitness and well-being, and the high altitude and intensity of sunlight has made you a bit giddy. For the moment all seems well in the world. Then, there, you are reminded of an old Chinese proverb: "Teachers open the door; you enter by yourself."

[Dark Green text] Imagine spending a month in the early 1970s on a tropical beach located on the southwest coast of the island of Sri Lanka, formerly known as Ceylon, in the Indian Ocean. Big ocean swells approach the shore in parallel waves there, and they enter a sandy palm-lined cove a half a mile wide. As the swells approach the beach, they heighten into waves that crash simultaneously across the entire width of the cove. Imagine yourself bodysurfing in these perfect impulses of aquatic energy. The warm tropical waters stimulate your senses and yet are somehow reminiscent of the calm perfection of the womb, before that startling birth event that so rudely slapped you into being. A full moon rises above the tall coconut palms on the shore as twilight gathers. You easily catch a wave, and one after another; each wave crests and crashes, enveloping you, and you feel your body propelled along by the power of the undulating waters in vividly thrilling and exuberant sensation. In the turbulently illuminating white water, phosphorescent bioluminescence sparkles like magic as you ride the waves all the way to the white sandy beach, where they gently peter out. No gods or goddesses appear on the shore, unless they inhabit some of the tanned, fit and shapely bodies of the few fortunate travelers that visited this place at that time.

"Imagination, *n.* A warehouse of facts, with poet and liar in joint ownership."

--- Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary*

Fantastic Imaginings

[Dark Orange text] Come with me on an epic little journey. Imagine being a young traveler who spends a month living on top of the dramatic cliffs of the beautiful island of Santorini in the Greek archipelago. You

rent one of those impossibly scenic whitewashed Greek houses with bright blue doors that are precipitously perched on the edge of the island's ancient volcanic caldera. The Mediterranean light falls on the world around you with a beauty so supreme that when it touches you it feels almost hostile. As John Fowles once wrote, "... in Greece, landscape and light are so beautiful, so all-present, so intense, so wild, that the relationship is immediately love-hatred, one of passion." The light is enchanting and alluring, yet sinister, like the sorceress Circe in Greek mythology who was made famous by Homer in his story about the adventures of Odysseus and his crew on his 10-year long journey home from the Trojan War.

So there you are, living simply, observing the cultural phenomenon that is tourism on the modern day Greek islands, and you feel a deep subtext of timeless and authentic community that infuses the surroundings. You read one of dozens of books that have been written about the lost civilization of Atlantis, and then, that night, you have a startling dream of being an inhabitant on the old island of Thera, which had been a thriving outpost of Minoan civilization until about 1650 BCE. Things had been going swimmingly until then, but suddenly a series of earth tremors seemed to presage the awakening of some terrible subterranean giant.

Then, in one of the most violent volcanic eruptions in the history of civilization, the island blew sky high. Most of the island of Thera vanished in a towering explosion of rock, lava, pumice and ash, leaving only remnants that are today's impossibly picturesque island of Santorini. A towering tsunami generated by this cataclysm threw waves 300 feet high against the north coast of Crete, seventy miles to the south, and large waves inundated coastal areas all around the Mediterranean basin. The Minoan civilization on Crete, which admirably worshipped nature goddesses, was devastated. Rivers ran red with the deep fallout of volcanic ash in Egypt and the Holy Land, long before it was considered wholly holy. Agriculture around the world was disrupted for years by the volcanic ash, and global climatic cooling took place in the years following the epic eruption. The trauma was shocking enough in the ancient world to inspire tales of biblical proportion for unending generations -- like the ones contained in the Old Testament of the Bible.

You awake from your dream with a sensation of falling, as if you were at the apex of the 12-mile high volcanic plume generated by the eruption. You realize that you are still alive, and still percipient, but you are dazed and confused. You viscerally understand how the peoples in pre-historic Canaan and Egypt might have felt, having witnessed the terrible wake of the eruption, but not having had MSNBC or CNN or Fox News to tell them what had happened across the waters. You visualize the truth: many superstitious people in ancient times would have imagined that a really angry God had smitten them, perhaps for whatever handy sins they may have felt guilty about, like perhaps pharaonic Egyptians having enslaved the Israelites and having refused, with hardened hearts, to let them go. Who's to say?

Lights, Camera, Action!

I believe that the richly evocative imagery of film is having a powerful and often positive affect on our societies. Documentary films investigate issues thoroughly, and vividly portray the complexities of our world, often providing compelling insights and illumination by speaking cogently to our emotional and spiritual selves, as well as to our rational and practical selves. Comprehensive perspectives are often provided in independent films, in particular, which may be valuably "feminizing" our cultures in important ways, and thus contributing to a trend that is re-establishing respect for important values and liberties in our societies.

This evolving medium may symbolize a larger and more important synthesis that is taking place in our societies that could help us more fully realize the great ideals of our Founders: to wit, to establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, promote the general welfare, and ensure democratic fairness and equality of opportunity and the unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Fairness, of course, should apply to people regardless of race, creed, political affiliation, religion, sexual orientation or gender.

The two most indelible images of the twentieth century were (1) the nuclear bomb mushroom clouds that brought the Second World War to an end, and (2) the vision of the spherical planet Earth as seen from space. The polymath Dr. Leonard Shlain made a valid point when he wrote: "The arms race, consuming much of the left brain's talent for thousands of years, had reached an absurd zero-sum stalemate: to 'win' all-out war meant to make the

planet uninhabitable for all humans, as well as for most other species." Dr. Shlain also noted: "The first photograph of Earth taken from space flashed around the world in 1968, celebrating the interconnectedness of all life." The photo "began to instill in everyone who saw it an understanding that the Earth must be honored, protected, and loved." The visions of these images resonate deeply with the natural-world-honoring sensibilities of our souls.

Imagery is the province of the right brain. It stimulates synthesis, the intuitive, the visual and the emotive. Communication through imagery and symbolism are elementally persuasive because they appeal to the integral wisdom and insightfulness of right-brain understandings. Imagery touches us at a profound level where our ancestors dwelled in prehistory for scores of millennia before left-brained dominance arrived to assert its ascendancy. People who love films and attend film festivals tend to be revealingly empathetic, amiable, liberal-minded and open to broader perspectives.

One of the most important films ever produced is *Home*, a film with stunning images created by the famous aerial photographer and ecologist Yann Arthus-Bertrand. I highly encourage everyone to watch this sensational film. It can be viewed on YouTube. The understandings conveyed by this film are crucially important to the future well-being of humanity.

Another film that is rich with beautiful images is Ken Burns' *The National Parks: America's Best Idea*. This film took eight years to make, and was first shown on PBS in September 2009. It "celebrates the beauty of these parks and the vision and foresight of the men and women who made sure that this land would be preserved." Perspectives like this are affiliated with progressive big picture attitudes that are sorely needed in our societies today. The rest of this essay provides some of the reasons that I feel this to be so true.

For the Love of Boats

The Scottish writer Kenneth Grahame wrote a wonderful book titled *The Wind in the Willows*, which was first published in 1908. It is a classic of children's literature, and is much more than a story for kids. In an arcane way, it is like *Alice in Wonderland*, though *Alice* is more jabberwocky and literary nonsense with a deep subtext of hidden meanings and political satire. The animal characters in *The Wind in the Willows* are simply delightful, and this story is an excellent one to read aloud. It is a great read for adults as well as for young people, for it provides a highly entertaining allegory of folly, recklessness, sensibility, wisdom and the positivity of faithful and caring friendships. Its main character, Toad, is a clever but conceited fellow who commits an astonishing succession of compulsive follies. His friends the Mole, the Water Rat and the Badger are also wonderful characters; indulge in the pleasure of reading about them!

The Wind in the Willows begins with the Mole feeling the imperious call of springtime above his little subterranean home. Working busily with his small paws, he ascended toward the surface, until at last, pop! -- his snout came out into the sunlight, and he found himself rolling in the warm grass of a lovely meadow. "This is fine!" he said to himself. "This is better than whitewashing!" The sunshine struck hot on his fur, soft breezes caressed his brow, and after the seclusion of the cellarage he had lived in so long the carol of happy birds fell on his dulled hearing almost like a shout. Jumping off all his four legs at once, in the joy of living and the delight of spring without its cleaning, and pursued his way across the meadow till he reached the hedge on the further side".

There he had a flustered and imperious exchange with the local rabbits ("Onion-sauce! Onion-Sauce!", he remarked, jeeringly), and then he found himself thinking that "he somehow could only feel how jolly it was to be the only idle dog among all the busy citizens."

The Mole "thought his happiness was complete when, as he meandered aimlessly along, suddenly he stood by the edge of a full-fed river. Never in his life had he seen a river before -- this sleek, sinuous, full-bodied animal, chasing and chuckling, gripping things with a gurgle and leaving them with a laugh, to fling itself on fresh playmates that shook themselves free, and were caught and held again. All was a-shake and a-shiver -- glints and gleams and sparkles, rustle and swirl, chatter and bubble. The Mole was bewitched, entranced, fascinated. By the side of the river he trotted as one trots, when very small, by the side of a man who holds one spell-bound by exciting stories; and when tired at last, he sat on the bank, while the river still chattered on to him, a babbling procession of the best stories in the world, sent from the heart of the earth to be told at last to the insatiable sea."

Here's the part I'm trying to tell. The Mole soon meets the Water Rat, who he first sees across the river winking at him, and the Rat has a little boat painted blue outside and white within, which "was just the size for two animals, and the Mole's whole heart went out to it at once, even though he did not yet fully understand its uses." The Water Rat sculled smartly across the river from the far bank, and helped the Mole into the stern of the boat. The Mole admitted to the Water Rat that he has never been in a boat before in all his life.

"What?" cried the Rat, open-mouthed. "Never been in a -- you never -- well I -- what have you been doing, then?"

"Is it so nice as all that?" asked the Mole shyly, though he was quite prepared to believe it as he leant back in his seat and surveyed the cushions, the oars, the rowlocks and all the fascinating fittings, and felt the boat sway lightly under him.

"Nice? It's the *only* thing," said the Water Rat solemnly, as he leant forward for his stroke. "Believe me, my young friend, there is *nothing* -- absolutely nothing -- half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats. Simply messing," he went on dreamily: "messing - about - in - boats; ... or *with* boats," the Rat went on ... "In or out of 'em, it doesn't matter. Nothing seems really to matter, that's the charm of it. Whether you get away, or whether you don't; whether you arrive at your destination or whether you reach somewhere else, or whether you never get anywhere at all, you are always busy, and you never do anything in particular; and when you've done it, there's always something else to do, and you can do it if you like, but you'd much better not." Ah, a perfect idyll ...

A far different appreciation for boats is expressed in the opening paragraph of Herman Melville's towering 1853 classic, *Moby Dick*. "Call me Ishmael. Some years ago ... having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world." Ishmael indicated that he was wont to do this, "whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul." He said, "With a philosophical flourish, Cato throws himself upon his sword; I myself quietly take to the ship."

Walt Whitman's poem on the Earth Manifesto Home Page, with its nautical symbolism, provocatively epitomizes my sentiments with regard to our human motivations and the aggregate impacts we are having on our beautiful home planet. Let us "Sail forth", indeed, but let's not be so heedless as to "risk the ship, ourselves, and all."

Pondering the Import of Early Literature and the Vicissitudes of Circumstance

Much classic literature is reminiscent of the classic paintings found in great European museums like the Louvre in Paris, the Uffizi Gallery in Firenze, and the Prado in Madrid. The subjects in these medieval paintings were often religious, dominated by images of Jesus Christ, Mother Mary and stories from the Bible. No wonder the Mona Lisa smiles so ambiguously. Today, evangelical impulses are strong in the U.S., and the powerful influence of the Religious Right is oppressive, so it is fortuitous that artists in our modern culture explore topics and ideas that are far wider, more diverse, more relevant and more broadminded, as well as more impressionistic, more enigmatic and more abstruse.

Classical literature, like classical painting, is dominated by religious themes. Dante Alighieri was the early 14th century Italian writer whose *Divine Comedy* is one of the most famous works in world literature. It was a "comedy" in the medieval sense during classical times, for it begins in confusion and ends in happiness. The *Divine Comedy* consists of three parts, *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. Dante imagines in this story making a journey through literal versions of the great mythological concepts of Hell, Purgatory and Heaven. These and related concepts like good, evil, guilt, sin, empathy and forgiveness represent colossal quandaries for humankind.

At the time Dante wrote this book, he felt lost and nearly mad. He had visions of being assailed by beasts, and he desperately sought, but was unable to find, the 'right way' to salvation. So in the *Divine Comedy*, he summonsed Virgil, the ancient Roman epic poet, as the embodiment of both rationality and poetic insight to help him in his quest for understanding. Dante enlisted Virgil to guide him through this dream-inspired account of his personal journey through Hell and Purgatory. But then, since the highly esteemed Virgil lived before Jesus and was consequently considered to automatically be an unbelieving 'pagan', he could not be allowed to accompany Dante once he ascended to Heaven, where his muse Beatrice guided him. Beatrice was Dante's inspirational and idealized woman, who was modeled after a young real woman he had admired from afar in Firenze.

Ah, enthralling Beatrice! It is quite wonderful that such kinds of "courtly love" once existed! This was a type of platonic love that involved a secret, highly respectful, and generally unrequited form of admiration and affection. Being smitten with passionate yet unrequited feelings like this can provide powerful motivation to writers and artists, and the inspiration sparked by all such muses should be celebrated!

Listen in, as Dante wrote in *La Vita Nuova*, of his first sighting of Beatrice from afar:

"The moment I saw her I say in all truth that the vital spirit, which dwells in the inmost depths of the heart, began to tremble so violently that I felt vibrations alarmingly in all my pulses, even the weakest of them. As it trembled, it uttered these words: <Behold a god more powerful than I, who comes to rule over me.> From then on indeed Love ruled over my soul, which was thus wedded to him early in life, and he began to acquire such assurance and mastery over me, owing to the power which my imagination gave him, that I was obliged to fulfill his wishes perfectly."

In contrapuntal contrast, familiarity can sometimes breed contempt, and it seems to be an aspect of the human condition that, as one humorist observed, familiarity in marriage often "takes the edge off of excessive admiration." A cynical ha!

