



Revelations of a Modern Prophet

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Begun Easter-time 2010, latest revision December 21, 2022

Absolute Truths and Other Myths

In the beginning, countless eons ago, the Universe was without form. There was no Earth, no waters, no Sun, no stars, no galaxies, no matter, no light, no space, and no time. It was a Void, I reckon. In this initial state of affairs, unfathomably enormous amounts of energy likely existed, along with a potentiality for the emergence of a highly-structured physical universe in which matter, light, heat, space and "laws of nature" would spring into being, as if designed by a really smart, mathematically savvy, infinitely powerful and wondrously creative Supreme Being. What She would have been doing in this state of dark excitement, without space or time, or stuff, or a looking glass, or companions, or even a fathomable purpose, no one can say.

The opinions of those who suppose that a Supreme Being exists suffer from a dearth of explanations for how this Supreme One might have sprung into existence. All we know for sure is that we human beings are here now, and that we exist in a physical universe governed by unchanging physical laws of nature that evidently have been operative with no detectable interruption since the beginning of time. These 'laws of nature' are physical aspects of reality, not some miraculous divine decree. Albert Einstein once observed that either everything is a miracle, or nothing is a miracle. The nature of Nature is the way that it is, independent of our perceptions (for all intents and purposes), and independent of the way we interpret our senses and experiences, and independent of our biases and judgments. It's like the biggest miracle ever.

A Contemporary View of Scientific Understandings of Seven Days of Creation

Seven formative stages have been involved in the creation of the world. In the beginning, a colossal exploding forth of energy into primitive forms of matter took place. Countless spiraling galaxies of fiery matter were flung in every direction into materializing expanses of space. As gaseous matter hurtled through the vast emerging reaches of intergalactic space, subatomic particles and atoms and heavier elements were forged in crucibles of nuclear furnaces within stars and during stupendous supernova explosions. Light and cosmic rays from ancient stellar supernova events continue to reach the Earth long after the events took place, due to the unfathomable distances between us and the times and locales these cosmic explosions occurred.

This first day of creation lasted more than 9 billion years, and no being at all was around to pronounce it good, or to have heard any such pronouncement.

Hundreds of billions of galaxies have been detected in the Universe, and the average galaxy may contain something like a hundred billion stars. Nearly all the stars in the universe are moving away from us as the Universe expands, as if all matter exists on some sort of 4th-dimensional surface of an enormous inflating balloon. The speed at which the galaxies in the Universe appear to be receding from us is nearly proportional to their distance from the Milky Way, and the speed seems to increase with their distance from us. Many extremely dense black holes have formed throughout the universe, like invisible material eddies in a raging river. Wherever sufficiently stupendous volumes of matter have been attracted together, the forces of gravity have become so powerful that they warp space itself around the masses, forming a black hole, and even light is unable to escape from black holes, so they cannot be detected even by the Hubble Space Telescope.

On the second day of creation, starting around 4.5 billion years ago in a remote outpost of the Milky Way galaxy, a solar system formed from a nebula of matter by means of gravitational accretion. Natural physical processes caused the planet Earth and its Moon and other planets to form in this solar system from matter that had been orbiting a modestly large star that we call the Sun. About 500 million years passed during this phase in the geophysical evolution of our solar system. This period culminated with times that are known as the Late Heavy Bombardment, which featured a "lunar cataclysm" on Earth. I'll bet that was locally impressive! Still, there were no beings around to pronounce these developments good or bad.

And then it happened. The third day of creation began with a sudden spark, like some divine bolt of lightning. This spark struck the primordial organic chemical soup somewhere in Earth's seas about 3.7 billion years ago, and inanimate amino acids were galvanized into the first primitive forms of self-replicating animate microbial life. For almost 3 billion years, these single-celled forms of life proliferated from this original cellular creation in the planet's salty seas. Things, it appeared, were starting to get good.

At the beginning of the fourth day of creation, about 540 million years before the present moment, a really epic biotic development occurred. Some of the single-celled organisms and colonies of such organisms that had been swimmingly occupying the aquatic environs for billions of years finally stumbled upon a mode of organization that allowed them to form increasingly complex multi-cellular organisms. Relatively soon after the beginning of this marvelous Cambrian explosion of biological variety, extensive cellular specialization and biological diversification took place. This featured a proliferating radiation of life into new habitats and ranges, and within a short period of geologic time, all of the 32 phyla of animals and 14 phyla in the plant kingdom that exist today sprang into existence. A wide variety of new species of fish, mollusks, corals, amphibians, arthropods, insects and primitive reptiles evolved in what has been called an "evolutionary arms race" that took place in the animal kingdom between predators and prey. Plants made a transition from aquatic ecosystems to terrestrial ones later during this era, and many species of homosporous horsetails and tree ferns evolved, and after some eons, forests of both deciduous trees and evergreen trees appeared. This fourth day of creation persisted for 300 million years.

And then again, another colossal prehistoric occurrence struck. The worst extinction event in the entire history of life on Earth occurred, wreaking havoc on the plants and animals existing at that time. Most living things died, including up to 96% of all marine species and some 70% of terrestrial vertebrate species in the course of this "mother of all mass extinctions". Cause and effect were operative back then, as they have always been ever since the beginning, and the evidence of the cause of this terrible biotic calamity -- the Permian Extinction -- makes the imagination spin with visualizations of a huge fiery meteor flashing through Earth's atmosphere and striking the planet with such reverberating force that the most extensive volcanic flows anywhere ever on Earth poured forth for a million years in the Siberian Traps, which presumably lie at the antipodes of the impact site on the opposite side of our majestic spherical orbiting home planet.

Thus began this fifth day of creation, about 250 million years ago. Life struggled to recover from the biotic devastation of this mass extinction event that brought the Paleozoic Era to an end. As this recovery unfolded and evolutionary processes filled the available ecological niches, many new species of life evolved that included flowering plants and numerous types of reptiles. Dinosaurs eventually became the dominant animals in terrestrial terrains, and they remained at an apex of life on land for many, many, many millions of years. Our cautious little mammalian ancestors first emerged onto the biological stage during this Mesozoic Era, but they laid low until their time in the sun would come on Day Six.

Sure enough, along came another cataclysmic mass extinction event that launched the sixth day of creation. This was the Cretaceous Extinction, which took place about 65 million years ago. It was caused by an enormous meteorite impact in the vicinity of the Yucatan and the Gulf of Mexico that created a severe planet-wide winter. In the aftermath of this disaster, all the non-avian dinosaurs were wiped out, along with countless other species of plants and animals. This set the stage for amazing evolutionary developments over the 65 million years since then. That's a whole coherent story unto itself, and it is continuing its evolution into the future.

On the seventh day of creation, many evolutionary developments took place, and eventually biological ancestors of human beings diverged from those of chimpanzees and bonobos, and a number of different species of the genus

Homo lived and died over the course of the past 3 million years or so. Anatomically modern humans finally made their appearance on the scene somewhere in the approximate vicinity of 200,000 years ago, and they reached substantive behavioral modernity around 50,000 years ago, when a "Big Bang of the Mind" led to startling introspective awareness. Along in here is where the story gets real interesting.

How It All Began on Earth

The human race has learned many things about the physical universe and the mysteries of existence and the evolutionary path that our species has taken from the earliest days of our being. Our remote primate ancestors had descended from trees and began walking upright on African plains in a distant period of prehistory. They developed opposable thumbs, and their brains grew substantially in size, allowing them to learn how to make tools for hunting and preparing food to eat. At some point they figured out how to control fire and use it for light, warmth, cooking and warding off predators. As our ancestors' conscious awareness of the universe developed, reflection and foresight sprung into the neuronal complexes of our brains, and the ability to vocalize utterances improved, facilitating better understanding of ever-more profound and abstract meanings. A veritable Tower of Babel of languages proliferated, and for Heaven's sake, there didn't appear to be any God to supervise their tangled expression.

In the beginning of our species' existence, as the pre-human gene pool began to diverge from that of our common ancestry with chimpanzees and bonobos, the bodies of our forebears were still covered with hair. Their jaws and teeth were much larger than ours today, but their brains were only about one-third the size of ours, and much less sophisticated. One third! The females of the times still showed sexual receptivity only during times they were "in heat". This sexual receptivity was communicated to males through the gaudy visual and olfactory clues of the estrous cycle, a seasonal condition that caused males to be frenzied with instinctive sexual desire.

Hierarchies of alpha male dominance likely existed in those remote times, as they do today in many species of mammals like baboons. This social structure helped ensure that the robust genes of alpha males were the ones most likely to be transmitted to descendents in future generations.