Inferno is the first part of the *Divine Comedy*. In it, a kind of poetic justice is served as punishment for each of the three main types of sins: those allegedly dastardly sins of desire and self-indulgence, and far worse, those sins of violence and of malicious intent. In contrast, Dante commemorates in *Paradiso* the four cardinal virtues (Prudence, Temperance, Fortitude and Justice), together with three theological virtues (Faith, Loving Kindness and Hope). Virtues are almost always, in theory if not in practice, distinctly preferable to vices! (The motives of the classifying religious authorities, however, are sometimes seriously suspect.)

Voltaire's Views on Philosophic Optimism and Pessimism

Another towering historical figure who found inspiration in a female muse was François-Marie Arouet, who is best known by his pen name Voltaire. He was one of the most prolific writers and famous philosophers of the Enlightenment Era. Voltaire had a notable aptitude for witty, perceptive observations, and often made scathing criticisms of religious establishments, governments, and human follies. This earned him imprisonment or exile from France on several occasions. He was inspired by Émilie du Châtelet, a woman whose intelligence and scientific acumen earned her considerable fame in her own right. Émilie and Voltaire had a romantic affair and lived together at a château owned by her husband, the Marquis du Châtelet, during 15 years of their relationship. That must have been a real interesting ménage à trois! (Then Émilie du Châtelet died in childbirth.)

Voltaire's amusing story *Candide* is a philosophic tale that is one of the greatest short stories ever written. Published in 1759, the story is a satirical attack on philosophical optimism, which was characteristic of much popular philosophizing at the time. *Candide* is about innocent young Candide and his tutor Pangloss, who "was professor of metaphysico-theologico-cosmologology. He proved admirably that there is no effect without a cause, and that this is the best of all possible worlds." Candide falls in love with Cunégonde, the young daughter of the Baron in a castle in Westphalia, but when Candide is caught kissing her with particular vivacity, sensibility and grace, and "their eyes sparkled, their knees trembled, their hands strayed", the Baron beheld this cause and effect, and "chased Candide from the castle with great kicks on the backside", an effect that is a subsequent cause of an astonishing series of terrible misfortunes.

Candide was written as a satire on the philosophic optimism expressed by Gottfried Leibniz, a famous German philosopher and mathematician who lived from 1646 to 1716. Leibniz had tried to justify the apparent imperfections in the world by arguing that physical reality is almost miraculously optimal for human existence, and for a simple reason: it was created by a perfect and benevolent God. Voltaire scoffed at the theory that our universe is the best of all possible worlds that God could have designed, for he was incensed about philosophical optimism in the wake of the Lisbon Earthquake of 1755 and the deadly and destructive tsunami and fires that followed the terrible tremor.

Voltaire wrote *Candide* in response to his disillusionment related to natural disasters like earthquakes, diseases and shipwrecks in storms, and he was also disturbed by the grave inhumanities of human beings to others that have

taken place throughout history since the dawn of time. The horrendous Seven Years' War that raged from 1756 to 1763, in which something like one million persons died, was likely also immediate in his mind, along with the general litany of reprehensible acts of slavery, rape, pillage, thievery, murder, massacres, military sieges, torture, hangings, arson, burnings at the stake, religious persecutions and the like.

Voltaire concludes *Candide* with a fitting irony, despite all the adversities that his characters have suffered: "Pangloss would say to *Candide*, all events form a chain in this best of all possible worlds; for in the end, had you not been given a good kick in the backside and been chased out of a beautiful castle for the love of Miss Cunégonde, and if you hadn't been subjected to the Inquisition, and if you hadn't wandered about South America on foot, and if you hadn't dealt the Baron a good blow with your sword, and if you hadn't lost all your sheep from that fine country of Eldorado, you wouldn't be here now eating candied citron and pistachio nuts."

"That is well put," replied *Candide*; "but we must cultivate our garden." Well, let's figuratively tend our gardens, and remain alert, and cultivate whatever appreciative gratitude we can summons, as we do so.

In contrast to those who are philosophic optimists, many people have been so discouraged by hardships, inequalities, desperate insecurities, calamities, despotic infamy, vile oppressions, neurochemical imbalances or religious intolerance that they espouse a contrary idea: "philosophic pessimism". Pessimism as a personal attitude can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, so it can be a negative and undesirable way of being in the world, whether or not pessimism is actually justified. Seeing the glass as half full is generally more valuable than seeing it as half empty, if only because optimism is healthier for us both mentally and physically. A positive attitude is often literally good for one's personal health and well-being.

Since one of the initial purposes of the U.S. Constitution was to establish a form of governance that would "promote the general Welfare", a top priority of our leaders should be to work together to ensure that the economic and social conditions that prevail will be the most amenable possible for giving the American people legitimate feelings for more secure and optimistic outlooks.

I believe that the idea of "meliorism" may be the best way of looking at the world. This perspective recognizes that the world has its flaws and adverse circumstances and 'evils', as well as its marvelous aspects, and that we can reduce negative outcomes in aggregate by planning more intelligently, and by restructuring our societies so that they are fairer, more long-term oriented and more ecologically sound. Salubrious progress is a real possibility, and we could improve the world for ourselves through proper understandings and smarter priorities and better, less polarized leadership. Democratic fairness and clearly defined greater good goals should prevail, along with more honorable social responsibilities and more widespread respect for human rights. And we should overcome economic and political corruption, fraudulent schemes, inordinate repression, tyranny and repressive abuses of power!

The Elevating Power of Philosophy

" There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

--- William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 5

The best aspects of philosophy are those that include a synthesis of all experience, and not merely a compendium of analytical knowledge or a concatenation of speculative ideas about metaphysical abstractions. As Will Durant puts it in his Introduction to *The Story of Philosophy*, "We want to seize the value and perspective of passing things, and so pull ourselves up out of the maelstrom of daily circumstances. We want to know that the little things are little, and the big things big, before it is too late. We want to learn to laugh in the face of the inevitable, to smile even at the looming of death. We want to be whole, to coordinate our energies by criticizing and harmonizing our desires ..."

Philosophy allows us to see everything in light of the whole, so it gives us a 'total perspective' in which we can integrate and synthesize all the parts and puzzles of existence into deeper understandings. The study of philosophy necessarily deals with technicalities of logic and conundrums of epistemology (the rather abstruse nature of consciousness and knowledge and knowing). But much more importantly, philosophy delves into meaningful questions of the material universe, and of our human perceptions and thoughts and beliefs and feelings.

Philosophers explore the intricacies of ethics, morality, meaning, value, happiness and the freedom of will, and also provide insights into the proper nature of education, history, art, esthetics, politics and progress.

"Doubtless some philosophers have had all sorts of wisdom except common sense; and many a philosophic flight has been due to the elevating power of thin air."

--- Will Durant, Introduction to *The Story of Philosophy*

Some of the most surprising, provocative and enlightening perspectives in the history of human thought are coming together today in the aftermath of the revolutionary ideas of biologists like Charles Darwin and psychologists like Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, and of physicists like Albert Einstein, and smart people like Dr. Leonard Shlain. Percolating in the neurons and synapses and interstices of the human brain, these ideas are culminating in a variety of insightful understandings. Brilliant holistic thinkers and brain scientists and spiritual people and many others are developing illuminating understandings, integrating the evolving knowledge of how our brains conceive of things with the most modern and accurate ways of comprehending reality.

Joseph Campbell, a widely respected professor who specialized in the realm of mythic imagination, once provocatively expressed the feeling that "we are at this moment participating in one of the very greatest leaps of the human spirit to a knowledge not only of outside nature but also of our own deep inward mystery." Journalist Bill Moyers later asked Joseph Campbell, not long before he died, if he still believed this to be true. "The very greatest," he confirmed.

Let us honor Joseph Campbell's memory by being alert and awake to extraordinary ways of perceiving and understanding our lives and experiences! It is valuable to clearly analyze and understand situations, and to simultaneously develop a comprehensive and holistic big-picture synthesis of the most valid ways of seeing things. By knowing the best that is thought and felt in the world, we can help create a current of true and fresh new ideas.

We are all together on this threshold of the greatest understandings ever. Each of us can embrace this awe-inspiring perspective of being alive at this particular moment in the unfathomably vast unfolding of existence. Each of us can develop a deeper awareness of the outer world than has ever been available before -- AND of the inner world of our psyches. Yet few people seem to appreciate this marvel with the reverence that it deserves. This failure is due to exigencies of the moment and the infinite minutiae of details and obligations in our lives, and because of a multitude of distractions in life and the specialized intricacies of knowledge. A plethora of profound insecurities tends to occlude our vision, and the same can be true of impediments inherent in simplistic belief systems and conditionings and indoctrinations.

Let us shake ourselves awake while we are still alive, and imagine this moment for its epic significance. Let us envision the mystery of existence with an open-eyed enthusiasm that transcends optimism and pessimism and all other 'isms'. Let us embrace the extraordinary understandings available here in the twenty-first century with open-mindedness and an eager interest in visionary knowledge. Let's reject narrow-minded blind certitudes that are like pit bulls resolutely latched onto the legs of hapless dogmatists. Let's see our lives like a vibrant drama in which the music is swelling and the perplexing plot feels like it is intensifying toward a startling crescendo. Read on for expansive illumination!

Wisdom and the Hero's Journey

"By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest; Second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest."

--- Confucius

The search for meaning, for true self, is what mythologist Joseph Campbell referred to as the hero's journey. Campbell believed in the importance of a feminine muse that leads the mythic male hero toward his poetic destiny. In this mythic dimension, the hero makes a spiritual quest toward self-realization, and pushes the horizons of his vision to ever-larger vistas, often propelled by inspiration of a feminine muse. The classical Muses themselves, in Greek mythology, are the nine daughters of Zeus, supreme ruler of the Greek heavens, and Mnemosyne, the Titan goddess of Memory. These Muses represent inspiration for men and women alike, and each of us, in a sense, is embarked upon our own hero's journey of self-discovery, understanding, creativity and self-expression.

We each seek to find a form of wisdom that is suited to our own lives, one that is personally best for us in the culture in which we live. Some say it is best to manifest stoic asceticism and to abandon earthly drives and ambitions, and to effectively give up passionate participation in the world. But I personally think we should all look more widely for wisdom, not more narrowly. History shows that it can be socially detrimental to have millions of people give up their lives to believe in Jesus Christ or Allah or any deity or messiah in obedience to the dictates of hardline doctrinaire or demagogic authorities, who often manipulatively exploit vulnerable people to enhance their own influence, ego, power, celebrity, fortune or glory. Each person who has managed to satisfy their basic needs, it seems to me, should seek the best balance for themselves between stoic self-denial and epicurean indulgence, between conformity and rebellion, and between classic Apollonian rationality and indulgent Dionysian emotionality.

The famous behavioral psychologist Abraham Maslow recognized the immense complexity of human behaviors, motivations and needs, and great capacity for personal growth. In a paper titled *A Theory of Motivation*, Maslow first set forth the idea that people operate out of "an inborn hierarchy of needs." He noted that once people have their basic physiological needs satisfied, like requirements for food, water and shelter, then 'belongingness needs' emerge and people seek approval and acceptance. If a person is fortunate enough to be able to satisfy these needs, then they have a modicum of security and serenity that allows them to move toward satisfying higher levels of "self-actualizing" needs. These outer-directed needs include the expression of more profound values that give depth and meaning to life, such as empathy, compassion, generosity and public-spiritedness.

Maslow was passionately optimistic about the good possibilities for people to positively transform themselves and the societies in which they live. It seems apparent that if we were to collectively encourage better education and more grounded forms of social well-being, and provided a healthier social safety net, we might be able to create a society in which more people were able to feel a positive sense of mission, and to achieve higher forms of self-actualization like creative endeavors and socially valuable service to others -- and a commendable dedication to greater good goals.

Not only do I believe we can act to make this world a better one for ourselves and others, but I think this should, in fact, be one of our main responsibilities in life. We should work together to change our political system and social institutions so that they are more in accord with the common good and the long-term well-being of all. Vote accordingly!

I recommend reading the book by Tony Schwartz, *What Really Matters - Searching for Wisdom in America*, for some comprehensive understandings of various philosophical perspectives of life, as experienced by a wide range of perceptive people who have sought transcendent meaning in life through an impressive variety of different modalities. Among those seeking wisdom are notable psychologists, scientists, artists, teachers, mystics, spiritual leaders and philosophers.

Each of us in our lives could be filled with higher potentialities and deeper purposes, if only the heavy iron heel of inequitable authorities and exigencies would just allow us more latitude. Most people evolve throughout their lives in their degree of self-awareness and self-knowledge, as well as in the range and depths of their abilities. We could all achieve richer, more authentic, more complete, and more meaningful lives. To do this optimally, we should find ways to connect more honestly with our bodies and our feelings, and to be more open-minded, and even to integrate the wisdom of an Eastern contemplative tradition like Buddhism. In doing this we could live better lives, and vanquish unthinking acceptance of the powerful but flimsy seductions of materialism, and of narrow doctrines of religious fundamentalism.

The world might be a much better place if most people spent more time reading books or walking outdoors than watching television. Instead, in most nations around the globe, people spend much more time watching TV than reading. There is some valuable programming on television, especially on the National Geographic Channel, the Discovery Channel and PBS stations. But television can also numb the mind with the passively hypnotic nature of the medium, and it is also full of shallow time-wasting trash and seductive subliminal messaging.

Of course, during the pandemic, there have been a great array of good things to watch, with films and multi-episode series that have been excellent ways to pass the time.

New-fangled electronic contraptions keep popping up with impressive regularity, so hundreds of millions of people are also spending much more time on iPhones and surfing the Internet or "social networking" or Twittering or watching YouTube videos or listening to iTunes. There are positive aspects of these activities, but also negative ones, and balanced discipline is required!

What would happen if young people spent less time playing violent computer games, or did less shopping at the mall? How can we sensibly discourage people from drinking excessive amounts of alcohol, or doing hard drugs, or hanging out in gangs? Must we feed our mindless compulsions for things like gambling in casinos in obscenely gaudy places like Las Vegas? Wouldn't it be better if people did not rush around burning up gasoline for so many unnecessary purposes? Do we actually need 161 games to be played between April and October by every professional baseball team in order to figure out which teams get into the playoffs to determine the "world champion"? Are these ridiculous questions?

"Many lives are so empty of interest that their subject must first perform some feat like sailing alone around the world, or climbing a hazardous peak, in order to elevate himself above mere existence, and then, having created a life, to write about it."

--- William Gass, *The Art of Self: Autobiography in the Age of Narcissism*

I laugh at this quote! Reading and writing are widely heralded as being among the most valuable of commonly learned skills. But there are 'downsides' to everything, a kind of curse, as it were, in every blessing. The perspectives of Dr. Leonard Shlain, discussed below, assert that the advent of written words and the spread of literacy are strongly correlated to the dominance of our brains by our analytic left hemispheres. This has lent itself to making our societies male-dominated patriarchies in which females have been relegated to inferior roles in society. To the extent that this is true, we should cultivate a cautionary attitude toward our thoughts, and even refrain from actually believing everything we think. Ha! Let us remain open to alternate points of view, and strive to understand our selves more fully -- and other people, and our enveloping cultures and politics. And let's think about what our innermost motivations may be, and how positive drives could be encouraged and negative ones discouraged.

The palpable intent of human purpose is evocatively exposed in wondrous monuments and ruins found in far-flung places around our home planet. Think of the chiseled volcanic rock statues on Easter Island and the stone monuments of Stonehenge in England. Picture the imposing pyramids built by ancient Egyptians. Consider the amazingly fitted stone masonry of the Incas in Peru. Visit in your mind's eye the jungle-reclaimed cities of the civilizations of the Mayas and the ruins of the Aztecs. Visualize the mausoleum that the first emperor of China had built at an enormous cost in Xian in the third century BCE, with its thousands of terra cotta warriors. Ponder the enigmatic purposes of structures scattered around the Mediterranean Sea that are now crumbling ruins of Mycenaean, Carthaginian, Greek and Roman civilizations. Imagine the impetus that inspired the building of the hundreds of temples along the banks of the Irrawaddy River at Pagan in Burma (now Myanmar), or at Angkor Wat in Cambodia. Contemplate the Buddhist temples of Kathmandu, the Hindu temples of India, the Moslem temples of Java, and the vaulting Gothic cathedrals of Europe. View the lovely online aerial photo of the Taj Mahal that was taken by Yann Arthus-Bertrand, and consider that this tomb was erected by the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan as a memorial to his wife, who tragically died while giving birth to their 14th child.

History is writ large in these places. Such sites are mute but feeling-engendering and thought-provoking testaments to the soaring human spirit, and to elemental needs and drives and motives. In light of these expansive visions, read on!

Insights from John Fowles

In *The Aristos*, British novelist and philosopher John Fowles stated that the "universal situation" in our existence is dominated by two opposing principles: Law, or the physical organizing principle, and Chaos, the disintegrating principle. Both of these principles are indifferent to individuals, according to Fowles. He suggests that humanity figuratively drifts on a raft, afloat on an endless ocean.

"From his present dissatisfaction, man reasons that there was some catastrophic wreck in the past, before which he was happy; some golden age, some Garden of Eden. He also reasons that somewhere ahead lies a promised land, a land without conflict. Meanwhile, he is miserably *en passage*; this myth lies deeper than religious faith."

"Seven kinds of people inhabit the raft: the optimist, the pessimist, the observer, the ego-centric epicurean, the altruist, the stoic, and the innocent child. Man is a seeker of the agent. We seek an agent for this being in a blind wind, this being on a raft; this mysterious power, the causator, the god, the face behind the mysterious mask of being and not being. Some make an active god of their own better natures; a benevolent father, a gentle mother, a wise brother, a charming sister. Some make an active god from positive human attributes like mercy, concern and justice. Some make an active god of their own worst natures; a god who is sadistically cruel and profoundly absurd; a god who absconds; a black exploiter of the defenseless individual; the venomous tyrant of *Genesis 3:16-17*."

"Between these tribes, the firm believers in an active good god and the firm believers in an active bad one, the great majority shift and surge, a milling herd caught between Pangloss and Job. They pay lip service to an empty image; or believe in nothing. In this century (the twentieth), they have drifted toward Job. If there is an active good god he has, since 1914, paid very poor wages." ... "The old myth that his raft, his world, is especially favored and protected now seems ridiculous."

This is an abbreviated summary of just the first four pages of *The Aristos*. This book has been important in the evolution of my own personal ideas and worldviews. One of John Fowles' purposes in writing this book was "to suggest that the main reason dissatisfaction haunts our century, as optimism haunted the eighteenth and complacency the nineteenth, is precisely because we are losing sight of our most fundamental human birthright: to have a self-made opinion on all that concerns us." Feel and think!

Why So Little Good?

"The more I see of men, the better I like my dog."

--- Pascal (LOL!)

Christian dogma holds that God gave human beings free will, which is considered a great good. By its nature, however, free will inherently entails the possibilities of 'sin'. In the Genesis creation stories in the Bible, Adam and Eve violated God's edict not to eat forbidden fruit from 'the tree of the knowledge of good and evil' in the Garden of Eden, so they thereby committed *original sin* when they partook of the fruit. In patriarchal predictability, the authors of the Bible blamed this turn of events on the first woman, Eve, and an insidiously sinuous and slithery serpent.

Christians believe that satanic forces operate in the world that are inimical to God and mankind. But this idea poses a serious contradiction: if God is benevolent and omnipotent, why does 'He' allow evil forces to prevail so often? If God, on the other hand, can't prevent evil and misfortune, then he is not all-powerful. This holy hole in Christian logic gave rise to Manichean ideas in the third century CE. These ideas posited that the universe is ruled by two equally powerful forces: absolute Good and absolute Evil. Honest people recognize that absolutist dogmas like these are fallacious because everything is subjective and relatively relative, and many things that are good for some are bad for others.

Dogmas of moral absolutism have unfortunately been used to strengthen right-wing political positions in the U.S. and other countries. Such dualistic dogmas hold that there are moral absolutes of good and evil. This doctrine is similar to the millennia-old religion of Manichaeism, and it has been used to paint a false dichotomy between us, the good guys, and others, the evil ones. I have traveled extensively, and found good people everywhere. And so are there 'bad' ones. Every person has both positive and negative impulses. *The line between good and evil does not run between us and "them", or between our country and other countries; in truth, this line runs right through each and every one of us.*

Manichaeism was formulated by a self-proclaimed prophet named Mani who lived in the third century CE. He resided in Babylon, which was a province of the Persian Empire at that time. He claimed to have received a revelation as a youth from a spirit he later called his Twin or 'Divine Self'. The spirit taught him truths that he

astutely developed into a religion. He claimed his 'divine' Twin brought him to self-realization, allowing him to gain divine knowledge and liberating insight. He asserted that he was the 'Paraclete of the Truth', which happened to be the Holy Spirit or Comforter prophesized in the *Gospel According to Saint John* in the Bible (*John 14:16*). Mani asserted that he was the last prophet in a succession of figures that included Zoroaster, Buddha and Jesus. A nifty place in the world!

Mani's doctrines presented an elaborate description of what he perceived as the conflict between the spiritual world of light and the material world of darkness. This ideology was distinguished by an elaborate cosmology in which the struggle between a good spiritual world of light was seen as combating an evil material world of darkness. Mani said that the province of human beings represents a battleground arena for these powers: the good part is the soul, which is composed of light, and the bad part is the body, composed of dark earth. The soul defines the person and was regarded as incorruptible, though it was dominated by a 'foreign power'. This depiction addressed the practical part of the problem of the existence of evil. Human beings, Mani said, can be saved from this dark power if they come to know who they are, and if they are able to nobly identify themselves with their soul.

Manichaeism thrived for many centuries. At its height in the seventh century CE, it was one of the most widespread religions in world history. Manichaean churches and scriptures existed as far east as China and as far west as the Roman Empire. The spread and success of Manichaeism was seen as a threat to other religions, so it was widely repressed, and its adherents were persecuted in Christian, Zoroastrian, Islamic and even Buddhist societies.

Simplistic dogmas are often contrary to comprehensive understandings, so this is why it would be a good idea to choose to believe in more nuanced and accurate ways of seeing the world. A holistic conception of the unity of mind and body might prove to be of greater value.

Life is filled with complexity, paradox and contradiction. As Lewis Carroll has Alice exclaim in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, we human beings often think and act in ways that are "Curious and curiouiser!"

The Law of Three Stages

"Originality is nothing but judicious imitation. The most original writers borrowed one from another."

--- Voltaire

All human beings attempt at least occasionally to make sense of the world in which they live. In the ideas presented throughout the rest of this essay, keep in mind the concept that the French thinker Auguste Comte conceived, which is known as The Law of Three Stages. This 'law' states that each field of thought can be observed by historians of ideas as having developed through three stages: (1) the theocratic stage, in which all phenomena are explained as expressing the will of some personified deity; (2) a metaphysical stage, in which things are explained by impersonal forces and abstractions; and (3) the positive science stage, in which things are explained through reason and the regularities of natural cause and effect, and in which the 'scientific method' is used to make precise observations and plausible hypotheses and objective, verifiable experiments.

The "Bet Situation" is discussed further on in this essay, in specific situations where people place symbolic bets on what the most accurate explanations are for our existence. Philosophical optimism, philosophical pessimism, and "meliorism" are also examined. Pay attention!

Doubt, Certainty, the Bible, and Wisdom

Plato, in the 4th century BCE, recognized that human behavior flows from three main sources: desire, emotion, and knowledge. He felt that the optimal individual action would be characterized by desire that is warmed and banked with emotion and guided by knowledge. Not a bad approach, when you think about it! And far better than allowing immoderate indulgences to be married to emotional hijackings, or making cerebral rationalizations that incidentally happen to justify awful outcomes for society as a whole.

"Time is a royal man-eating tiger. He is not satisfied with men; he also devours cities, kingdoms and (forgive me, God) even gods."

--- Nikos Kazantzakis

Voltaire observed in the 18th century: "Doubt is not a pleasant condition, but certainty is an absurd one." Since poverty, destitution, failure, calamity, exile, pain or loss can lead to harsh anguish, the frightening burden of severe uncertainties and bewildering insecurity can make a person experience doubt with agonizing anxiety. A spiritual crisis can then occur during such an unsettling interregnum. A psychological "metanoia" crisis like this can lead to turmoil and make one's actions and motives and purposes suddenly appear to be hollow or meaningless. At such times of existential crises of thought and emotion, one becomes more vulnerable to a startling religious conversion. "Born again!" At such moments, doctrines of 'original sin' that assert every person will either be eternally damned or saved through proper believing can seize control of one's consciousness and subconscious mind, for better or for worse.

Being 'born again' can have real downsides as well as upsides. Millions of people, especially in Southern states, use the Bible as a source of succor and counsel. Yet the Bible has a multitude of faults and errors, and believing fervently in fundamentalist ideas often has remarkably harmful problems associated with it, for individuals and for society as a whole.

Mark Twain adduced the defects of the Bible thusly: "It has ... a wealth of obscenity; and upwards of a thousand lies." The Bible is also filled with serious contradictions. Take the question of whether or not it is actually a folly to be wise.

"For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow."

--- *Ecclesiastes 1:18*

"For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent."

--- *I Corinthians 1:19*

And, in distinct contrast, from *Proverbs 4:7*: "Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting, get understanding."

What shall it be? I believe knowledge and understanding are of the utmost importance to humanity, whether or not preachers say God favors them. A perceptive friend of mine who has two children once said that the saving grace of humanity will be an effective use of our awareness and intellect and wisdom to advance civic concerns. I find strong resonance in this idea. The best hopes for our children will not be found in desperately casting hopes to the heavens for salvation. It is becoming increasingly necessary for us to act more sensibly here on Earth, rather than to give in to temptations and indulge in tendencies to buy unnecessary quantities of material things and cling to ethnocentric impulses and deny important scientific understandings. It is becoming urgent for us to change course and begin mitigating the extent to which we are imperiling our communities and Earth's ecosystems and the healthy biological diversity of untold numbers of species of life.

Our societies are suffering pathological pains associated with tensions between generations that are caused by economic inequities and harmful environmental impacts. These things are compounded by a rapid increase in the number of needy and greedy people alive. Acute conflicts between jealously self-protective privileged people and envious underprivileged people contribute to this malaise. Neo-Gilded-Age inequalities, dire poverty, extreme economic insecurity, crime and anti-social behaviors related to these pathologies have the effect of complicating our societal challenges. These problems are intensified by powerful human desires for more variety and greater liberty and more materialistic possessions and expanded freedoms to choose.

In light of these existential challenges, there is some merit in the preachings of those who believe in a straight and narrow path, and in the value of conforming to the proverbial Procrustean bed. It is just too bad that this conformity often turns out to be a disciplined conformity -- SURPRISE! -- to the strictures of those who are eager to impose their control and narrow-minded ways of seeing the world upon everyone else. Conformity to expectations can have the drawback that it suppresses the deepest of our aspirations and can be troubling to our most authentic inner selves. There are definite respects in which it is healthier to accept and cultivate one's innate predispositions and virtues.

There may be some positive aspects of social control through the dominance of religious authorities -- but only if those self-anointed authorities actually acted in ways that were truly consistent with the greater good. But they rarely act in the best interests of the majority of people in society. In any case, it is quite contrary to our American ideals, rules of law, and Constitution to let religious prejudices have determinative influence in government. Such gambits are much more characteristic of governments in strict theocracies like those of Saudi Arabia and Iran. The common people in those Muslim countries are certainly not happy with the repressive aspects of the regimes that rule over them. Liberty-loving Americans would surely revolt against any efforts to impose strict and disproportionately harsh and unjust dictates like those that characterize Islamic law.

One of the themes that Jonathan Swift explores in *Gulliver's Travels* is whether *might* is right, or in contrast, whether *moral correctness* is best. Which should be the governing factor in our societies? History shows that claims of moral superiority used by religious authorities to dominate others can have outcomes that are as ruthlessly harmful as more secular justifications for uses of repression and physical force to control people.

Jesus said morality is kindness to the weak; Nietzsche said morality is the bravery of the strong. Plato, in contrast, said morality is the effective harmonizing of the whole. An 18th century sage named Helvetius pointed out a reasonable way of seeing this: Morality should be founded on sociology, not theology, and on the ever-changing needs of society, not on any unchanging revelation or dogma.