Roughly 250,000 generations of our ancestors have been born and died since those ancient days of divergence from our common ancestors throughout the Pliocene Epoch of geologic time. Not only have our bodies and brains evolved in quite significant ways since then, but so have our animal natures and our human cultures. For the preponderance of the time since humankind first evolved from earlier *Homo* ancestors, those who preceded us lived in small nomadic clans and wandered around during the various seasons of every year hunting animals and gathering edible roots, plants, nuts and fruits for sustenance.

Time Out

For a sense of perspective on these eons of time, imagine yourself standing on the rim of the Grand Canyon, gazing far down to the Colorado River, which is glimpsed more than 5,000 feet in elevation below. Contemplate the multitude of rock layers in variegated hues of color that are exposed by erosion in this awe-inspiring abyss.

These exposed sedimentary rocks speak to us with allusions to the unfathomable eras of time long past. We can imagine relatively calm equilibrium times being punctuated occasionally by real earth-shaking events. Calcium carbonate limestone and silicate chert rock speak of primordial precipitations of microscopic shells of countless sextillions of organisms onto the floors of shallow seas and oceans. They also speak of eons of tectonic plate movements, violent volcanic eruptions, sporadic great floods and underwater landslides on continental shelves. These lithified layers of sediments speak of seemingly eternal spells of time, and of the constancy of the formative processes that have been in operation since the beginning of time.

The sandstone, limestone and shale rock layers in the Grand Canyon extend from the most recent geologic epochs near the canyon rim on down to the Colorado River through layers of rock formed during the Cenozoic Era back through the Cretaceous and Jurassic and Triassic Periods, and thence through the Paleozoic Era back into lithified Pre-Cambrian sediments. The deepest exposed layers formed well over a billion years ago.

The amount of physical change that has taken place during this period of time completely dwarfs the amount of change that has taken place in the relatively mere moments in geologic time during which our own genus *Homo* has

been diverging from our nearest living relatives with whom we share a common ancestry. I remember watching the infinitely changing rhythm and size of big waves cresting and crashing onto a somewhat steep reddish sand beach, and I recall the character and tempo of Nature's slowly unfolding story coming viscerally to inspire my imagination. Nearby, there is a place in the exposed chert cliffs where rock layers can be seen that have been folded back almost 180 degrees during the slow, slow, slow processes of uplift and emplacement.

Richard Dawkins provides a vivid understanding of biological evolutionary change in *The Ancestor's Tale: A Pilgrimage to the Dawn of Evolution*. Dawkins cleverly uses Chaucer's famous book *The Canterbury Tales* as the inspiration for his ancestor's tales in this exploration of a grand unifying theory of biology. He has borrowed the rough structure of Chaucer's story of colorful pilgrims on their journey from a London tavern to the town of Canterbury, and he has taken modern readers on a pilgrimage backward through evolutionary time to the beginning of life, long, long, long before the mythical Adam and Eve became visions in our mythological imagining.

Dawkins uses extraordinary evidence of fossilized remains and DNA, as interpreted in scientific understandings of genetics and molecular biology, to trace this journey back along the branches of the tree of life. As he traces current species of life backwards in time to points where they have common ancestors with other forms of life, he reviews the history of biological evolution in reverse. As he heads back toward the origin of all life, readers meet humanity's various ancestral relatives as they converge back in time on earlier common ancestors. He explores a succession of scientific stories concerned with the formative processes of life at each of 40 "rendezvous points" in the course of this marvelous pilgrimage. A good summary of Dawkins' Tales can be found in Wikipedia, where a recap of these 40 provocative insights can be better understood.

The Farmer's Tale and the Cro-Magnon's Tale lead us further back in time to the Tasmanian's Tale, the Gorilla's Tale, the Howler Monkey's Tale and on back to such stories as the Hippo's Tale, the Galapagos Finch's Tale, the Peacock's Tale, the Dodo's Tale, and even the Blind Cave Fish's Tale, and the Sponge's Tale and the Redwood's Tale. Listen in to Richard Dawkins: "We meet up with fellow pilgrims along the route as we and they converge on our common ancestors. Chimpanzees join us at about 6 million years in the past, gorillas at 7 million years, orangutans at 14 million years, as we stride on together, a growing band. The journey provides the setting for a collection of some 40 tales. Each explores an aspect of evolutionary biology through the stories of characters met along the way, or glimpsed from afar -- the Elephant Bird's Tale, the Marsupial Mole's Tale, the Coelacanth's Tale. Together they give a deep understanding of the processes that have shaped life on Earth: convergent evolution, the isolation of populations, continental drift, the great extinctions. The tales are interspersed with prologues detailing the journey, and route maps showing joining lineages, and life-like reconstructions of our common ancestors. *The Ancestor's Tale* represents a pilgrimage on an unimaginable scale: our goal is four billion years away, and the number of pilgrims joining us grows vast -- ultimately encompassing all living creatures."

Evolutionary Change

Our primordial human ancestors were social animals that co-evolved under conditions in which the survival of the clan was more important than the survival of the individual. Groups in which males cooperated in the hunt survived with greater success than groups in which individuals did not work together well in this common goal. Likewise, groups in which females cooperated together in gathering foods, and in taking care of the young, survived with more success than groups in which individuals shirked this individual and common responsibility. Groups that cooperated together survived better than groups in which too many individuals freeloaded or cheated, or were not willing to sacrifice for the greater good of their clan. "Altruistic groups" had much greater survival advantages than groups with too many narrowly selfish individuals.

The process of natural selection gradually pruned the groups and individuals of *Homo* genera into the physical and behavioral animals that we are today. *Homo* females developed concealed ovulation and monthly menses, and a vital need grew for a kind of meat-for-sex interdependence with males. This was because males were the ones who hunted to provide meat for the clan, and meat is one of the best sources of iron, and iron is necessary in the production of hemoglobin in red blood cells. Females have a crucial need for red blood cells due to the fact that they lose some blood every month during the biological processes of menstruation. The protein hemoglobin provides a crucial service to physical well-being by facilitating the uptake of oxygen in the lungs, and releasing it to

cells throughout the circulatory system. Oxygen is particularly vital for brain cells, and most other cells throughout the body need to get oxygen from the blood as it pulses past for use in generating energy.

Human females eventually made a mental connection between ovulation and the sex act and the arrival, nine months later, of a newborn baby. This caused females to consciously begin exhibiting the overarching concern of "Original Choice", in which they rejected social misfits and slackers and males who had substandard physical characteristics. They began to choose mates who were disposed to help provide for their families and protect them from the many insecurities and dangers of life on the savanna or in caves. Dr. Leonard Shlain provides a fascinating perspective about these interdependent associations in his illuminating book *Sex, Time, and Power - How Women's Sexuality Shaped Human Evolution*.

Humans also developed a keen ability to perceive intentions of others, partially through the distinctive feature that highlights our eyes -- the sclera, or whites of our eyes. The sclera was naturally selected for, possibly because it helped people follow each other's gazes when they were communicating or cooperating with one another on tasks like hunting that require close contact and good rapport. This interesting theory is known as the "cooperative eye hypothesis". Our ancestors also developed a keen radar for whether another human was friend or foe, and a sensitive kind of lie and BS detector. Shake hands! Our abilities to recognize individual faces became remarkable, though remembering the names of others has always tended to be much more challenging. These capabilities were developments that helped promote positive aspects of community bonding and social cohesion and cooperative coexistence, which are boons for adaptivity.

Facial expressions are innate behaviors, and even babies exhibit them clearly. There are six primary categories of universal emotions that people express on their faces: smiling happiness, open-eyed surprise, pained sadness, frowning disgust, scowling anger, and trepidatious fear. Most people also feel emotions that may be more visually subtle -- like love, affection, hope, shame or embarrassment. So-called mirror neurons are involved in our easy recognition of these emotions in others. Curiously, we feel and remember fear and negative emotions with the most poignancy, so they tend to have the most powerful influence on us. A smile, on the other hand, is the emotion visible from the farthest distance, likely because it has always been important to accurately see if another person approaching is a friend or a foe.

"Man's mind, once stretched by a new idea, never regains its original dimensions."

--- Oliver Wendell Holmes

Religion, Social Cohesion, Obedience and the Suppression of Deviancy and Freeloading

One of the most interesting human cultural adaptations has been the evolution of religious behavior. A study of the evolutionary roots of religion and ethics is intriguing because it reveals that every known human culture has had propensities toward religious belief. The fact that an instinctive impulse like this is so pervasive in every human culture indicates that there must have been a compelling survival advantage in holding religious beliefs.

Evolutionary psychologists like Dominic Johnson speculate about this: "We have inherited the general template for religiosity because those early humans who abandoned the prospect of supernatural agents, or who lacked the capacity to represent their involvement in moral affairs, likely met with an early death at the hands of their own group members, or at least reduced reproductive success. Those who readily acquiesced to the possibility of moralizing gods, and who lived their lives in fear of such agencies, survived to become our ancestors."