As a strong believer in human rights and dignity and individual freedom and equal rights for women, I state unequivocally that our system is better for us Americans than anything that the Religious Right offers to impose upon our society through all those God-fearing right-wing religion-pandering Southern politicians and assorted Christian nationalists. The domineering influence of social conservatives on churches, and on Fox News and the Republican Party, seem to have obscured the fact that Jesus was what would be considered today to be an outright liberal. He championed the interests of the poor, chastised the greed of the rich, and opposed the oppressive powers-that-be. He taught compassion and forgiveness, tolerance, peace, equality and love.

"It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God."

--- Matthew 19:24 (Oh, is that so?)

Darker Sides of Human Inspiration

As these words materialized onto the page, musician and vocalist Don Henley beat the drums and the rest of the rock band The Eagles played along. Don Henley crooned out a soulful rendition of *Hotel California*, singing the lyrics, "This could be Heaven or this could be Hell."

The imagination does not always conjure up images that are sanguine, sublime or enlightening. Vividly dark forces also operate in the vast subterranean landscape of our subconscious minds. This is the lair of the nightmare, a place where a part of our inner selves lurks that can keep us in thrall to horror movies and thrillers. But even the highly image-sensitive emotive centers of our conscious minds are not fully up to the task of imagining reality in all of its potentially terrible ramifications and ultimately impersonal aspects. Another common form of inspiration is in the offing -- and it is darker.

Much artistic inspiration springs not from a muse or religious fervor, but from a more shadowy fount. One category of such motive is revealed in persecuted disciples who revel in imagined sacrificial glories of beatified martyrdom. Creative undertakings sometimes issue from a torment of the soul like that of someone half-mad. Think of Vincent van Gogh, who cut off the lobe of his left ear, or Francisco Goya, who depicted the Titan male god Saturn eating a child in his most famous painting, *Saturn Devouring His Son*,

"The more one sees of human fate and the more one examines its secret springs of action, the more one is impressed by the strength of unconscious motives and by the limitations of free choice."

--- Swiss psychologist Carl Jung

Herman Melville's character Ishmael chillingly observes that there is an "invisible police officer of the Fates, who has the constant surveillance of me, and secretly dogs me, and influences me in some unaccountable way." Ishmael says: "And, doubtless, my going on this whaling voyage formed part of the grand programme of Providence that was

drawn up a long time ago. ... Though I cannot tell why it was, exactly, that those stage managers, the Fates, put me down for this shabby part of a whaling voyage, while others were set down for magnificent parts in high tragedies, or short and easy parts in genteel comedies, or jolly parts in farces -- though I cannot tell why this was exactly; yet, now that I recall all the circumstances, I think I can see a little into the springs and motives which being cunningly presented to me under various disguises, induced me to set about performing the part I did, besides cajoling me into the delusion that it was a choice resulting from my own unbiased freewill and discriminating judgment."

Chill out, Melville! Take a breath, think clearly, and succinctly express what you want to say. Okay, Ishmael, please continue. "Chief among these motives was the overwhelming idea of the great whale himself. Such a portentous and mysterious monster roused all my curiosity. Then the wild and distant seas where he rolled his island bulk; the nameless, undeliverable perils of the whale; these, with all the attending marvels of a thousand Patagonian sights and sounds, helped to sway me to my wish. With other men, perhaps, such things would not have been inducements; but as for me, I am tormented with an everlasting itch for things remote. I love to sail forbidden seas, and land on barbarous coasts. Not ignoring what is good, I am quick to perceive a horror, and could still be social with it -- would they let me -- since it is but well to be on friendly terms with all the inmates of the place one lodges in. By reason of these things, then, the whaling voyage was welcome; the great flood-gates of the wonder-world swung open, and in the wild conceits that swayed me to my purpose, two and two there floated into my inmost soul, endless processions of the whale, and, mid-most of them all, one grand hooded phantom, like a snow hill in the air."

These words practically make one's head spin. And yet, they stimulate wonder: Could it be that there really is a 'stage manager of the Fates'? Could it be that this stage manager determines whether or not each of us is to play a shabby role in life, or if instead we are to be given a fabulous part in a high tragedy or an easy part in a genteel comedy, or even a jolly role in a farce? If so, this would be in accord with the Yiddish word *beshert*, which means something fortuitous that was 'meant to be', almost as if there is some sort of predestined divine plan. In this view of existence, there is no such thing as coincidence, and serendipity actually consists of the natural unfolding of a well-constructed plan.

In retrospect, each of us may be able to roughly trace the curious springs of happenstance that have transpired in our lives, along with the motives that have swayed us to our wishes and influenced our choices under various disguises. We could each speculate as to what has cajoled us into the delusion that our choices result from our free will and discriminating judgment. One may wonder why an author would dwell on such mysterious oddities, insufficiencies and generalities, and create such tormented particularities as are found in *Moby Dick*. But it surely must be the case that it's not a bad idea to be on friendly terms with our fellow beings, for they otherwise may treat us poorly or unduly frighten or threaten us. This may be why philosophers like to ponder such things!

The 18th century philosopher David Hume considered the question of whether or not we truly have free will, and called it "the most contentious question of metaphysics." My freedom of action and yours, Hume implies, may be distinctly limited. My own freedom of action seems clear: I can go for a long walk starting ten minutes from now, or I can take a nap, or I can do any of a dozen other activities that are either habitual or spontaneous. Yet the choices we make every day are strongly affected by a complex web of influences. These include our basic human drives, our upbringing and personal experiences, social attitudes, circumstantial obligations and happenstances, peer pressures, role models and moods, as well as advertising-stoked desires and the enticement of incentives. Big sale!

For all practical purposes, in any case, it is important for us to act as if each individual has free will. We all naturally crave the right to do as we like --- Yay for freedom! We like to do what we want without restrictions, inconveniences, limitations, discipline or discouragement. But there are many overarching issues, including a need for our actions to take place in a context of Golden Rule fairness, reasonable moderation, and wider social responsibility.

An Aside Concerning Serendipity and Synchronicity

Serendipity was the favorite word in Britain in the year 2000, according to a poll taken that year. This is "the faculty of making happy and unexpected discoveries by accident." Eureka! The history of scientific discoveries is

replete with serendipitous occurrences. Some say that there is an 'accidental sagacity' that is facilitated by being prepared and having an open mind, so that when accidental events reveal important information, such information is recognized for what it means and what it is worth. Serendipity has come to be a concept that is popularly used to mean merely a happy coincidence in relationships or events that leads to a positive outcome.

There is a folk-wisdom adage that proclaims, "everything happens for a reason." This isn't a comment on the obvious fact that we live in a cause-and-effect world, but rather it is generally a kind of optimistic fatalism that expresses the feeling that whatever happens in life can lead to better things. This saying is often used as a convenient explanation for fortuitous circumstances. It is also used as a rationalization for all-too-common adverse happenstances. People who believe that everything takes place for a purpose are not necessarily religious people who believe that God has a mysterious, predestined plan for every person. Instead, this philosophy is sometimes a kind of rationalization of hope that the circumstances that buffet us, while we are making other plans, will turn out just fine.

Clearly, chance and happenstance play roles in the events that affect our lives. Some circumstances have random impacts, so that one person may be in the right place at the right time, while another may be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Fickle is the finger of fate! Bad things often happen to good people, and good things often happen to "bad" people, so life is generally not exactly fair. Some people prepare themselves for the positive, and this can somewhat increase the probabilities of salubrious outcomes. Others seem to set themselves up for negative outcomes, and are thus more likely to be smitten by an unfolding fusillade of adversities. In any case, rationalizations by religious people that God makes things happen in accordance with a divine plan for every individual seem highly improbable, and those who so believe are influenced by a rather crazy gullibility.

When anyone attempts to trace the concatenation of events that led them right to where they are, at this moment in their life, they can often remember salient turning points. In retrospect, these inflection points are often regarded as having been miraculous twists of fate, or alternatively having been calamitous ones. What, we wonder, if such circumstances had been different? What if we failed to recognize a serendipitous opportunity, instead of having taken good advantage of it? What, for that matter, if our attitude toward those events had been different? What if we had forgiven a slight, instead of having reacted angrily? What if some twist of happenstance like the one that took place in the provocative film *Sliding Doors* had made us miss an encounter with someone who, it turns out, has had a profound effect on our lives? Things would be different!

'Synchronicity' is another kind of circumstantial occurrence that springs from fortunate coincidences. The psychoanalyst Carl Jung coined this word. It is a kind of folk wisdom concept that signifies a 'meaningful coincidence'. Most people can relate to this idea because many people experience such fortuitous occurrences. Mystics like those in James Redfield's book, the *Celestine Prophecy*, say that when we pay attention to coincidences, we tend to see them more often, and to have a better ability to understand their meanings. Skeptics say that an infinite number of things happen in life, so it is not surprising that some of them are oddly coincidental, and that some of these coincidences turn out to be fortuitous, rather than calamitous. Our minds are good at drawing inferences, creating meaning, and projecting our biases and hopes and fears onto things; this is the nature of how our minds work.

Actualities lie behind Appearances. There is a physical Objective Reality that is independent of our perception, isn't there? In our attempts to fully comprehend the nature of this reality, we find that our perceptions are deeply subjectivity and profoundly relative. After all, the Universe is ultimately unknowable. These uncertainties are parallel to quantum uncertainties described by physicists in modern times (like Werner Heisenberg's uncertainty principle). It is interesting to ponder such things, in any case, and to explore the nature of how we think of things, even if our concepts are abstruse or silly or superstitious or illusory.

James Redfield's book *The Celestine Prophecy* is weak literature, but it contains an interesting New Age perspective of the potentials and desirability of transforming our world. In its own take on the Law of Three Stages, the book basically says that the Church dominated 'thought' in Western cultures for 1,000 years during the Middle Ages, but then its credibility fell apart as it became apparent that humanity and our home planet are not the center of the universe, and that Church doctrines are too often errant, inflexible, dogmatic and intolerant. As

a result, religious explanations were somewhat discredited, and people's natural spiritual natures yielded to preoccupations with comfort, material things, economic security, and secular activities. Now we are realizing that overly indulging in materialistic consumerism is not a fully adequate way to live in the world, and that we need to better understand spiritual questions and the real values pertinent to our authentic selves. *The Celestine Prophecy* proposes some curious insights into how we could consciously evolve and gain a "common world vision". These ideas have some merit.

For instance, the fourth Insight in *The Celestine Prophecy* holds that a struggle for power takes place between people: "To gain energy, we tend to manipulate or force others to give us attention, and thus energy. When we successfully dominate others in this way, we feel more powerful, but they are left weakened, and often fight back. Competition for scarce human energy is the cause of all conflict between people." It's a veritable battle of wills out there!

The philosopher Herbert Spencer, in his book *First Principles*, noted that "We too often forget that not only is there a 'soul of goodness in things evil', but very generally also, a soul of truth even in things erroneous." Some philosophers, like Rousseau, exalted instinct and feeling above intellect and reason. These variegated viewpoints encourage us to entertain ideas and feelings that are expressed in hopes, fears and superstitions, and see if we can't make valuable use of them.

To comprehend the universe and our existence in the most accurate light, we need to be willing to use reason and analysis as well as intuition and feeling. When we do, we can synthesize our experiences and perceptions into more holistic worldviews that allow us to see things in the most sensible and salubrious ways.

Speculations on Nature, Purpose, and Cause and Effect

Big ideas are intriguing. Philosophical speculations provided by spiritual savants like Deepak Chopra are compelling, though not particularly convincing; love, they contend, has a central place in God's plan. God is love, they say, as if love exists as a central organizing principle in the Creation of the universe. This, methinks, is suspiciously anthropocentric and cosmically rather ridiculous. Gipsy Rose Lee once said, "God is love -- but get it in writing." I'm not sure what she meant, but there are few guarantees in life.

Assuming that a God does exist, like the anthropocentric one hypothesized in the Bible, it seems to me to be an error of logic to think that this God causes everything, and that 'He' has a purpose for everything that happens. As noted earlier, really smart people like German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz supposed that a benevolent and perfect God exists, and this led him to speculate that our world must be "the best of all possible worlds". It was natural that Voltaire, a half century later, satirically attacked such philosophical optimism after having seen the dreadful effects of the Lisbon Earthquake and the horrors of so many people suffering and being killed in the Seven Years' War in Europe and in colonies around the world.

As with many types of intellectual disputes, the entire fabric of such disagreements is interwoven with misunderstanding. Nature is a relentlessly impersonal force, indifferent to its effects on individual living things. Violent storms, deadly volcanic eruptions, destructive earthquakes, shocking tsunamis and devastating deluges are natural events; they are not the expression of an angry God. When such events have a detrimental impact on someone, they cannot be accurately attributed to the malevolent will of a Supreme Being. Likewise, when events occur that turn out to be a marvelous boon, they are not due to God's good will. Such suppositions are mere superstitions, and are often preposterously presumptuous.

It is a mistake of misunderstanding to suppose that any kind of galactic or geophysical change is guided by a divine being, or that it takes place by design to reward or harm any individual or group. Cause and effect are random as regards individual beings who may or may not be in the right place, or the wrong place, at the right or wrong time. Physical events generally take place with what resembles supreme indifference to living beings. In contrast, human actions that help people can accurately be seen as being generous hearted, and those that harm people can be understood to be malevolent, even though most of them may be driven by selfishness or greed or hubris rather than intentionally harmful or wicked motivation.

Back Again to Considerations of Salvation

Another book that was concerned, like Dante's *Divine Comedy*, with the search for 'salvation' is John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress from This World to That Which Is To Come*. Written in 1678, this book was one of the most influential and widely published religious books ever written in the English language. It is an exceedingly simple-minded story with plainly allegorical characters that have names like Christian, Faithful, Evangelist, Hopeful, Obstinate, Pliable, Hypocrisy and Ignorance.

It is striking to know that Bunyan's own life had been burdened by extreme depression and intense spiritual conflicts during his adolescence as he struggled with doubts and fears over religion and guilt about sinful behaviors. He imagined menacing visions and terrible woes, and as a consequence, he had experienced a severe religious crisis. His readings of the supposedly holy Scriptures had made him "crazed in the wits", and he had become convinced that all men are destined to eternal damnation unless they pursue a straight and narrow path to salvation. He trembled, and lamented, and became obsessed with the question, "What shall I do to be saved?" So, years later, while in prison for preaching teachings that differed from the orthodox views of the Church of England, he created the mythical character Christian in this allegorical story.

Christian in *The Pilgrim's Progress* was an anguished and delusional simpleton who was frightened by visions of fire and brimstone and Judgment and Hell. Christian was a thin caricature of a character that Bunyan dreamed up as a transparent allegory to represent a man mentally burdened by literal beliefs in terrible teachings of sin and eternal damnation in the Bible and in churches. Evangelist, another of his caricatured seekers, advised Christian to forsake his wife, children, possessions and home, and make a pilgrimage in search of salvation, celestial glory and eternal life. Abandon your family in a quixotic gamble for glory and the illusion of eternal life? Such an insane delusion is actually unconscionably irresponsible!

Christian feared God's wrath and fiery indignation, so he tried to follow a straight and narrow path through the Slough of Despond, the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and the seductive trappings of Vanity Fair. He sought to reject personal sins and the woes of life and attachment. He basically bet his entire future alive that a better life is yet to come in an unknowable existence "in the hereafter". What obtuse vainglory and self-abnegation! Religious fanatics might as well physically flagellate their flesh while they're at it! (And they do, in some places around the globe.)

John Bunyan did not seem to consider that such beliefs involve pliable and gullibly foolish obedience to men who proclaim "the Truth". The fact that these supposed truths are proclaimed by religious authorities who gain power from their version of 'the Truth' is suspicious. Many of these truths are completely contrary to the noble moral sentiments of the 'Holy Bible' itself. Jesus was said to champion the downtrodden in society, for instance, not rich people or powerful authorities -- and certainly not greed-driven self-centered social conservatives.

John Bunyan, in his fear and despondency and psychological desperation, did not seem to recognize that clerics too often throughout history have been manipulative control freaks and hypocritical ideologues who demand faith to behaviors that give them power and money while distorting true justice and violating hopes for peaceful coexistence, while subverting Golden Rule civility and contributing to discrimination, hatred, violence, terrorist attacks and wars.

"Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel."

--- Matthew 23:24

Christian stimulated my personal ire by having denigrated the sometimes-exquisite virtue of taking a healthy nap while he was traveling en route to the glory of salvation. It's as likely as not that the *journey* in life is the most important thing, and not the destination, especially when the goal is a delusion! It seems as likely to me that living well in this life is the best we can do, and that we should enjoy and appreciate what we can, and also make some sort of reasonable contribution to the betterment of society while we are here, instead of abandoning these things and counting on a life in the hereafter.

One notable passage in *The Pilgrim's Progress* concerns the town of Vanity where a huge Fair takes place throughout the year. Evangelist had prophesied that Christian and Faithful would soon enter Vanity, and that the residents would kill one or both of them. So their visit to Vanity would include the ultimate obstacle on their way

to salvation -- martyrdom, or dying for one's faith.

Sure enough, soon thereafter Christian and Faithful enter the town of Vanity. The demonic King Beelzebub had seen many pilgrims passing through Vanity on their way to the Celestial City, so had set up Vanity Fair to sell all sorts of things -- lands, titles, kingdoms, jewels, and even people. Every kind of sin and crime also happened there.

Christian and Faithful vowed to resist all temptations. As soon as Christian and Faithful enter the Fair, they cause a commotion. "Their clothing is strange; their speech, 'the language of Canaan,' sounds barbaric to the people of Vanity; and they constantly turn their eyes away and plug their ears against the sellers and merchandise, calling on Heaven for help. When Christian and Faithful say that they're only interested in buying 'the Truth,' the people of Vanity mock them." They are arrested and a trial ensues; "Lord Hategood instructs the jury, and they come back with a unanimous guilty verdict, condemning Faithful to the cruelest death possible."

"Vanity symbolizes the world as a whole, especially its opposition to Christianity from the very beginning. The demons established the Fair on purpose to try to divert heavenly minded pilgrims. It contains everything, good and bad, that the world has to offer -- anything that could possibly distract and tempt a person on the way to salvation in the Celestial City."

The Bet Situation

It is worthwhile to note that every person is in a Bet Situation in this dilemma regarding the gamble of whether or not to believe in "eternal life." The Bet Situation was first postulated by Blaise Pascal, a 17th century French scientist who defined it as a philosophical bet that has profound practical implications about probabilities and the future. He asserted that we are all confronted with Bet Situations in our lives because there are uncertainties and we are inextricably involved in 'the game'. Importantly, we face Bet Situations in which it is important to us in our own lives, and in the lives of our fellow human beings, that we make decisions that are more conscious, conscientious and socially responsible with regard to a variety of important categories of bets we are collectively making.

In Pascal's particular bias, he basically believed that everyone should bet that there will be an afterlife, and so dedicate their lives to doing good, so that they will go to Heaven for eternity, rather than to Hell. I believe that we should strive to do good as much as possible, but that our motives should be more honorable in so doing. We should try to maximize our own well-being as well as that of society as a whole, and make the best of whatever comes our way. There can be a tragic pathos in squandering the only life we will ever know to devote it to desperately futile hopes or misguiding delusions.

The entire question of motivation is related to feelings concerning our perceptions of purpose in life. We human animals love to feel a sense of purpose -- so much so, in fact, that the evangelical pastor Rick Warren has surprisingly sold more than 30 million copies of his book, *The Purpose Driven Life*. The slick message of this book is simple: devote yourself to God, not to yourself. Praise God's glory, and live for 'His' glory, and worship 'Him' because "The Lord taketh pleasure in them that fear him, in those that hope in his mercy". Really?! God also apparently loves weak and vulnerable people, and folks who are gullible and abjectly obedient to religious authorities. Yow! The God that Rick Warren writes about seems to be the God of the Old Testament, a jealous God that will hold a grudge for many generations against those who worship any God other than him. This God further will supposedly damn for all of eternity those who do not believe in 'Him'. Nice guy, 'Father'!

We can either bet that this life is the only one we will ever have, or we can bet along with John Bunyan and Rick Warren that this life is just a test to determine if we can get into Heaven instead of being condemned to everlasting Hell. Let's be clear about one thing: for all the good Rick Warren may have dedicated himself to doing, he basically says that we should all commit ourselves not to our own lives or those of our loved ones, or to the greater good of our descendants, but to sacrificing ourselves to a belief that getting into a mythological Heaven is the main purpose of this life.

What an enormous existential gamble! Imagine if it turns out, as is almost certain, that this life will be our only chance in all of eternity for enjoying and appreciating being alive. What a terrible shame it would be to squander

many of life's wonderful potentials, clinging to a belief in an epic myth that is used to manipulate the masses into docile obedience to the dictates of religious exploiters. "Please put your money in the donation plate."

The British child development psychologist John Bowlby wrote the following words about what he called attachment behaviors: "All of us, from the cradle to the grave, are happiest when life offers us a series of excursions, long or short, from a secure base." Well, I believe! We all seek personal, financial and emotional security, and by extension national security; but what we really desire most deeply is a personal sense of safety, a feeling that allows us to relax, to feel less anxiety, to relate more confidently, to accept ourselves, and to make adventurous excursions into the world, to travel, to expand our perspectives, to take somewhat safe but thrilling risks, to experience ooh-la-la titillating sensations, and to open ourselves up to our own unique forms of creative self-expression.

Rather than embracing a Supreme Being God in submissive and surrendering ways, as Rick Warren recommends to achieve a personal sense of security, I feel that we should all be more bold and reasonable, and make responsible commitments that are more consistent with truly fulfilling goals that honor good will, justice, friendship, peaceable coexistence, sustainability and ecological sanity!

Life, Death, and One of Aesop's Fables

It seems likely that, in bets placed on whether or not there is a life after death, we are somewhat like the dog in a fable that had a nourishing hunk of meat in his mouth. Upon seeing its reflection in a pool of water in a clear stream, and mistaking it for another dog with another piece of meat, the greedy dog lunged for the meat he saw in the reflection. In doing so, he lost the real nourishment that he had already possessed. This story comes from one of Aesop's Fables, *The Dog and the Shadow*. Its actual 'application', or proverbial moral of the story, is this: "Grasp at the shadow and lose the substance." Shall we grasp at a glorious afterlife, and lose genuine connectedness, social cohesion, spiritual enlightenment, self-actualization, pleasure, honorable social responsibility, the blessings of domestic tranquility, and other vital human potentialities?

In prehistoric days before alphabets and written language, storytelling was an oral tradition passed down from generation to generation. Some of the oldest stories were fables and legends. Aesop was a humble Greek slave who won renown, and eventually his freedom, by entertaining the nobles in the court of the powerful Greek King Croesus, telling clever tales of animals who could talk like human beings. Aesop's fables were not only amusing, but instructive as well, and King Croesus and his court allegedly learned more 'home truths' from Aesop's narrative skill than from all the teachings and writings of royal philosophers. Stories can definitely have positive value, but we should see many of them not as literal truth, but as metaphorical ideas.

In any case, with regards to life after death, every organism is dead after it dies, and the probability that human beings are different in this regard from all other species of life on Earth vanishingly small. There is no biological life after death, no matter what myths of anthropocentric religions may say. Religious establishments have propagated such myths to scare people and gain power over them, and to seduce them into hoping, desperately, that there will be an afterlife replete with compensatory solace for the indignities, disappointments, pain, suffering and humiliations endured in this life.

"... for dust thou art, and unto dust shall thou return."

--- Genesis 3:19

The certainty that each of us will one day die should train our attention to meaning, purpose and passion in this only life that we have. It should focus us on the quality of life while we are living. We should not make the desperate gamble that sacrificing pleasure and good will to our fears is the best course of action. We should avoid following rigorously narrow and evangelically self-righteous paths in the hope of a better life for ourselves after we are dead. We should not rationalize misery in this one life, for ourselves or for others, on the off-chance that this strategy will be rewarded by a hypothetical stay in 'Heaven' after death. As Mark Twain wrote in *Letters from the Earth*, a Heaven filled with angels, harp music and prayer is an unlikely place for humanity to enjoy eternity anyway.

It seems almost certain to me that there will be no misery for anyone after our individual deaths, for there will be no body to suffer pain, and no mind to perceive. If a belief in Heaven after death brings some solace in this life,

then fine: believe! But when such a belief is used to justify a waste of time and energy and life, or to rationalize misguided actions or outright harm to others, or to irreversibly damage the environment that provides for us and will hopefully provide for all people in future generations, then it is crazily unconscionable.

What Would Goethe Have to Say?

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was a German polymath who wrote *Faust*, the most important version of a classic German legend about a bargain made with the devil. In *Faust*, an unsatisfied scholar makes a deal with the Devil to exchange his soul for unlimited knowledge and worldly pleasures. It didn't turn out good. Bad bets like this have been made throughout history!

Goethe visited the city of Marienbad in 1821 when he was 72 years old, and he happened to fall in love there with a 17-year old girl named Ulrike von Levetzow. She was so enthralling to him that when she rejected his aspiration to marry her two years later, he penned a profoundly sad and distraught poem, *The Marienbad Elegy*. It was one of his most personal poems, and he considered it to be one of his finest works. It is a paean to the potential for chagrin and disappointment to serve as a catalyst for artistic expression.

Goethe had an emotionally hectic youth, and was recognized as a leading figure in the emotional expression movement known as *Sturm und Drang* (*storm and stress*). This type of artistic endeavor is said to have "celebrated the energetic Promethean restlessness of spirit, as opposed to the ideal of calm rationalism of the Enlightenment." In Goethe's poem *Prometheus*, he insisted that man must believe not in gods, but in himself. This may be one of the more rational perspectives of the times, and the kernel of our collective salvation may lie therein, finely balanced.

A Curious Disclaimer

A nexus of ideas germinates in the interstices of my mind, brewing in my subconscious and spilling over into my conscious thoughts. I see a vision of fairness and kindness between people in every nation that includes new doctrines that treat females more equitably. None of the perspectives that are expressed in the hundreds of pages of Earth Manifesto writings should be construed to mean that I believe women should be accorded a status 'more equal' than men on our evolving *Animal Farm*. Innumerable injustices, blatant biases, patriarchal dominance tactics, and sexual outrages have been perpetrated against women throughout recorded history in nations worldwide. These deplorably unfair conditions are epitomized by the historic suppression of female deities by established religions, and are expressed in associated social attitudes embodied in discriminatory laws, strict role limitations, long-established restrictions on women's rights, forced-birth dictates, unfair pay for the same work, glass ceilings and the like. Any honest person could think of many such inequities, like Republican efforts to deny women the right to use contraceptives or to have an abortion even in cases of rape or incest or to save the life of the pregnant woman. Such attitudes smack of cynical repressive opportunism in religiously conservative "red states".

As economic inequality continues to grow in the U.S., social mobility is stagnating and the problem of unfairness of opportunity is becoming more critical. Affirmative action programs are designed to right injustices perpetuated throughout a long history of social inequities. As such, they may be somewhat unfair to current individuals in an effort to create more equal overall opportunities. Affirmative action is not an ideal solution, but it is a reasonable step in the right direction. The rationale behind affirmative action programs is to create a fairer society by providing minorities and underprivileged people with better opportunities. Defenders of the status quo adduce arguments that affirmative action programs unfairly discriminate against dominant groups in the effort to more fairly and equally distribute opportunities to those who have been historically denied. While there is a kernel of truth in this, it is only fair to address the overarching trend of unfairness.

It can be argued, for instance, that it has been unjust and discriminatory to have chosen white males to be 108 of the 116 Justices that have ever served on the U.S. Supreme Court. It is high time for us to now appoint more women. Plenty of them are qualified. The under-representation of women on the Supreme Court and in Congress has deeply unfair impacts on the nature of how laws are made and interpreted in our society.

And not all women are equally well qualified. Ruth Bader Ginsburg was a vastly more respectable representative of women and families in our society than her Trumpian anti-abortion replacement, the excessively religious fundamentalist conservative partisan Amy Coney Barrett, who has a history of having been happy with a dystopian *Handmaid's Tale* future for her gender.

The current 6 to 3 majority of conservative Justices on the Supreme Court, three of who were appointed by Donald Trump because they believe *Roe vs. Wade* abortion rights should be overturned, constitute the most right-wing Supreme Court in modern history. As David Sirota has written, "This is a group of judges who now loyally rubber-stamp legal requests from the US Chamber of Commerce and other corporate groups bankrolling the politicians and the nomination campaigns that install right-wing appointees on the court. The justices have become so politically brazen that they now quietly issue landmark rulings in total secrecy through a so-called shadow docket."