The deities of various religions may at first have been just a curiosity, but eventually they acquired a quite extraordinarily useful social role. Almost all early societies needed to develop an effective inhibiting mechanism in the form of anticipated threats of punishment by a god or other supernatural agent for wrong-doing. In societies throughout the world, spirit gods or the spirits of dead ancestors were supposed to be keenly interested in people's observance of prevailing laws and taboos. The gods reputedly punish infractions unflinchingly, either in this world or in the next, or both. In some religions, for better effect, an extremely jealous God was posited that acts with downright vindictiveness toward "sinners" who are regarded as deserving punishment for their errant activities, like not believing or not conforming, or not obeying.

Gods were given this socially convenient role to encourage people to conform by striking fear into their hearts. Without gods, it was dangerous for anyone in a clan, tribe or community to assume a leadership role that involved the enforcement of punishments, because they would run the personal risk of incurring harms associated with resentment and retaliation.

Some philosophers have speculated that "Fear first made the gods". Only when priests used these fears and associated rituals to support morality and law did religion become a compelling force and a rival to other forms of governance. Too often, unfortunately, Church establishments have "stooped to fraud, as with pious legend, bogus relics and dubious miracles." The masses of mankind desire a religion rich in miracle, mystery, myth and hope, and there are profound subconscious reasons why.

Religion, *n.* A daughter of Hope and Fear, explaining to Ignorance the nature of the Unknowable.

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

Evolutionary change operates on principles of differential reproduction and natural selection. Variation in genes is a random process that occurs by means of a recombination of genes during meiotic cell division, or through inherited cellular mutations. But natural selection itself is definitely NOT a random process. Natural selection is almost unerringly focused, in the long run, on eliminating mutations that are undesirable, and on preserving traits that are advantageous because they help individuals survive and adapt to changing conditions in the environment, or to changes in competitive pressures or social interrelationships.

It is easy to imagine why natural selection favored clan members who cooperated in their social groups, for there are distinct survival advantages of cooperation in a group of semi-nomadic hunters and gatherers. It surely must have often been vitally important for these early peoples to work together to provide for their families and have individuals who felt enough commitment to their clan to be willing to die for their group during conflicts with other groups.

People are far more cooperative, even with total strangers, than biologists would expect. This is a behavior that appears to be deeply embedded in human nature. What biological explanation could there be for cooperation with people who are not a person's close biological kin? Such a high level of natural cooperativeness would not arise, in all probability, unless those who deviated from this behavior feared severe censure or inexorable punishment or mortally dangerous banishment from the group.

"A man's ethical behavior should be based effectually on sympathy, education, and social ties and needs; no religious basis is necessary. Man would indeed be in a poor way if he had to be restrained by fear of punishment and hope of reward after death."

--- Albert Einstein

Freeloaders and those who selfishly refuse to contribute would have been a burden in a clan group, so a belief in moralizing gods was an easy way to discourage freeloading and social deviancy. Otherwise, why would conceptions of immortal gods in their supernatural realm be so astonishingly concerned about things like human sexuality, interpersonal behaviors and even dietary preferences? The only good explanation for such religious strictures is that humans have created all gods and invested in them the moral authority of a culture and its interest in having the rules and traditions of social behavior obeyed by all its members. From this perspective, deities are understandably very interested in human conduct, because such concerns are their very *raison d'être!*

"The most terrifying fact about the universe is not that it is hostile, but that it is indifferent."

--- Stanley Kubrick

Transcendence Beckons

Carl Sagan once said, "A religion that stresses the magnificence of the universe as revealed by modern science might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by traditional faiths. Sooner or later, such a religion will emerge." Now is a good time for us to be proactive and choose to develop the catholic and ecological canons of this new faith, and to wholeheartedly embrace them.

To ensure a more advantageous future for our kind, a more enlightened appreciation of existence is called for. We basically need to develop more holistic Gaia understandings. The Earth Manifesto essay *Gaia's Geological Perspective: Episodes Since Genesis* contains valuable guidance.

Cultural evolution changes at a much faster pace than biological evolution, so cultural changes are our best hope for helping us successfully adapt to the converging challenges of our times. We are well-advised to come together and choose cultural "memes" that are most favorable to our collective flourishing and survival. Maybe this manifesto, with its *Common Sense Revival*, could function as a handbook for these salubrious ideas!

What we really need is a new attitude, a new global perspective, a new belief system that generously satisfies our emotional and spiritual impulses while at the same time integrating the vital Golden Rule principle of acceptance for other people and other faiths. We need a belief system that is open to loving thy neighbor -- or, at least, to giving thy neighbor a greater modicum of peaceable respect. Fair-minded "live and let live" attitudes are vital in matters of race, gender, sexuality, freedom of reproductive choice, community cohesion and religious convictions.

We would also be smart to come to grips with how to properly deal with criminal deviants by establishing fairer rules of law and punishment, so that justice would be dispensed in ways proportionate to the threats their crimes pose to society as a whole. We cannot afford broad trillion-dollar "shock and awe" wars against terrorists, and we can no longer afford draconian punishments against petty crimes like marijuana use. And in the context of the mindless materialism in our times, which advertisers so repetitiously and seductively promote, we can't afford to let corporate profiteering override all other considerations. We should identify the real cheaters, freeloaders and exploiters in our societies, taking into account consequential ethics, and determine how to best deal with the problems they pose.

Who would have thought that the biggest freeloaders in a society might be the financial elites who abuse the influence of their wealth to rig the system ever more radically to their selfish advantages? Who would have imagined that our societies might face an existential crisis specifically because a small group of rich and powerful people is allowed to grab the preponderance of benefits for themselves, at the expense of the vast majority of workers and the greater good of the populace as a whole?

This, naturally, should be no great surprise. A passing familiarity with Thomas Piketty's best-selling tome *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* provides readers with confirmatory details about how capitalism works. Once again the ominous words of Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis come to mind with reverberating import:

"We can have a democracy in this country or we can have great wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we can't have both."

Who would have imagined that a narrow majority of "conservative" Justices on the Supreme Court would have sided with unfair extreme partisan gerrymandering and campaign financing abuses of influence like the ones currently being perpetrated against the American people? Who would have thought that so many politicians and judges would take the side of Big Money in a Pyrrhic victory over the health of the providential ecological commons and the best interests of the vast majority of people alive today, and of all people in the future?

Consider the words Pope John Paul II spoke in 1984: "The needs of the poor must take priority over the desires of the rich; and the rights of workers over the maximization of profits." Read that again. At the time the Pope uttered these words, about 33 million Americans were poor, and 28% of the nation's wealth was held by the richest 2% of the population. Today, more than 40 million Americans are poor, and 40% of the nation's wealth is held by the richest 1%. Regressive tax-cutting plans promoted by conservatives are making these trends worse and worse. I urge all voters to consider this when evaluating any politician who opposes requiring the wealthy and giant corporations to pay a larger share of the tax burden. Any future changes in taxation should rightly give NOT ONE MORE PENNY to rich people and the highest-income earners!

Our long prehistory of hunting and gathering not only required a high degree of cooperation, but also a fair measure of egalitarianism. This was a dramatic contrast with earlier social groups dominated by alpha males. Picture rams butting heads during rutting season, or baboons fighting fiercely to establish male dominance so that the alpha male could mate exclusively with as many females as possible.

Talk about family values! Sexual aggression, like all vices, was once a virtue, back before anything was regarded as a vice or virtue, or good or bad. The process of natural selection helped determine which individuals and their traits were chosen to be propagated forward in time. Natural selection made these choices with impersonally fateful and mortally final decisiveness, as our lineage was pruned into the entire paradoxical panoply of our human nature and character today.

The goal of creating more equality of opportunity and a greater measure of egalitarianism is one that is arguably more crucial to our collective survival and flourishing than the status quo of allowing privileged people the freedom to create ever more inequality in economic gain and political power. Extreme frustration with the status quo was expressed by the 99% of Americans in the Occupy Wall Street movement and related protests around the world in late 2011. As time marches steadily by, a greater commitment to cooperative problem-solving is clearly needed. And we should renounce obstinate opposition to progress, along with merciless defenses of policies that facilitate worsening inequality, and harsh attitudes toward the poor, and the suppression of dissent, and the continuance of swindles that give debt-financed low tax rates to the super-rich.

"I think, therefore I am (I think)."

--- Rene Descartes (paraphrased version)

Homo sapiens sapiens is the sole surviving species in our genus *Homo*. In this sense, all our biotic eggs are in one basket. Only by continuing to think rationally, and to respect our capabilities for intelligent foresight, and to be open to creative ways of quickly adapting, will we thereby continue to be. And only by honoring vital social and ecological principles and intuitions of the greater good will we improve the future prospects of humanity.

Everything we do that will increase the likelihood of driving ourselves closer to catastrophe, and possible extinction, is an ultimate foolishness and immoral course -- an ultimate faux pas in the face of the processes of natural selection. This perspective sees that public decision-making must give greater priority to policies and practices that are fairer and more likely to be sustainable. Such an emphasis is needed because unsustainable activities are a movement toward riskier and less auspicious outcomes for all of humankind.

Moderation in All Things

The Buddha recommended that people follow a path of moderation. Similarly, the enigmatic Greek philosopher Socrates, founder of Western philosophy, wisely counsels us from 2,400 years ago: "Everything in moderation. Nothing in excess."

The Oracle of Delphi was the high priestess in the Greek Temple of Apollo on the slopes of Mount Parnassus. This soothsayer was known for centuries as the famed Pythia. This Oracle was established at Delphi in the 8th century BCE, and a long succession of women acted as Pythia, making prophecies for 1,200 years until the end of the 4th century CE. These prophecies were thought to be inspired by Apollo, the god of light and of prophecy, and they were reputedly delivered by the Pythia in an ecstatic trance. Some say the sagacious soothsayers were perhaps in an altered mental state induced by hot vapors that rose from a chasm in the Delphic rock.

These prophecies had influential impacts on many leaders in the ancient world, so the Pythia of Delphi was one of the most powerful women in the world during her tenure. Hundreds of the Oracular statements of Delphi have survived since classical times, according to Wikipedia, and many of them, stunningly, are said to be "historically accurate". Many of them are anecdotal, and have survived as proverbs. "Love of money and nothing else will ruin Sparta", proclaimed the Oracle. Maybe we need a new modern Oracle to counsel us in our materialistic Western world today!

The Oracle gave consequentially good advice to the wise ruler Solon, who was considering what constitutional reforms to make for Athens. The high priestess advised him to "Seat yourself amidships ...". As a result, Solon created fair-minded laws and instituted a progressively-graduated tax system and a moderate means by which debts could be forgiven. This helped create a stronger Athenian middle class, and prevented the gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots" from growing too dangerously wide. Ostensibly, we should all seat ourselves amidships today, and demand fairer and wiser national plans!

The maxim "Nothing in Excess" is carved into the forecourt of the Temple of Apollo in Delphi. Our hyper-partisan representatives should ponder this idea of "moderation in all things", and accept this advice when it comes to making decisions on protecting democracy and issues like public spending, debt-financed tax cuts, budget deficits, corporate perks and ideologically-driven stands on various things. This wise perspective provides another simple reason that moderates and liberals within religious faiths should honorably step forward to replace conservatives who dominate their religious establishments.

Apollo is associated with the "Golden Mean", for it represented the Greek ideal of moderation and a virtue that opposes excesses. As an example of the value of the Golden Mean, courage is considered a virtue, but if taken to excess it manifests itself as dangerous recklessness, while in deficiency, it manifests itself as cowardice.

Trump Republicans in particular need to hear this advice, because they have allowed their once dignified political party to become radicalized in a treacherous delirium of ethics-deficient political opportunism and affected religiosity. And they incidentally demonstrate extreme cowardice in kowtowing to the demagogic Donald Trump.

"The world would be a far better place if philosophers, poets or jazz musicians had greater influence in our societies."

--- A pronouncement of a modern reincarnation of the Priestess Oracle of Delphi

If jazz musicians ran the world, in syncopated harmony, with penultimate cool, it would likely be a much better place. With a little help from truly civic-minded business people and more reasonable politicians, and visionary poets, Buddhist philosophers, artists, ecological economists, deep ecologists and strong proponents of peaceful coexistence, we really could dramatically improve the world!

I love the idea of the nine divine Muses in Greek mythology. These goddesses were daughters of Mnemosyne, the personified Titan goddess of Memory, and the supreme Olympian god Zeus. The Muses were said to be the divine inspiration for the creation of various kinds of literature, philosophy and the arts. Please step forward and take a dignified bow on behalf of music and song, Euterpe, and of epic poets, Calliope, you divine feminine inspirations!

I remember a friend telling me she had attended a weeklong silent retreat at a spiritual spot in Massachusetts, and she observed that the meditative interlude centered her, and put her in touch with her inner self. She felt that the silent retreat had subtly shifted her way of seeing the world. Curiously, her personal experience gave her an oceanic sense of love for all human beings and sentient animals, yet she felt no particular strong affection for any one of the actual people with whom she shared this eminently quiet cathartic experience. Ha! -- what mysterious beings we are!

Prometheus and Epimetheus

In ancient Greek mythology, Atlas and Prometheus and Epimetheus were three of the offspring of the first-generation Titan gods and goddesses. Atlas was a primordial deity who was said to hold up the celestial sphere. Somebody had to be doing it, right? Prometheus, known in Greek mythology for having been a champion of humankind because he stole fire from Zeus and gave it to mortals, was regarded as wise; his name literally means 'forethought'. The name of his brother god, Epimetheus, literally means 'hind-thought' -- "in the manner of a fool looking backward while running forward."

One defining characteristic of us mortals is our valuable ability to use foresight to extrapolate from experience. This ability is crucial to our survival. It is an ability we would be smart to cultivate in our societies to ensure that our activities do not squander resources, pollute ecosystems, deplete and damage fresh water sources, over-harvest forests, decimate fisheries, heighten environmental injustices, cause dangerous changes in the global climate, wipe out most of the wildlife on Earth, or devastate the ecosystems upon which we so markedly depend. We must realize that we cannot continue with impunity to fleece future generations by pursuing such courses of action. In the grand scheme of things, this broad perspective is the most essential of all moral considerations.

Consider again the story of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil that was plagiarized from earlier "pagan" religions, as explained in *Inspiration, Imagination, and the Deep Well of Human Impulses*:

The Biblical story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden is an echo of the earlier Greek myth of Pandora. The supreme ruler of the Greek heavens Zeus gave Pandora as a wife to the slow-witted Titan Epimetheus, the brother of Prometheus. Pandora was thus the first mortal woman, and Zeus gave her to Epimetheus as a punishment to mankind because Prometheus had stolen the gift of fire and given it to man. Zeus also gave Epimetheus a large jar, later translated as a box, which contained all the ills and evils of the world. Pandora had been given the wonderful trait of curiosity and a desire for knowledge, so she opened the box even though Epimetheus had forbidden her to do so. When she opened the box, she released misfortune into the world.

Thus the stage was set for Bible writers to borrow this myth and blame Eve and the serpent for disobeying God, who was a more modern incarnation of Zeus and all the other Greek deities integrated in one monotheistic Supreme Being. God had prohibited Adam and Eve from eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. And the rest is history, as they say. After Adam and Eve ate the fruit, all of humankind ever since have been subjected to suffering, death, and shame or guilt for engaging in sinful behaviors. And believers are supposedly rewarded with an "afterlife" in a sublime Heaven while non-believers are condemned to an eternal horrible fate in Hell. The Bible writers who plagiarized the story of Pandora added a clever twist that God wanted to punish every woman thereafter for Eve's transgression by requiring them to be subservient to men and giving them pain and difficulty in childbirth.

Pandora's Box! Herein lies the beginning of the denigration, demonization and male domination of women at the dawn of written history. One account of Hesiod's version of the Pandora story indicates that these tales are "evidence of the shift from matriarchy to patriarchy in Greek culture". This source cited a perspective that Pandora had been considered a reflection of a life-giving goddess until the poet Hesiod altered the story to make Pandora an evil, death-bringing female. Our myths both reflect and mold our societies, says Leonard Shlain, making this brilliantly clear in *The Alphabet vs. the Goddess: The Conflict Between Word and Image*.

Reward Center Calling

"I do know how to pay attention ...
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
With your one wild and precious life?"

--- Mary Oliver, *The Summer Day*

Our brains feature a neuronal reward system that encourages us to eat and have sex -- and even to feel good by embracing religious beliefs. The evolutionary reasons for eating and reproducing are to ensure survival and a maximum number of progeny. Natural selection ensured that we feel a compelling pleasure in eating and mating, so human beings feel inherited drives and desires to eat and to have sex. These pleasures are different from true evolutionary purposes of eating to survive and having sex to propagate one's genes into future generations.

Likewise, people feel deep satisfactions in religious behaviors that encourage them to practice rituals, but these rewards are somewhat different than the evolutionary function of religion, which is to bind people together and make them willing to put the group's interests ahead of the individual's.

Experts in the study of our brain's structure and functioning have made amazing advances in recent years. They have found an elaborate system of neurotransmitters and hormones, including dopamine, serotonin and oxytocin, which are produced in our brains and affect things like cognition, motor skills, arousal, social bonding, mood, memory and feelings of reward.