David Sirota wrote, in this an article titled *Amy Coney Barrett says the Supreme Court aren't 'partisan hacks'. Oh really?* He noted that Barrett asked Americans to believe the Orwellian fable that the Supreme Court is a "dispassionate nonpartisan branch of government free of bias, despite the court's wildly partisan ruling on abortion rights, but also just months after she promoted climate denialism to a national audience and refused to recuse herself as she helped secure a legal victory for the fossil fuel giant that employed her father for decades." Ethics reform is needed to prevent increasing instances of conflicts of interest on the high court.

"This is a tale not just of cartoonish hypocrisy but also of deception -- a frantic attempt to prevent more of the country from realizing the court is a corporate star chamber that has become one of the most powerful partisan weapons in American politics."

But let me return from this digression to the essay at hand.

An Aside Concerning Pandora's Box

Dante envisioned Thomas Aquinas, the logical priest and theologian of the 13th century CE, as a guide on his way to Paradise. Aquinas twisted his brain torturously trying to reconcile philosophy and theology, reason and faith. I can't figure out whether he was a defender of the "infallibility" of the Church, but ironically and unfortunately, he was a brilliant man blinded by the misogynistic and repressive prejudices of the Church during his lifetime. This may have been why he was known as the "Dumb Ox". Cultural conditioning definitely affects people deeply, just as intelligent Aristotle was prejudicially affected in his narrow attitudes toward women and slaves. Church-generated biases like these eventually contributed to widespread savagery when thousands of women were burned to death for 'witchcraft', heresy, love of nature and other such things. The companion God had made for man had come to be regarded as an evil temptress. How and why had this come to be?

The Biblical story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden is an echo of the earlier Greek myth of Pandora. Zeus had given Pandora as a wife to the slow-witted Titan god Epimetheus. Zeus entrusted Epimetheus with a box that contained all of the ills in the world. Pandora had also been given the trait of curiosity and the desire for knowledge, so naturally she opened the box. When she did so, she inadvertently released all the misfortunes into the world. Thus the stage was set for Bible writers to borrow this myth and blame Eve and a serpent for disobeying God, a new incarnation of Zeus. God gave a severe injunction to Adam and Eve not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and for their disobedience, God decreed that all human beings evermore would suffer pain, guilt and death, and they would either repent of this original sin and believe the Good Book to gain admittance to sublime Heaven or else suffer an eternity in a horrible Hell.

Pandora's Box! The fall of mankind in the Garden of Eden was the beginning of the denigration and male domination of women at the dawn of history. As Dr. Leonard Shlain poignantly and convincingly articulated in his illuminating book, *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess*, profound psychological and cultural impulses underlie the historical overthrow of the divine feminine. Dr. Shlain correlated this development with the suppression of women's prerogatives in patriarchal societies ever since.

"The occurrence of monotheism, codified law, and the alphabet all at the same moment in history cannot have been coincidental. The abstractness of all three innovations were mutually reinforcing," wrote Robert Logan. The

dominant ruling class often conspires with authorities in religious establishments to impose new narratives on people, and this manipulation of the populace establishes and perpetuates male power, position and dominance.

Dr. Shlain adduced deeper implications than meet the eye to Marshall McLuhan's observation that "the medium is the message". Oddly, the *means* of communication sometimes tends to mold cultural perceptions even more significantly than the actual *content* communicated. Leonard Shlain persuasively contended that the advent of writing and the use of easily-learned alphabets led to widespread literacy, and that this had the curious side-effect of reinforcing abstract, analytical, left-brained and male-domineering cultural attitudes. Severe Draconian rules of law like Hammurabi's Code, which treated women shabbily as second-class citizens, arose soon thereafter.

Literacy had the surprising collateral effect of undermining synthesis-oriented right-brained feminine attributes that honor intuitive and holistic cultural attitudes. The 'yang' thus triumphed over the 'yin', instead of being balanced and complementary. Thereafter, written words in 'holy books' like the Bible and the Quran prohibited the honoring of God or Allah by means of any use of idols or images. These books helped patriarchal societies repress women and deprive them of equal rights in their churches. Our modern societies are still in the dying throes of this hegemony, particularly in far right Republican circles and women-oppressing fundamentalist Muslim countries. This makes the need starkly clear today for our cultures to progress beyond medieval straightjackets of the mind. We simply must strive to create fairer and more just societies.

The Facts Concerning How the Bible Ends

My favorite number just happens to be twelve. Recognize the significance that numbers have played in a curious range of symbolic roles in various cultures and religious traditions throughout history. The number 12 is strongly associated with the heavens, as in the 12 months of the Earth's orbit around the Sun, and the 12 constellations of the zodiac, and the 12 animals of the 12-year cycle of the Chinese Zodiac. Twelve is said to represent completion, wholeness, harmony or perfect governance. In ancient civilizations like ones in the Orient, the number 12 corresponds to integrity and plenitude.

Despite my affiliation with the number 12, I cannot in any way believe that the final pages of the Bible are in any way even slightly probable, as set forth in the weighty *Revelation 21, 22*. Here is how the Bible ends: "A new holy city will come down from God out of heaven" ... "and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain."

Hallelujah! This city will supposedly have 12 gates made of 12 pearls and guarded by 12 angels with the names of 12 tribes of the children of Israel inscribed upon them. The streets of the city will be pure gold, yet somehow will appear like transparent glass. The city will rest on 12 foundations with the names of the 12 apostles on them, and it will measure 12,000 furlongs, with its length and breadth and height being equal. One can just visualize this big cubic city gleaming and materializing in the latest motion picture special effects, floating down from ... well, from wherever.

A great wall around this holy heavenly city will measure 144 cubits (12 cubits squared!), and it will have "a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God". On either side of the river will be a tree of life that will bear "twelve manner of fruits" and will yield these 12 fruits all 12 months of the year. The foundations of the walls of the city will be "garnished with all manner of precious stones", twelve in number: (1) jasper, (2) sapphire, (3) chalcedony, (4) emerald, (5) sardonyx, (6) sardius, (7) chrysolite, (8) beryl, (9) topaz, (10) chrysoprasus, (11) jacinth, and (12) amethyst. **Brilliant!!** Literally bring it on, God! Maybe we can all put on our virtual reality glasses and appreciate the spectacle!

It is noteworthy that even fanciful tales of opulent palaces like the one Aladdin had a genie build overnight in *The Story of Aladdin; Or, the Wonderful Lamp* cannot measure up to the amazing proportions and décor of this holy city that kingly God will ride down out of heaven. Aladdin's genie in that story was able to instantaneously transport Aladdin's posh palace to Africa from the capital of a rich province in the kingdom of China. The genie did this after a perfidious African magician had by deception gotten hold of the magical lamp. So perhaps it should not be all that surprising that our presumably much more powerful God would be able to judge everyone, and cast all

the heretical disbelievers into a lake of fire burning with brimstone, and then in a frenzied Cubist crescendo, send down this gaudy 12-plex holy city to the region of the Holy Land. SHEZAAM!!!

The disciple John wrote the Bible story about this astonishing holy city, and to make real sure that readers didn't imagine he had made it all up, he repeatedly said that the Lord Jesus had sent his angel to testify to the truth of these things. "He which testifieth these things saith, Surely I come quickly. Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen." THE END.

So come already, Jesus! Otherwise people may begin to doubt the veracity of all the stories told in the Bible and become disillusioned in their religious convictions. This is apparently already happening, since surveys done by the Pew Research Center consistently reveal a marked decline in adults who self-identify as Christians, along with corresponding increases in adults who are now religiously unaffiliated.

Faithful folks, who hope for cool everlasting life merely by virtue of believing biblical stories to be true and acting to glorify God, may be beginning to wonder if these tales are true in any way whatsoever. The Bible is one of the most influential books ever published, and it is transparently clear that it is a monumental work of fiction. The impacts of the Bible on human civilization have had some positive aspects, to be sure, but also many impacts that have been terribly negative. And the same can be said for much more recent holy scriptures like the Quran and the Book of Mormon.

"I love God, but am cynical about some of His fan clubs."

--- John Fugelsang

Revelation 20:10 says that false prophets are to be "tormented day and night forever and ever." There were apparently lots of false prophets back in the days when the Old Testament and the New Testament of the Bible were being written. Lots of people, in other words, professed 'pagan' ideas. It is no wonder that the authors of the trumped up revelations in the Bible's *Revelation* kept swearing that these words are true and faithful, and that, indeed, 'The Word of God' rode in on a white horse, accompanied by armies from heaven all clothed in clean fine white linen, and that these armies followed him upon white horses, and that 'he' who sat upon the white horse "was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war." (*Revelation 19:11*)

O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant! If war need be, incidentally, can't we at least expect a higher standard for "just wars" to be fought over sensible or urgently necessary issues, rather than unjust wars fought over religious differences, ethnocentric hubris, the hunger for power, nefarious opportunities to take territory and plunder resources, capitalist profiteering or barbaric religious extremism?

There is a sensationally unfortunate Catch-22 to the stories in *Revelation*: they assert that no person may enter the biblical holy city who "maketh a lie". Thus, even the people who created this concluding vision of the Bible may not be allowed into this cubist heaven on "Judgment Day"! It'll be a lonely place. Sad violins, rather than strumming harps, may be the order of the day! Oh, well, *C'est la vie* ...

Speaking of lies, voters should be aware that the tyrant wannabe Trump, who had been given PolitiFacts' 2015 Lie of the Year for his outlandish multitude of "Mostly False, False and Pants on Fire" lies, become by far the most prolific liar in the history of American politics during his tenure in office from 2017 through 2021, and has followed up that devious demagogic performance by propagating a Big Lie about the 2020 election being stolen from him that now threatens to overthrow our democracy from within. True patriots must stand up and demand that he be disqualified from ever again holding public office for his role in inciting the January 6 insurrection against Congress, as the 14th Amendment stipulates.

I love America, but sure can see that she could be made greater with smart reforms, and not in a Trumpian white supremacist dystopia, for I am deeply skeptical of Trump Republicans, and sad that Trump's cultish fan base includes so many racists, misogynists and deceived people who think that a return of his arrogant, chaotic, erratic, devious, unprincipled and cruel authoritarian rule would be good for the average American.

Holy Books, the Supernatural, and Progressive Perspective

Scriptures, n. The sacred books of our holy religion, as distinguished from the false and profane writings

on which all other faiths are based.

--- Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary*

People who do not believe in the doctrines of the Mormon faith chuckle ruefully in recognizing the opening claims in the Book of Mormon, first published in 1830 by Joseph Smith. This supposedly sacred text starts out with not-all-that-convincing testimony of a number of witnesses who claim to have seen the Golden Plates that Joseph Smith said contained the words of ancient prophets, which he claimed to have translated to create the Book of Mormon.

In *Roughing It*, Mark Twain makes serious fun of this "Testimony" in the Book of Mormon: "Some people have to have a world of evidence before they can come anywhere in the neighborhood of believing anything; but for me, when a man tells me that he has "seen the engravings which are upon the plates," and not only that, but an angel was there at the time, and saw him see them, and probably took his receipt for it, I am very far on the road to conviction, no matter whether I ever heard of that man before or not, and even if I do not know the name of the angel, or his nationality either."

Honest to God! Joseph Smith asserted that he heard the voice of God giving him commandments. If he had spent a few more years imagining and creating history (the authors of various parts of the Bible, after all, had spent more than 1200 years at it, from about 900 BCE to 300 CE), then Joseph Smith might even have ridden in on his own white horse and called the whole kit and caboodle "Faithful and True".

All this Holy Scripture stuff smacks of official sanction to a grandiose version of formerly 'pagan' superstitions of the supernatural. Whereas lightning and thunder are impressive natural phenomena, and may be deserving of the deification that was embodied in all-powerful Zeus in ancient Greek mythology, it is absurd and potentially dangerous to attribute them to the "will of God", and to ignore better and more accurate understandings. Maybe it's a shame in one sense to reduce lightening to a mere momentary physical occurrence of meteorological phenomena and electrical impulses, for metaphorical interpretations of events can be richly evocative.

But let's "get real"! Times change. Knowledge advances. Cultures shift. Inflexible domineering religious establishments, however, often have a pathetic tendency to still stubbornly resist change. They oppose change well past the time that it becomes drastically necessary to adapt. They act like a sea anchor, a device that slows and stabilizes the movement of a boat sailing over deep waters in a strong storm far from shore. When attached to the stern of a vessel, a sea anchor can prevent the vessel from turning broadside to the waves and being overwhelmed by them. So sea anchors have the positive purpose of acting as a stabilizing safety device, and can flexibly be pulled in without difficulty when a storm subsides and they are no longer needed.

Jared Diamond, a professor who wrote the compelling book *Collapse, How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, says that the human race must pay particular attention to long-term thinking and anticipatory long-term planning in order to survive and prosper. He says people must be willing to reconsider things that once served society well, especially when those things become outmoded and detrimental due to changing circumstances, increasing conflicts or deteriorating ecological conditions.

Now is the time for humankind to cultivate more resilient thinking. It is time to stop burying our heads in the sand or redoubling our commitments to either authoritarian politicians or religious authorities promoting rigid dogmas. We can no longer afford to cling stubbornly to primitive beliefs that obstruct progress and keep us from collaborating together to honestly solve our growing regional and global problems. Now is the time for us to make more honest commitments to social responsibility, and to really making the world a better place.

A small, unsophisticated sect in southern Slobovia has reportedly canonized the stories of Arabian Nights, and clings to the belief that the tales in this ancient text are genuine fact. They know as sure as words written on papyrus that a "hideous genie of gigantic size" could appear when Aladdin's magic lamp is rubbed, and that the genie would always materialize and say, "What wouldst thou have? I am ready to obey thee as thy slave, and the slave of all those who have that lamp in their hands."

Aladdin, at least, supposedly set a positive role model by exhibiting a commendable zeal for the public good. As a result, Slobovia has fair laws and a balanced budget and freedom of religion and common good goals that are established to be achieved with the honorable help of those at the highest levels of government. The public good

should be held far above the rights and privileges of unscrupulous profiteers, power-abusing wealthy people, and cost-externalizing corporations. A society ostensibly need not be utopian to be made much improved!