The reward and pleasure centers of our brains are particularly interesting for their effects on our motivations. Neurotransmitters like dopamine provide an activating stimulus in these reward and pleasure areas. They arouse anticipation and create feelings of euphoria or well-being. We experience fulfilling feelings when we consume food, consummate sexual activity or achieve an intimate sense of connectedness. Friendship, love, authenticity and spiritual connection give us a positive sense of belonging. Curiously, drugs like cocaine are psychologically addictive precisely because they imitate the effects of dopamine. These drugs provide surge doses of powerful impulses to reward and pleasure center receptors in the brain.

Humans are the most intricately social of all animals. Consider teenagers, whose brains are acutely attuned to dopamine, the neurotransmitter that primes and fires reward circuits and helps us recognize patterns and make decisions. The brains of teenagers are also finely attuned to oxytocin, the neuronal hormone involved in making social connections feel especially rewarding. During teenage years, the hormones of young adults are raging, and teenagers see social rejection and peer exclusion as threats that sometimes feel more significant than physical danger or the lack of food. This is one reason that teenagers indulge in risky behaviors, being motivated to seek pleasures associated with them, rather than being inhibited by overriding concerns for risks, dangers and the unintended consequences of their actions.

The more we explore, the more we discover. The more we learn, the more we realize there are good explanations for almost everything. Consider the fact that teenagers not only crave acceptance and belonging in their peer groups, but also excitement and novelty and risk. These traits almost define adolescence, and they are characteristics that make young adults more adaptive as individuals, so they contribute to our adaptivity as a species. Genes and developmental processes that play an amplified role during this key transition period have been selected for, over many thousands of generations, because they produce young human beings who are optimally primed to take the big risk of leaving a safe home to move into unfamiliar territory. This willingness to take risks and master challenging new environments has been critically important for our species in its adaptive success as we migrated and colonized new niches and habitats around the globe.

The average human brain consists of almost 100 billion neurons, each having as many as a thousand or more synapses. These neurons have branch-like extensions known as dendrites, along which chemical messages are transmitted to neuronal cell bodies across narrow synaptic gaps. Cell bodies send both chemical and electrical information along nerve fiber extensions known as axons. During adolescence, these axons gradually become more insulated with a sheath of fatty substance called myelin, which boosts transmission speeds of axons up to 100 times. Faster brain functions are beneficial because they work more efficiently, providing us with greater adaptive intelligence. As this insulation builds up, however, functional flexibility diminishes. This is why languages are harder to learn as we get older and this insulation process is completed. As we age our brains literally become less flexibly open-minded. This may be why astute observers say it's hard to teach an old dog new tricks. This fact provides us with a compelling reason why inflexible political conservatism associated with opposition to change should not be allowed to so dominate our national decision-making.

Mark Twain once made this interesting observation: "Man is the only animal that blushes. Or needs to." One possible evolutionary explanation for the phenomenon of blushing is that it evolved as a means of ameliorating conflicts. Blushing reduces the ability to deceive, so may encourage honesty and socially constructive behavior.

It is noteworthy that taboos like the one against incest arose early in human societies. One can well imagine the reason for this. Inbreeding can result in severe physical or mental degeneracy within a few generations. This has occurred on many occasions, as when the Hapsburg dynasty in Europe tried to keep their dynastic heritage intact by inter-marrying with their relatives. The outcome was a considerable number of physical and mental deficiencies in their families, like those of Charles II in Spain in the late 1600s.

"The grand essentials to happiness in this life are something to do, something to love, and something to hope for."

--- Joseph Addison

Politics and Religion

The Seven Days of Creation scenario adduced at the beginning of these *Revelations* is a modern creation story that provides a dramatic contrast to all the many antiquated mythological Creation stories invented over the long course of human history. The creative Creation stories of all the world's principal religions have provided some positive benefits throughout the roughly five or six millennia since civilization began back in ancient Mesopotamia. Creation stories did this by facilitating cooperative relationships between people and providing psychological security, while satisfying human needs for belief, faith and belonging. Staunch adherence by many religions to their concocted founding conceptions has also caused violent conflicts, ideological strife and much atrocious discrimination and

persecution. And religious authorities have too often sided with repressive establishment leaders, causing terrible harms to countless number of people over the centuries.

Politics and religion make strange bedfellows. When religious authorities form coalitions with rulers who oppose the greater good, these alliances can undermine the most important values of our kind. Extreme fundamentalist believers in religions around the world today pose one of the biggest threats to peaceful coexistence and both saner and more civilized courses of action. In particular, the Religious Right in the U.S. and Islamic extremists in many nations, and the ayatollahs of Iran, all seem to be committed to conflict-engendering domination and ascendancy. Aggressive supremacist attitudes are making international conflicts unnecessarily dangerous, and religious extremism is giving unwarranted and counterproductive amounts of power to reactionary elements in all-too-many nations. Social harms associated with domestic repression and wrongheaded government policies and misguided priorities are radically undesirable.

"When fascism comes to America, it will be wrapped in the flag, carrying the cross."

--- Misattributed to Sinclair Lewis in his 1935 novel, *It Can't Happen Here*

Rational decision-making and intelligent judgments about the best approaches to fostering human well-being are being thwarted by entrenched interest groups supported by many religious people. Religious conservatives tend to side with authoritarian leaders and economic fundamentalists in countries worldwide. This is a very dangerous affiliation that makes disparities of wealth and social inequities more pronounced, and thus unnecessarily stokes increased insecurities, stresses, strife and animosities around the globe. This sadly unchristian aspect of religions is socially unacceptable! Moderates and liberals, assert stronger influence, please!

"Peace along with freedom and justice are the pillars for attaining both security and stability, and will pave the way towards the eradication of oppression, extremism, and terrorism in our world."

--- Najib Mikati

Woe, and An Incisively Irreverent Comedic Perspective

There have been an unbelievable number of evil outcomes visited upon humankind by religious authorities and "religion on the march" over the centuries. This carnage perhaps began back in the 14 century BCE when King Tut's father, the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaten, outlawed traditional polytheism and established a new monotheism centered on worship of Aten, the sun god. Especially objectionable in this category of nefarious assaults on the tolerance of Golden Rule sensibilities and peaceable coexistence since then were the Catholic Inquisition, the Crusades, the tactics used to spread Islam by the sword, the Salem Witch Trials, the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the War on Terror in reaction -- and now the current on-going predations of the Religious Right in the USA today, in their unholy alliance with Republican conservatives.

In an eminently reasonable response to all this carnage, it is valuable to listen to George Carlin's extraordinary comedy routine, titled *Religion is Bullshit* (google it). Some will regard George Carlin's humorous monologue as incisively irreverent and worse, but he makes very valid points about money and religion and sun worshipping and prayer and God's will.

Whether to rage or laugh at excessive credulity in the improbable -- THAT is the question. As George Carlin once humorously pointed out, "Tell people there's an invisible man in the sky who created the universe, and the vast majority will believe you. Tell them the paint is wet, and they have to touch it to be sure." Ha!

Philosophical Introspection

I just love astutely insightful perspectives. Think of an issue where you believed something was true, but later were presented with a different point of view that was so persuasive that you changed your mind. In a collective sense, a perceptual surprise like this took place when humankind first realized that the Earth spins around once every day, rather than that the Sun makes a daily orbit around the Earth. This contradicted the apparent fact that the Sun rises in the east every day and travels across the sky to set in the west.

"Doubt is not a pleasant condition, but certainty is an absurd one."

--- Voltaire

French philosopher Rene Descartes surveyed the scene in the 17th century of earlier thinkers like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, and of skeptics like the Sophists and Stoics, and came to convoluted conclusions like "I think, therefore I am" -- and, "So, from what has been said, it must be concluded that God necessarily exists." Descartes made the bizarre Ontological Argument that the existence of a great God can be inferred directly from a fact that necessary existence is contained in the "clear and distinct idea of a supremely perfect being".

Wait a minute. I have a clear and distinct idea that the Sun rose in the east this morning and is moving across the sky exactly as if it is revolving around the Earth, but that doesn't make it a necessary and self-evident truth. A good explanation for confused thinking was adduced by philosopher Will Durant, when he astutely observed in *The Pleasures of Philosophy*: "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."

People claim that God has divine attributes like goodness, omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence and eternal existence. Really? That sounds much more like a fabricated idea about the particularities of what a respectable God should be like, rather than a knowable truth about the real nature of deities in existence. These characteristics are framed in the language and concepts of what the nature of a super-human being might be. Surely, whatever God is, "He" cannot be limited to a narrow list of human-like descriptive attributes, so we should be especially careful not to ascribe these concepts to God, given their suspiciously anthropomorphic and blatantly improbable nature -- and their use, all too often, to rationalize discrimination and atrocities.