The Existential Problems Associated with Religious Fundamentalism

The intellectually stern philosopher Krishnamurti urged listeners to examine their beliefs closely and scrupulously. That was a good call. The profound problem with dogmatic religious convictions is that, in the spiritual quest for virtue, exalted behavior, righteousness and certainty, believers sometimes ignore the fair-mindedness of the Golden Rule. They condemn others for not believing the way they do, and they judge other people harshly. They disparage live-and-let-live attitudes, and tend to support politicians who discriminate against women, gay people, those in racial minorities and those in lower classes. They also sometimes repress the expression of their own true souls, and their passion for living life, and their creative impulses, and their enjoyment of worldly pleasures. And they too often abjectly fail to demonstrate loving 'Christian behaviors' towards others. In particular, they use the self-righteousness of their beliefs to scorn people of other faiths and to denounce as heretics or infidels others who believe differently than them. Peace, brothers and sisters!

The noble aspiration for a virtuous spiritual purity thus often finds expression as a pathetic vice that is ignoble, bigoted, mean-spirited, divisive, prudish, self-abnegating, soul-denying, progress opposing, woman oppressing, homosexual hating, and dangerously violence-prone. *Écrasez l'infâme!*

One of the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament proclaims, "Thou shalt not commit adultery". According to the law that God supposedly gave to the Israelites through Moses, both the man and the woman who commit adultery shall be punished by being stoned to death. The Bible would thus have hundreds of millions of people killed today because of this antiquated morality, as professed in *Deuteronomy 22:22*. Believers seem to have forgotten the wise counsel of the pacifist Jesus, who is said to have declared, "He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone"

What of forgiveness? Forgiveness is arguably a vital aspect of human relations. The disciple Peter said unto Jesus in *Matthew 18:21*, "Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Jesus answered him, 'I tell you, not just seven times, but seventy times seven.'" All this forgiveness for a man that wrongs thee, and yet this same God in his Ten Commandments cautions the faithful not to worship any graven images or idols, for "I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me." This sure sounds to me like an egregiously severe violation of proportional justice! It is wrathful, intimidating and horrible vengeance, not a form of fair-minded divine justice. Can anyone think this is actually 'right'?

Lest one think that adultery should actually be punished by death, consider an even more outrageous example of injustice in the Bible. In *Deuteronomy 22:21*, it says that a damsel who is not married and who is not a virgin shall be stoned to death for the "evil" and "folly she hath wrought". How many of our daughters shall we stone to death? Should the men of Wasilla, Alaska have stoned Sarah Palin's pregnant daughter Bristol to death for having had sex without having gotten married?

If we were to stone to death the hundreds of thousands of unwed teenagers that get pregnant every year in the U.S., the little hussies, wouldn't that be a supreme injustice to a million unborn children? Wouldn't it? And how about those testosterone-driven boys and men who get these teenage girls pregnant, don't they have a big responsibility for the events that lead up to the loss of the damsel's virginity? In my experience, it is boys and men who are the most eager to have sex, to want "to score", and to take advantage of females to satisfy their lustful hormonal drives. So why should girls and women be blamed and punished so severely, and then not only be victimized but also be forced to cope with lifelong consequences if they become pregnant? Our societies must become more enlightened with regard to this absurd and burdensome double-standard!

The freedom of reproductive choice must be guaranteed through new legislation that would codify *Roe vs. Wade* reproductive rights, like that passed by the House of Representatives in the Women's Health Protection Act of 2022. This would fairly, and once and for all, assure those who get pregnant that they can decide their own fates, without males and governments telling them what they must do.

Many people seek transcendent insights, upon occasion, and try to achieve what the poet Rainer Maria Rilke called a "conflagration of clarity". Such certainty is difficult to come by, and when it is achieved, it is generally a product of open-mindedness, not a kaleidoscopic conforming capitulation to dogma and doctrine. The author Dr. Leonard Shlain made note in his book *Art and Physics* that intuitions and evocative metaphors and synthetic thinking are the province of the brain's right hemisphere, and that they are valuable in achieving a healthy and balanced worldview. He also noted that precise left-brained logic, reason, analysis and abstract thinking are crucial to scientific understandings and a reasonable way of comprehending reality. Dr. Shlain sensibly argued for balance, saying it would be best to integrate both of these complementary approaches in our thinking!

English philosopher Alfred North Whitehead noted that "Truth is the conformation of Appearance to Reality." He further observed: "There are no whole truths; all truths are half-truths. It is trying to treat them as whole truths that plays the devil." Let us meditate on the meaning of these statements for a while, and evaluate both the perspectives of those who agree with them and those who play the 'devil's advocate'.

A Digression on Soteriology

In theology, the study of salvation is called 'soteriology'. Various salvation doctrines exist in all nine of the world's major religions (Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Confucianism, Jainism, and Shintoism). Christian salvation and redemption are studied by the faithful in much the same way that geology is studied by Biblical literalists: they start with premises and conclusions that exclude full perspectives, and work backwards from there. A more honest study of salvation would cast the doctrines in full context by studying the validity of the entire 'sublapsarian' concept that sets up a narrative of absolute good and evil, and original sin, and damnation and redemption, and it would investigate the motives behind male authoritarianism, the suppression of sexual impulses, and commanded obedience and blind belief in biblical certitudes. And it would make a more comprehensive study of the complex and consequential issues related to human behaviors.

In Christian soteriology, debate concerns a narrower set of questions, including how an individual can be saved, and whether God is completely sovereign or human beings have free will, and whether there are absolute moral laws. To me it seems preposterous to suppose, like theologian Martin Luther did, that salvation can be achieved merely by *believing* fervently enough in the Bible, and not necessarily by acting virtuously.

I believe that the wisest way for humanity to achieve salvation would be in a more secular manner in which we choose to collectively transform our societies into fairer ones that are more committed to global problem-solving and peaceful coexistence and sustainable living. Belief in God alone will prove to be inadequate, especially if such beliefs are divisive and exclusionary, and serve to engender conflicts, and if they do not support an overarching responsible stewardship of nature.

Different forms of salvation are found in secular understandings than in religious dogmas. John Muir felt fervently that salvation can be found through immersion in awe-inspiring and beautiful places in the natural world. I find deep resonance in this conviction. It seems to me that the best path for us to choose would be to save ourselves from courses of action that are excessively exploitive, socially dysfunctional and environmentally calamitous!

Psychoanalysis of Those who are Crazy for God

Frank Schaeffer was one of the men who founded the Religious Right movement and helped marry it to the Republican Party. I intend to read his book, *Crazy for God, How I Grew Up as One of the Elect, Helped Found the Religious Right, and Lived to Take All (or Almost All) of It Back*, in order to see what he has to say about the dysfunction of conservative evangelical Christianity and the disgust he now feels for both leaders of the Religious Right and radical social conservatives. *Crazy for God* is Schaeffer's confession, and he seems to be seeking redemption through an introspective rejection of what he formerly espoused. Schaeffer apparently embodies the ancient religious virtue of humility: "He is unafraid to say he was wrong on important matters."

Though I believe in the value of maintaining an open mind and seeking clarity and being idealistic, at the same time it seems clear that we need to be smart and pragmatic, and to strive to cultivate fairness and good common sense. The profile of those who are most susceptible to intense born-again 'religious conversion experiences' and

manipulative religious organizations and cults are generally young people who are seekers of clarity and meaningful understandings and idealistic goals. Many of these people have undergone a personal "metanoia" crisis, and experience weakness and vulnerable feelings in their lives. Those who seek simplistic understandings are often easily swayed to ideologically programmed belief systems, or ones that are authoritarian, and are often far too willing to depend on controlling authorities who demand obedience, conformity and unquestioning loyalty.

Think about Todd Harvey, a man who spent years involved with the Unification Church of the Korean religious leader Sun Myung Moon. Harvey wrote a long article about his odd experiences with this religious cult, examining the simplistic, distorted, black-and-white worldviews of religious extremists and the doctrine of the "fall of man" in the Garden of Eden. He analyzed how such doctrines exert their influence, giving consideration to the psychological nature of mind-control techniques that rely on demands of purity and requirements to confess sins and unworthiness. He wrote about the insidious nature of using slogans instead of critical thinking, and about risks related to holding beliefs that are supposedly sacred and above question and scrutiny.

"You start with the idealistic vision of a world without pain, suffering or loneliness, a virtual Kingdom of Heaven on Earth. You point out that our real world is obviously not the ideal, that something is terribly wrong. Something is wrong with our love. You persuade people that their love is imperfect, and their natural biological urges for pleasure and love are self-centered, evil, Satanic. You show that people have four 'fallen natures', which in essence all boil down to disbelief and disobedience. You burden people with the guilt of four kinds of sin: original sin, collective sin, inherited sin and individual sin. You create deep feelings of unworthiness and a need for salvation, and a sense that there is no hope without a 'messiah'. You tell people of a suffering, broken-hearted God who has been disappointed for thousands of years of providential history at mankind's repeated failures. Then, you offer a way, a new truth, a new hope for mankind. You show how this is the greatest moment in history, this is the time of fulfillment. You say that all you have to do, to comfort God's heart and solve your deep sin and restore Heaven on Earth, is to unite with the new messiah. Offer your life to him. Attend him. These times have cosmic significance. Nothing else you could be doing with your life is as important as this. Expect to suffer and sacrifice everything that is important to you. Follow your Abel figure with absolute obedience. This is the course of the saints. This is the course of glory."

"Start with a doctrine like this. Combine religious insights and inspirations that resonate strongly with our deepest spiritual longings for Truth, Love, God. Present it in an environment that is engineered to break down barriers of resistance and faculties of critical evaluation, to someone who is searching for answers, and is trusting and vulnerable."

"You can begin to see how ... someone can give everything they possibly could -- their mind, body and soul, their past, present and future, their family and friends, their sincere hard work for seven days a week for years on end -- all the while lavishing love and praise on the revered leader, all the while being told it isn't enough, that they aren't accomplishing what God expects, that they aren't worthy of the blessings the leader is bestowing on them, all the while believing in their heart that it is true, repenting with tears."

Manipulative gambits like these make people feel insecure and guilty. By asserting there are no ambiguities or shades of grey, and that everything is either good or evil, this point-of-view frames morality in terms of sexual abstinence and the denial of earthly pleasures. It portrays natural drives as being shameful, and sows confusion, self-doubt, inhibition and a guilty sense of sinfulness. It can make individualism seem self-centered and irresponsible, and set the stage for convictions in a need for salvation, sacrifice, and dependence on leaders for guidance. It makes pious attitudes seem proper, even when they are absurd, as if flattery of God is the way to get into Heaven. It convinces people that natural biological urges for love and pleasure and sexual fulfillment are bad. It is congruent with the ideas of a "chastity patrol" in George Orwell's 1984, and with the self-righteous and judgmental fulminations of the Religious Right. Boo hiss!

There are striking parallels between the Moonies cult and the tragedy that took place in Jonestown, Guyana in 1978 -- an event where a demagogic religious leader caused more than 900 people to commit suicide by taking cyanide. And there are interesting similarities to the cult of the self-styled "sex guru" Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh,

who took over a town in Oregon in the early 1980s. That fascinating tale is told in the documentary *Wild Wild Country*. Check it out!

A Related Digression Concerning Jonathan Swift

Jonathan Swift (1667 - 1745) was an Anglo-Irish satirist, essayist and cleric whose most famous book was *Gulliver's Travels*. He had a Doctor of Divinity degree from Trinity College in Dublin, and he became actively involved in politics and the inner circle of the Tory government in England from 1710 to 1714. *Gulliver's Travels* is a sophisticated satire on human nature and societies. The book was based on the author's experiences of his times. He satirizes practical knowledge that doesn't produce good results when he writes about the fictitious academy of 'Balnibarbi', where experiments for "extracting sunbeams from cucumbers" somehow amount to nothing. Swift depicted rational societies in 'Brobdingnag' and 'Houyhnhnmland' as the best kind because their peoples were happy and able to live their lives in well-ordered ways. He made fun of using knowledge of abstract ideas, so he was strangely a skeptic of science, and a cultural conservative.

The tiny Lilliputians in *Gulliver's Travels* symbolize humankind's wildly excessive pride in "its own puny existence". Lilliputians regarded fraud, breach of trust and ingratitude as among the worst of crimes. Their approach to justice laudably offered rewards for consistent good behaviors, not merely harsh punishments for inconsistent bad behaviors.

In *Gulliver's Travels*, a long war took place between the obstinate empire of 'Lilliput' and that of 'Blefuscu'. This conflict concerned whether it is right to break eggs on the larger end or the smaller end, a difference in 'doctrine' that was completely absurd, yet it was responsible for causing the deaths of thousands of citizens in the two empires when a war broke out. The brutal conflict sprang from wounded vanity, in curious contrast to wars of more modern times, which have been launched for economic and geostrategic concerns like ideological differences, terrorist attacks, disputed territory or greedy desires for the resources of another nation. On reflection, most wars in history seem to have absurdly unjust causes, and both ego and unbridled ambition are often involved. This sure implies that we should strive with greater commitment to avoid getting involved in wars. In every satire on human foibles and vices and absurdities, neither the writer nor the readers are above these tendencies. "The bell tolls for us, as it does for Gulliver and his creator."

Some of Swift's satire was directed against the spiritual pride and naive self-love of 'mankind', which he felt was expressed by the rationalist optimism of philosophers of his era. In this regard, Swift's satire is similar to religious criticism of the follies of humankind because they pursue materialistic goals rather than spiritual ones. Such perspectives have considerable merit, for materialism does not provide ultimate fulfillment. Swift did not 'optimistically' view human beings as existing in harmonious and rational societies with well-integrated purposes. Instead he asserted a traditional Christian view that says people are profoundly divided between their rational souls and their carnal bodies. Swift's satirical intentions in creating excrement-loving 'Yahoos' can be attributed to an imaginative representation of our supposedly sinful bodies. Swift thus presented 'unregenerate man' in much the same way as St. Augustine and countless other proponents of traditional doctrines of Original Sin portrayed him: as a pride-smitten lump of deformity and disease, both in body and mind. Yuck-o!

The Yahoos are portrayed not only as smelly and unclean, but as driven by greed, laziness, lewdness, intemperance, hate and cunning maliciousness. An implicit moral of Swift's religious satire is that human beings can be saved from their own destructive self-love only by recognizing the supposed hideousness of their animality, and the depth of their carnal sinfulness. Once they have done this, then they will be more aware of how desperate their need is for redemption, which just happens to be offered through a belief in the absolute truth of a Christian God. Yada, yada, yada. Prostrate your self, and pass the collection plate!