The existence of God is a conveniently simplistic idea that evolved from earlier animistic and polytheistic concepts. The monotheistic belief in one God is a more sophisticated idea than previous beliefs that supposed there are many gods and goddesses, but this sophistication is cast in an exceedingly dubious and unfavorable light by the extraordinary insights contained in the thought-provoking book *God Against the God: The History of the War Between Monotheism and Polytheism*. Polytheists, commendably didn't get on their high horses and slaughter others who believed in different deities.

I personally find the panoply of gods and goddesses in the pantheons of ancient Greece and Rome to be fascinating because these mythological beings embody many marvelous reflections of our archetypal human characteristics. A study of *Goddesses in Everywoman*, and of *Gods in Everyman*, by the Jungian psychiatrist Jean Shinoda Bolen, provides valuable perspectives about both archetypes and stereotypes in our human psyches and cultures. Considered from this point of view, beliefs in a God reveal much about true believers, and much more about those who believe than they reveal about the probable nature of any envisioned Supreme Being.

Likewise, a study of comparative religion and the attributed character of deities as described in canonized religious texts around the world can reveal fascinating things about the people who profess these beliefs -- and about their convoluted thinking. Consider the belief that essentially posits: "Presto, God created everything!" This is a curiously convenient construct, but no one has yet come up with the impossible -- an adequately honest explanation for how God in our image might have come to exist before anything else in the entire Universe.

Religions have often in history served as a type of manipulative propaganda. A reliable way to make people believe in falsehoods is through early indoctrination and frequent repetition. Psychologist Daniel Kahneman makes this point in *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. Our brains, it turns out, function in ways that make it hard for people to distinguish truth from familiarity. This is a cause of the phenomenon known as "the illusory truth effect." People involved in propagating dogmas and product marketing take advantage of this fact, as do religious zealots, manipulative demagogues and liberty-infringing authoritarians.

George W. Bush once stated during his presidency, "See, in my line of work you got to keep repeating things over and over and over again for the truth to sink in, to kind of catapult the propaganda." That's too much! Strategies that catapult propaganda are particularly pathetic when they are affiliated with hidden agendas, exploitive ambitions, discriminatory drives, fraudulent schemes, financial improprieties, downplaying risks, war enthusiasms, dark motives and other actions that have big potentials for negative impacts on society as a whole.

There is no doubt that fabricated stories can truly alter our realities. This theme is powerfully explored in the film *Life is Beautiful*, in which a father uses imagination and humor to make up a story in a Nazi concentration camp

that he tells to his son. Even though his story is a fiction, it actually helps the son survive. Unfortunately, in the arena of religious fanaticism, stories like those in the Bible, the Quran and the Book of Mormon can have highly negative outcomes for society, despite implied morality that holds religious doctrines to be designed to foster the moral good. Fanatic evangelical believers tend to demonize those with different faiths, and to regard non-believers as evil, and these attitudes spark anger, animosity and motives for violence or vengeance in reaction. Much harm has been caused by such self-righteous attitudes.

On the whole, there are overwhelmingly valid reasons to believe that evidence-based beliefs are preferable to superstition and ignorance. It is stunning that, on the Sunday this paragraph was originally written, the top two paperback books on the National Non-Fiction Best-Seller List were *Heaven Is for Real* ("A boy's encounter with Jesus and the angels") and *Proof of Heaven* ("A neurosurgeon recounts his near death experience during a coma"). Science has not yet found the physical location of either Heaven or Hell, and the probability that they exist as literal places is vanishingly small. Literal beliefs in these storied places are about as reasonable as faith in the existence of a real Santa Claus or Easter Bunny or Boogeyman. When such literal beliefs are used to get people to deny big picture understandings, like the wrong-headedness of allowing giant corporations to damage the foundations of biotic well-being in order to maximize profits, such self-serving convictions can be a serious threat to our overall flourishing and survival.

And when fervent beliefs in a better fate in some imagined afterlife prevents people from demanding and getting fairer policies in the here and now, this addictive opiate of the people is bad medicine. Calls for fairer national priorities are demands for the real happiness of the people, not merely solace in an illusory happiness.

"Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people."

--- Karl Marx, 1844

An Aside on Beliefs and Opinions

Mark Twain's sagacious perspectives inform many of the ideas found in this manifesto. The great writer and humorist grafted fine high-class sensibilities that he acquired in the second half of his life onto a sturdy midwestern working class root stock. He had traveled from his hometown in Hannibal on the banks of the wide Mississippi River to the Wild West during the Civil War in 1861, well after the California Gold Rush had begun, and years later he married into an aristocratic family and settled in the Northeast. He had also journeyed and lived abroad for years on end, so his opinions reflected the broadening insights gained from these rich, expansive and widely varied cultural experiences.

Mark Twain wrote his important essay *Corn Pone Opinions* in 1901. In it, he explored the pitfalls of unthinking opinions and beliefs. The essay was not published until 1923, more than 12 years after he died. It is entertaining and enlightening to delve into his meaning in this article. He begins by reminiscing about a friend who had been very dear to him 50 years earlier. "He was a gay and impudent and satirical and delightful young black man -- a slave -- who daily preached sermons from the top of his master's woodpile, with me for sole audience. He imitated the pulpit style of the several clergymen of the village, and did it well, and with fine passion and energy."

The black slave alleged that, "You tell me whar a man gits his corn pone, en I'll tell you what his 'pinions is." Corn pone is an inexpensive form of corn bread made without eggs or milk. Such austere recipes were created out of necessity by poor people who couldn't afford eggs and milk. Author Greg Beatty has written an excellent article titled *Quarter Pound Opinions* in which he points out that, using Mark Twain's analysis, people could be said to accept the opinions of those around them, "especially Americans with their divided allegiances to God, democracy, and the dollar."

Just as the corn in their corn-pone was grown in nearby fields, and was ground by a miller they knew, and was bagged and baked by others, their opinions were acquired second-hand from their families and fellow members of their church and others in their neighborhoods and localities. The spices and herbs that made individual batches of corn-pone distinctive revealed telling information about the geographical and economic influences that affected the cooks. Likewise, the shared opinions upon which Mark Twain cogitated and occasionally heaped scorn were

often circulated widely because of people's tendency to parrot the ideas of others in unthinking ways, and in sometimes obsequious conformity.

Remembering his black slave friend's impressive harangues from atop the woodpile in Hannibal, Mark Twain transformed him in *Corn-Pone Opinions* into a rhetorical prophet of individual freedom. He ostensibly felt that people should be able to break free from false notions, counterproductive opinions, dangerous habits and undesirable prejudices by means of being capable of seeing more clearly that their opinions are largely a matter of conditioning, indoctrination and conformity. I love the idea of this potentiality of breaking through, even if it may be difficult to transcend the deeply conditioned opinions and ideas and beliefs that we often have acquired from others like comfortable second-hand shoes.

Today, this has become truer and more impactful as social media has lulled us in conditioned echo chambers. Many folks find it exceedingly hard to reach beyond tribal identification and loyalties that we have adopted from our news sources and social media feeds. "Facebook. LIKE? Instagram. Twitter, twitter, twitter." Some people act as if they are dutiful robots, conforming to emotion-manipulating schemers, trolls and Russian bots.

John Steinbeck and 'Doc' Ed Ricketts glimpsed deep truths during their famous voyage on the Sea of Cortez in 1940. They debated a state of "understanding-acceptance" and came up with the idea that holistic worldviews can lead to breaking through to useful and purposeful social action. People in our societies are deeply affected by sheep-like following, blind conformity and materialistic keeping-up-with-the-Joneses strivings. This contributes to widely harmful outcomes on a global scale. People do not seem to bridle much at their obsequious servitude to the persuasive propaganda of advertisers, ideologues, partisan politicians or churches -- or pushers of false conspiracies -- so it's as though we are completely convinced by spin, marketing, orthodox dogmas or deceptions.

Here are some of Mark Twain's insights and a fine example of his subversive wit in *Corn-Pone Opinions*: "The black philosopher's idea was that a man is not independent, and cannot afford views which might interfere with his bread and butter. If he would prosper, he must train with the majority; in matters of large moment, like politics and religion, he must think and feel with the bulk of his neighbors, or suffer damage in his social standing and in his business prosperities. He must restrict himself to corn-pone opinions -- at least on the surface. He must get his opinions from other people; he must reason out none for himself; he must have no first-hand views."

"Morals, religions, politics, get their following from surrounding influences and atmospheres, almost entirely; not from study, not from thinking. A man must and will have his own approval first of all, in each and every moment and circumstance of his life -- even if he must repent of a self-approved act the moment after its commission, in order to get his self-approval again: but, speaking in general terms, a man's self-approval in the large concerns of life has its source in the approval of the peoples about him, and not in a searching personal examination of the matter. Mohammedans are Mohammedans because they are born and reared among that sect, not because they have thought it out and can furnish sound reasons for being Mohammedans; we know why Catholics are Catholics; why Presbyterians are Presbyterians; why Baptists are Baptists; why Mormons are Mormons; why thieves are thieves and monarchists, monarchists; why Republicans are Republicans and Democrats, Democrats. We know it is a matter of association and sympathy, not reasoning and examination; that hardly a man in the world has an opinion upon morals, politics, or religion which he got otherwise than through his associations and sympathies."

"Men think they think upon great political questions, and they do; but they think with their party, not independently; they read its literature, but not that of the other side; they arrive at convictions, but they are drawn from a partial view of the matter in hand and are of no particular value. They swarm with their party, they feel with their party, they are happy in their party's approval; and where the party leads they will follow, whether for right and honor, or through blood and dirt and a mush of mutilated morals."

"We all do no end of feeling, and we mistake it for thinking. And out of it we get an aggregation which we consider a boon. Its name is Public Opinion. It is held in reverence. It settles everything. *Some think it is the Voice of God.*"

Hmmm ... This perspective on conformity and approval-seeking is reminiscent of ideas John Fowles expresses in his seminal book, *The Aristos*, where he examines the many powerful social pressures that motivate people to conform.

He expresses the opinion that it is one of our fundamental human birthrights to be able to think objectively and express opinions freely. He felt that the healthiest societies would be those in which every person develops a self-made opinion on all issues that concern them. Such freedoms of independent consideration and expression are vitally important requisites for a healthy democracy -- and for a good understanding of our selves, as well.

Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel Sing A Lovely Sonata Enveloped in Silence

Hello darkness, my old friend
 I've come to talk with you again.
 Because a vision softly creeping
 Left its seeds while I was sleeping
 And the vision that was planted in my brain still remains
 Within the sound of silence.

... My eyes were stabbed by the flash of a neon light
 People hearing without listening
 And the people bowed and prayed
 To the neon god they made
 And the sign flashed out its warning
 In the words that it was forming
 And the sign said, "The words of the prophets are written on the subway walls
 And the tenement halls"
 And whispered in the sounds of silence.

--- Simon and Garfunkel, *The Sounds of Silence*

Is One Religion Absolutely Right?

Here is a thought-provoking question that was posed by Vanity Fair magazine. They polled about one thousand people, and asked them the following question: "Which comes closest to your view? (1) The world would be a better place if there were one global religion. (2) The world would be a better place if there were one global religion but only if that religion were Christianity. (3) The world is a better place because of its religious diversity. (4) The world would be a better place with no religion."

What do you think? More than half of people interviewed believed that religious diversity is the best for society. Just 20% figured a Christianity-only nation would be best, and 12% of the respondents figured no religion would be best. Only 8% of respondents said one global religion would be best. American evangelicals, not surprisingly, believed that having only one religion in which everyone accepted Christianity would be best, but even then only 49% of them endorsed that idea. Cultural diversity and broad open-mindedness are healthy, while constrictions of people's choices goes against the grain of our national ideals of the freedom of religion, belief and expression.

"Nothing so needs reforming as other people's habits."

--- Mark Twain

In his illuminating book *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, psychologist Steven Pinker writes about terrible historical acts like the torturing of heretics and the burning of women at the stake because they practiced "witchcraft". He observes: "The belief that one may escape from an eternity in hell only by accepting Jesus as a savior makes it a moral imperative to coerce people into accepting that belief, and to silence anyone who might sow doubt about it." Or, presumably, to wage discriminatory campaigns against them, or visit violence upon them.

Surely our societies would be better off without fundamentalist evangelical believers commanding power and demanding obedience, especially when they hold the conviction that other people should be coerced into adhering to their narrow theologies. This is why a strong separation between Church and State is so important for human freedom and dignity.

Even the latter-day apostle Ronald Reagan once said, "We were founded as a nation of openness to people of all beliefs. And so we must remain. Our very unity has been strengthened by our pluralism. We establish no religion in this country, we command no worship, we mandate no belief, nor will we ever. Church and State are, and must

remain, separate." Texas Senator Ted Cruz and his cocksure religious kin may disagreeably disagree on this point, but that doesn't mean he is right. He is too far right, and this should have disqualified him from high office.

In 2012, the extreme religious conservative Rick Santorum said that when he watched a speech made by Presidential candidate John F. Kennedy to Baptist ministers in 1960, it made him want to "throw up". He felt this revulsion because JFK was stressing a fair-minded belief in the importance of a separation of Church and State. Good grief -- that's gross -- and vile bile, to boot.

Let's recommit our nation to strengthening the separation between religion and government. In evaluating the value of religions in modern times, let us remain open-minded, because there are many crucially important things to be learned about the world and ourselves. More knowledge and better understandings are the key. And there are many vital things that we should work together to accomplish!

Religious Diversity and Religious Tolerance Go Hand in Hand

Imagine a home with 10,000 rooms that has a directory in the antechamber providing information about each of the rooms and the beliefs specific to the people who inhabit the spaces within. Each room has an altar providing a place of worship for one of the ten thousand extant religious sects in the world today. Each of these religions has its own cosmology, its own creation story, its own dogmas, and its own explanation for the meaning of life and death. As Jon Krakauer pointed out in *Under the Banner of Heaven*, referring to the faithful of these various belief systems: "Most assert that the other 9,999 not only have it completely wrong, but are instruments of evil, besides." It is easy to see the problem here.

Steven Pinker poignantly points out in *The Better Angels of Our Nature* that there is an astonishing absurdity of "... different people being unshakably certain of the truth of their mutually incompatible beliefs." When it comes to convictions of absolute certainty of belief, and of fervently aggressive self-righteousness in defense of cherished convictions, perhaps it is natural for hostility toward others to arise. Anyone who happens to have different religious convictions can be subjected to suspicion, contempt, cancel culture prohibitions, discriminatory repression, and even cruelty and violence. When self-serving religious authorities exaggeratedly influence entire nations, harsh prohibitions and punishments can result. So can irrational and uncompromising political stances, and Crusading militarism, bloody Inquisitions, murderous genocides, regional wars or violent terrorism in the name of a particular God.

Most people would agree it is a bad idea for people to be ruled by governments that collaborate too closely with authorities of any one particular religion. This is especially true when such eminences promote discrimination against groups of people like atheists or females or gay people. We simply cannot accept divisive influences of established churches in the spheres of governments and laws. The rights of all people must be upheld to believe as they like, and no government should be allowed to side with authorities of any one religion or God. This is why the concept of a sensible separation of church and state is so necessary in nations worldwide.

It is curious that many people who adhere to religious faiths are credulous enough that they feel compelled to deny the greatest understandings ever realized by humankind -- including the awe-inspiring conception of the physical evolution of the Universe over billions of years of time, and the unfathomably long adaptive saga of the biological evolution of life on Earth.

There can be a great danger when religious fanatics gain control of decision-making processes in any government in the world. This is particularly true right now of Iran, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, and regions dominated by the influence of the Religious Right in the USA. The sustained Republican assault on women's rights and prerogatives, and Churchly opposition to family planning and abortion and even the use of contraceptives -- and threats of war between Israel and Iran -- are all converging on similar understandings. Which is that overarching consideration should be given to the long-term greater good. Less emphasis should be put on parochial puritanism or ignorant, discrimination-defending biases and control demands of religious zealots.

The above quote from Jon Krakauer's *Under the Banner of Heaven* was immediately preceded by this compelling observation: "I don't know what God is, or what God had in mind when the universe was set in motion. In fact, I

don't know if God even exists, although I confess that I sometimes find myself praying in times of great fear or despair, or astonishment at a display of unexpected beauty." Aha!

This observation was followed by a classic Krakauer comment that none of the ten thousand religious sects had persuaded him to make a requisite leap of faith to embrace their beliefs. "In the absence of conviction," he wrote, "I've come to terms with the fact that uncertainty is an inescapable corollary of life. An abundance of mystery is simply part of the bargain -- which doesn't strike me as something to lament. Accepting the essential inscrutability of existence, in any case, is surely preferable to its opposite: capitulating to the tyranny of intransigent belief." Hallelujah!

Glimpses into the Murky Waters of Prehistory

The earliest civilizations appear to have emerged independently: those of Mesopotamia along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, Egypt along the Nile River, India along the Indus River, China along the Yellow River, and in the New World in the Central Andes and in Mesoamerica. The concept of a cradle of civilization has a focus on where the inhabitants came to build cities, to make pottery and use metals, to grow crops and domesticate animals, to create writing systems, and to develop complex social structures that involved class systems.

It is intriguing that the oldest temple ruins found anywhere in the world are about 12,000 years old. This age is significantly further back in time than the period in which people began to settle down in agrarian communities. These ruins are in southern Turkey at a place known as Göbekli Tepe. It is ironic that Göbekli Tepe was built to commemorate gods of a culture long gone and completely forgotten. The same is true for the faiths that inspired all of the ten oldest temples in the world. No one any longer worships any of the gods that these temples were built to honor. Beliefs in those gods -- and hundreds of others -- have drifted into the realm of myth, legend, conjecture, mystery and obscurity.