In order to put faithful believers in their place and make them feel unworthy, and thus in need of redemption, images of small loathsome creatures are used over and over again in religious writings. The Presbyterian Jonathan Edwards wrote in *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, in which he imagined God as a giant being who held the body of a tiny and diminutive sinner over the abyss of eternal punishment. In his torturous imagination, he observed: "The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy

of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times more abominable in his eyes than the most hateful serpent is in ours."

And in an explicit reference to the doctrine of Original Sin, the writer and religionist John Bunyan, in taking account of his own personal 'original and inward pollution', compares himself to a toad: "I was more loathsome in mine own eyes than a toad, and I thought I was so in God's eyes too. Sin and corruption, I said, would as naturally bubble out of my heart as water would bubble out of a fountain ... I thought none but the devil himself could equal me for inward wickedness and pollution of mind. I fell, therefore, at the sight of my own vileness, deeply into despair..."

The most common of all religious images of self-contempt is that of the worm. "But I am a worm and no man," wrote the author of *Psalm 22* as he sought to answer the question why God has forsaken him. In a similar manner, the unworthiness of mankind is lamented by Bildad in the Book of Job 25:4-6.

How then can man be justified with God?
 Or how can he be clean *that is* born of a woman? (*Excuse me?*)
 Behold even to the moon, and it shineth not;
 Yea, the stars are not pure in his sight.
 How much less man, *that is* a worm?
 And the son of man, *which is* a worm?

This puzzling attitude is not virtuous humility; it is pathos-driven self-abnegation and a gratuitous degradation of the human spirit. My ecstatically holistic right brain meets in my humming corpus callosum with clinically obtuse representatives of such left brain angst, and rejects the manipulative nature of religious authorities who have managed to get countless victims to renounce all that is beautiful in life and snap onto a self-flagellating obedience to this crude concept of a God that despises sin-corrupted human beings. This is a real clever and duplicitous gimmick. Religious authorities may be able to enlist a few extra converts with this disgusting imagery, but I condemn it. In fact, I frankly prefer chipper attitudes, and I admire people who live their lives as exemplifications of the wonderful qualities of positivity, generosity, enthusiasm and fair-mindedness. I feel that we do need a kind of salvation, but one that protects us from greed and clever Machiavellian machinations of those who seek to manipulate and exploit others -- and all in future generations -- by their rude actions.

A Bit of Greek Mythology

I personally find inspiration in the handsome hunter Adonis, who is a god of vegetation and the annual renewal of springtime in Greek mythology. Adonis was thought to be loved by two Greek goddesses, Persephone, the Queen of the Underworld, and Aphrodite, Goddess of Love and Beauty. Persephone and Aphrodite competed for Adonis' devotion, so Zeus, ruler of the heavens, adjudicated the dispute and decided Adonis should spend one-third of each year with Aphrodite and one-third with Persephone, and one-third of his time to himself. Not a bad gig for Adonis, and a sensible sort of trimester compromise solution long ago! Anyway, Adonis was killed by a wild boar, but was permitted to return from the underworld to Aphrodite for part of every year. The cult of Adonis honored this myth as a part of an annual Spring renewal, which represents resurrection after death.

Adonis was the son of Paphos, according to some stories, who was the son of Pygmalion. This is an oh-so-curious legend. Pygmalion was a king of Cyprus who carved a statue of ivory to represent his idealized woman. The more he looked at the smooth bust, the more he fell in love with his own carved creation. Eventually he prayed to Aphrodite, the Goddess of Love, for a wife like his statue. When Pygmalion kissed the ivory figure, the statue came alive. Voila! In ecstasy, he married her, and they had a lovely boy together who they named Paphos. This is a founding myth of the picturesque Cypriot port town of Paphos, which was a center of the cult of Aphrodite and pre-Hellenic fertility deities. (The port town of Paphos on the island of Cyprus today has been designated by UNESCO as one of the sites of cultural and natural treasures of the world's heritage.)

After thinking about this love for a marble statue in the context of the excessive pride of Jonathan Swift's Lilliputians, one cannot help but think of Narcissus, the beautiful youth who disdained those who loved him. All who fell in love with him suffered from unrequited love. Nemesis, the Greek goddess spirit of divine punishment, caused

Narcissus to fall in love with his own reflection in a pool, and he perished there because he was unable to leave the beauty of his own reflection. Such myths, considered symbolically, can be illuminating, and may make one fall into an introspective reverie.

Feeling versus Knowledge

Once long ago, during a lovely hike up a forested hillside, my best friend in college and I were speculatively talking about the intricate botanical details of a variety of wildflowers that grew in profusion at that time of year near a towering stand of Douglas fir trees. Some hikers trooped past, and one of them smugly remarked, "Can't you just appreciate them as they are?" Good call. Yay for spontaneity and the freshness of impression! Then again, one can arguably glean a greater appreciation for wildflowers and natural ecosystems if some facts are known about the seasonal cycles of wildflowers, and their unique reproductive characteristics, and the ecological niches they occupy, and their biotic ranges and distribution.

Likewise, one can appreciate great literature merely for its stories, or for its visceral feeling or lyric qualities. One can also develop a deeper appreciation and understanding of books by learning about the author's life and experiences, and about the perspectives of others who have studied the themes, techniques, motifs and symbolism of a particular work. The online *SparkNotes*, for instance, provides good summary information about many authors and the big picture aspects of prominent literary works. Analysis and synthesis, and the left brain and the right brain, are once again seen to compete for ascendancy. I advocate an enlightened balance!

The Advantages of a Passionate Interest in Reading

The Harry Potter books by J.K. Rowling and the films they inspired have had a remarkable stimulative effect on the imagination and interest of young people. It's possible that this enthusiasm will fortuitously carry many of them into the marvelous world of more important literature and independent films. Maybe it will someday even lead to this manifesto, intertwined as everything is ... who knows! "On ne sait jamais." Note that, for extensive and expansive ideas about valuable books to read, see *Recommended Reading for a Broader Understanding and Appreciation of the World* at the end of this Book Four of the Earth Manifesto (Part Five online).

Book club reading groups abound around our great nation. The last one I participated in was notably social. It revolved around sharing a nice dinner together, replete with animated conversations and catching up, and then having a discussion about the book we had chosen to read that month. Some book clubs read books on Bestseller Lists, some tend toward interpersonal relationship topics and spiritual growth, and some read Oprah's recommendations, or always read fiction, and all are unique and generally provide thought-provoking experiences.

Part of the motivation that has stimulated my creation of the Earth Manifesto is a nebulous imagining of people reading various parts of it and gleaning insights, and engaging in spirited discussions about its wide-ranging topics. Being a believer in open-mindedness and clarity of understanding, I encourage debate about economic, social, political and moral issues. Sometimes people are best advised to just "agree to disagree", but still to strive to actualize positive changes in our societies and to try to find common ground and good ways to collaborate and fairly compromise in the interests of the greater good.

As an aside, I urge readers to check out *Twelve Delicious Recipes for Good Health and Gourmet Appreciation* in Book Five of the Earth Manifesto (Part Five online). It contains some healthy recipes for tasty food that would be good for any book group or dinner party, and could provide an excellent introduction to a Cooking Club. I am a gourmet cook, and have spelled out many good recipes that are often healthy and provide readers Five Star menu suggestions for outstanding dinner parties.

An Inconclusive Conclusion Looms

The sound of a knock at the door startled writer Dorothy Parker out of an introspective reverie. "What fresh hell is this?" she exclaimed. Chill out, for Peet's sake, Dorothy! In literature, as we have seen, human angst and the dark side are well represented. Great literature has been written in many instances by tormented souls like Dante Alighieri and John Bunyan and Herman Melville and Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Edgar Allen Poe and Franz Kafka and countless others, including John Kennedy O'Toole, the author of the bizarre book *The Confederacy of Dunces*, who committed suicide after writing this one book.

One of the most distinct examples of the dark side in literary motivations is that of Herman Melville in *Moby Dick*. His central character, Captain Ahab, saw evil malignity and despair on a vast scale. Melville was never in his life notably happy, but at the age of thirty-two when he wrote *Moby Dick*, he was miserable, sick, worried and unhappily married. He felt a metaphysical despair and an Evil lurking large in his world, an evil he projected onto a great white whale. "*Moby Dick* is not a lament, it is a vision, full of pathetic and humorless pessimism," according to an Introduction to *Moby Dick*.

Whereas Dante's *Divine Comedy* is a product of faith, Melville's *Moby Dick* is a product of unfaith. *Moby Dick* is a myth of Evil and Tragedy, in contrast to Dante's Christian epic, which is more of a myth of Sin and Good and sublapsarian Salvation. Melville's crazy Ahab "piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down; and then, as if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his hot heart's shell upon it." Ahab knows that Good exists in the world, but basically he is mesmerized by the negative and disastrous. The White Whale "swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them." The vision came to him as if from a "pit of blackness, the central dark mother-lode of despair which every man at times knows to be within him." Yikes! (Whatever, dude!)

The Perspective of 'Rowbear'

I have a good friend who calls himself Rowbear. He resembles the original Laughing Philosopher, the widely traveled Greek philosopher Democritus (460 BCE to 370 BCE), who according to Wikipedia "was cheerful, and was always ready to see the comical side of life." Later writers regarded the Laughing Philosopher as one who laughed at the foolishness of people; so he was an early scoffer! Hmmm ... sort of like my hero Mark Twain!

"A sense of humor, being born of perspective, bears a near kinship to philosophy; each is the soul of the other."

--- Will Durant, Introduction to *The Story of Philosophy*

Rowbear lives like a Mole in a comfortable home that is as fitting as that of a Cappadocian gnome. Cappadocia, in central Turkey, has hundreds of houses and churches and even hotels that are carved into solid volcanic tuff rock that eons of erosion have rendered into hoodoos and other fantastical formations. Google 'Cappadocia' for images of their awe-inspiring appearance. This soft rock was created by deep layers of volcanic ash that had been spewed out by volcanoes in the region sometime in the span of the past ten million years. As the ash cooled and settled and compressed, consolidating into rock 200 feet deep. This rock has been subjected to the subsequent effects of wind and water erosion in these arid highlands. A number of underground cities were carved out of the rock in this region by Christians long ago who were hiding out there to avoid persecution in the years before Christianity became a more widely accepted religion.

Today Cappadocia is a famous and popular tourist destination that is compellingly evocative to visit. Ironically, almost 100% of the people that inhabit the area today are Muslims, not Christians, and it is an overwhelmingly patriarchal society. Women's roles in this culture seem severely circumscribed, from a Western world point of view. Scores of men were seen in cafes and bars by night when I visited a dozen years ago, but not a single female. I wondered what all the women were up to!

I again recall Mark Twain's observation in this regard: "We easily perceive that the peoples furthest from civilization are the ones where equality between man and woman are furthest apart --- and we consider this one of the signs of savagery. But we are so stupid that we can't see that we thus plainly admit that no civilization can be perfect until exact equality between man and woman is included."

I do not demean Islam. Almost everyone a traveler meets in Cappadocia seems to be fair and honest and generous-hearted. Unfortunately, both Christianity (in the Vatican and in the United States) and Islam worldwide are characterized by the same problem: moderate and progressive elements of their respective religious establishments have allowed extreme conservatives to dominate their faiths. In nations governed by a theocracy rather than a democracy or a capitalist plutocracy, control by social conservatives even more readily manifests itself in ruthlessly authoritarian rule.

The right wing of every faith seems to consist of people who are fundamentally control freaks and social reactionaries who tend to oppress women. The Taliban in Afghanistan has taken this repression of women to a pathologically bizarre extreme, but it is prevalent in almost all the cultures of the modern world to a disturbing degree. I believe that the empowerment of women would lead to fairer, more sustainable and more peaceful societies. Influences that deprive women of rights are contrary to the best interests of humanity. Greater equality of opportunity and fairer treatment under the law are principal ideals of American society, and it is high time we worked more assertively to assure them!

Violence begets violence in response, and extremism likewise begets extremism. This is why, in the largest context, crusading strife for dominance by Christianity and Islam results in an effect of 'countersupporting' that strengthens right-wing opposition in the faiths and nations they oppose. To defuse hatred and prejudice, it would be best to try harder to get along in peaceful coexistence, to diminish the influence of religious establishments in governments everywhere, and to legislate greater fairness. Live and let live!

Barack Obama gave a speech in Egypt in June 2009 in a bold effort to repair some of the damage to our nation's standing in the world that had been caused by the arrogant and aggressive Bush/Cheney cowboy mentality and the violations of the sovereignty of other nations through our preemptive wars and military occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, and our use of harsh interrogation methods on prisoners. We need new efforts and initiatives to fairly bear healing fruit!

History shows that non-religious dictators may have killed more millions of people than have been murdered by tyrants who claim to be acting in God's will. But in any case, the best plan would probably be to create strong constitutional governments and ecumenical rules of law, and dramatically strengthen democracies, and make sure there is a strong separation between church and state in nations worldwide. Better checks and balances should be established between executive, legislative and judicial branches of government to ensure that there will be a healthier balance of power, and transparency and accountability should become articles of faith. Also despots should be prevented from gaining control, whether in the name of God, or Allah, or megalomania, or power madness, or narcissistic ambition, or the pursuit of money, or rigidity of authoritarian impulse, or whatever.

The best that a nation can do is to create an orderly and reasonably safe civil society that has an open structure in which all individuals are assured choices in how to live their lives in accordance with their own individual propensities and predilections and positive inner motivations, all in the context of a recognition of the overarching importance of common good values and socially responsible activities. Let the Golden Rule flourish! When leaders intimidate citizens and repress them and exploit their fears, and when they enact policies that contribute to economic insecurity for the vast majority, and when they manipulatively trap people into sheepish submission or fool them into being cult followers, then they cause perverse injustices and deplorably detrimental social dysfunction.

We are gathered here together, on the precipice of a new day, calm, not trembling, hoping that sanity will prevail in world affairs. This sanity will be characterized by better cooperation, peaceful coexistence and sustainable endeavors, and it will encompass respect, dogma-free faith, compassion, music, dance, eloquence, love, laughter and contemplation. "I'll drink to that!"

Yours Truly,

Dr. Tiffany B. Twain

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