As noted in *Transcendental Musings*, the Creation myth of ancient Greeks says that Gaea, feminine-gendered Earth, emerged from Chaos and gave birth to Uranus, the personification of the male deity of the Sky, and together they gave birth to offspring known as the Titans, who later begat the Olympians. It is amazing that this Creation myth was the dominant cosmological and religious explanation of existence for many centuries in the most advanced civilizations in the Near East and Europe at the time. Yet it is revealing that the rich and well-developed body of myths surrounding these deities enveloped the Greeks in a spiritual connection to their world, and provided them with deeply conceived visions of archetypes of human nature and behaviors and idiosyncrasies.

Today most people regard Greek mythology as a quaintly imaginary body of story telling and anthropocentric projections and superstitions. We can no longer access the state of awareness that prevailed for centuries during the time these myths were the dominant conceptions and explanations of existence.

In light of the long evolving history of cosmological conceptions throughout recorded history, now is the time for those who think their faiths represent "absolute truths" to admit that their founding creation stories and scriptures are also tall tales that have been invented by human beings. These stories are not divine revelations. Now is the time for people of all religious faiths -- especially Christians, Catholics, Baptists, Mormons and both Shia and Sunni Muslims -- to admit that other faiths have as much legitimacy as theirs, and to accept differences, and to honestly and honorably work together to achieve larger humanistic goals.

A clearer understanding of the founding drives behind religions, and of the ways modern religions have been hijacked by manipulative authorities, is vitally important to help us move forward toward creating saner, safer, fairer and more peaceable societies. These, I believe, would be cultures most likely to be healthy, secure and sustainable. This topic will be explored below, after a short digression.

Another Dogmatic Religion

Christianity and Islam each have more than one billion adherents around the world. But another type of religion effectively dwarfs these and all others. It is Capitalism. Everyone basically participates in this religion, believing that the possession of money is the best means to achieve happiness, security, variety and salvation in the form of individual freedom. Some people even believe that more money could contribute to a kind of liberation of the

masses. Capitalist economic systems hold that the best way to salvation is through success in becoming rich, and that this can be achieved no matter what a person's background or education or social class.

Capitalism is a religion in a similar sense to other belief systems because it deals with not dissimilar sets of existential issues and anxieties as established religions. Capitalism is an odd religion of conditioned consumerism, status seeking, avarice, ruthlessness of competition, industrialization, globalization and a commercialization of almost everything. It plays on people's hopes, fears, aspirations, weaknesses, insecurities, gullibility, vices, guilt, shame, passivity, shallowness and misunderstanding, and it manipulates people through the urgings of persuasive schemers who are like proverbial snake oil salesmen that push people to buy and indulge, believe and conform.

Capitalism is more like a cult than a mainstream religion, for its followers regard money almost as an absolute arbiter of social importance. It also holds that the prerogatives of rich people should be inviolate. Capitalism is a secular cult whose object of worship is money and special perks and privileges. It is a cult promoted by advertising that encourages people to consume and to pursue narrow self-interest. Capitalism conditions people to envy others who have a lot of money, possessions and material things. In reaction, those who have the most money and possessions tend to jealously defend the exclusiveness of their money, power and good fortune.

People are highly susceptible to subliminal influences of sophisticated marketing techniques and the persuasion of oft-repeated advertising. While repetition is effective in selling things and catapulting propaganda, the naked truth can come out when an emperor is transparently seen to be wearing no clothes, and in parallel, even the deceiving dissemblers who propagate the shrewd spin can be revealed to be hucksters who may do much harm.

"You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you can not fool all of the people all of the time."

--- Honest Abe Lincoln

The capitalist system subtly encourages every person to turn his or her back on vital human values like economic fairness, social justice, generosity, empathetic understanding, good neighborliness, compassionate behaviors, the overall well-being of the majority, selfless service, kindness, moderation and spiritual pursuits. This can lead to alienation and cultural mania. John Fowles made a valid point in *The Aristos*: "Much more than we let philosophies guide our lives, we allow obsessions to drive them; and there is no doubt which has been the great driving obsession of the last one hundred and fifty years. It is money." ... "Having, not being, governs our time."

The Republican Party in particular is obsessed with money and the power and control it represents. Republicans are excessively eager to give the full legal rights of real persons to amoral corporate entities. They are so zealously and obsequiously willing to do this that they allow the rights of the American people to be trampled upon to advance this narrow goal. The stakes are high -- huge sums of money for wealthy people! -- so these stalwart partisans triumphantly rationalize this awkward and patently self-serving legal misconstruction. They even go a step further and try to endow these amoral organizations with rights and power that far exceed those of real persons of flesh and blood.

If corporations really were people, the way they generally act could be reasonably characterized as clinically and pathologically sociopathic. The Canadian writer, jazz musician and filmmaker Joel Bakan poignantly asserts that this is the case, and he cites extensive and convincing detail in his book *The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power*. Corporate entities often undermine environmental protections, and even work against fairly representative democracy, human rights, decency and fairness. Joel Bakan is optimistic, however, indicating that pragmatic and realistic reforms are possible. We would be wise to heed his recommendations and work together to fairly fix our economic and political systems. In 2021, Joel Bakan revisited such issues in his incisive new film *The New Corporation*, revealing "a world now fully remade in the corporation's image, perilously close to losing democracy." The consequences, he concludes, are "perilous."

Corporations often act in ways that harm people by cutting corners, cheating customers, engaging in unfair competitive practices, circumventing environmentally and socially responsible regulations, investing in lobbying efforts to gain more subsidies and tax breaks at the expense of the people, indulging in tax avoidance schemes, lobbying for and getting perverse subsidies, or working overtime to profit from war. They also abuse their

influence to corrupt our elected representatives and facilitate the externalizing of costs onto society. These are not honorable things, and they are not socially desirable! True character is revealed by actions, not by public relations claims, grandstanding greenwashing, or deceitful tweets or speeches.

"Corporations are people, my friend", remarked Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney in August 2011, in a particularly barbed and condescending rejoinder that was directed at a heckler in the crowd while he was on the campaign trail at the Iowa State Fair. Mitt could have used a wise word of advice: Vulture capitalism is hardly something to put on a pedestal, and it is pathetic to crow about it, or to try to pawn it off as being a paragon of virtue or propriety or the greater good.

The willful denial by conservatives of the vital importance of protections of the environment is particularly shocking. It should be of paramount importance to give greater respect to the foundations of humanity's long-term well-being. A higher regard for the survival of life on Earth should be a moral imperative. These things should be regarded as basic acts of hygiene, of aesthetics, and of a smart and sensible regard for human flourishing and survival.

There is something profoundly ethical about wildlife protection advocates who express caring attitudes about other species, and of passionately committed folks like those involved in organizations like the World Wildlife Fund or People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. People like birdwatchers and those who love their pets can be commendable in their caring and awareness. But people often exhibit extreme degrees of anthropocentricity, and we are collectively treating wildlife and most other species of life on Earth with a terribly obtuse lack of concern for their habitats and general health and well-being. Make no mistake about it, other animals are sentient beings, and they feel pain and suffer from things like pollution and toxic chemicals and the damaging impacts of global warming caused by greenhouse gas emissions, and many of them are being driven toward eternal extinction because of our abject failure to take steps to prevent rash changes in biotic conditions on the planet.

Watch the YouTube video of the extraordinarily heartening demonstration by a humpback whale of the joy of living and appreciating being freed from constraints. This video shows a group of people in a small boat who rescued a whale on Valentines Day in 2011 by freeing the animal from being trapped in a huge tangle of fishing nets in the Sea of Cortez. The whale's ecstatic leaping responses to being freed reveals much about the beauty of wild animals living free lives unendangered by human heedlessness.

Human Development

It has been more than 150,000 years since the first members of *Homo sapiens* appeared on Earth, and during most of this time, our kind lived close to Nature. Then, somewhere around 10,000 years ago, nomadic wanderers of the Stone Age of human development discovered the advantages of cultivating crops instead of wandering around to find food -- and of domesticating animals instead of hunting their dangerous wild relatives. These advances allowed people to settle down into agrarian communities, leading to the growth of villages, towns and cities, and eventually great early civilizations began to flourish in places like Mesopotamia, Egypt and China.

Cultures, customs, values and belief systems shifted seismically with social revolutions implicit in epic transitions from hunting and gathering to agriculture and animal husbandry. At the same time, the roles of males and females changed radically. Both male hunters and female gatherers had to become more content with new and different roles required to succeed in cultivating crops and taking care of animals to provide sustenance.

Recognizing that every culture ever in existence has invented its own creation stories, its own cosmological conceptions of the universe, and its own explanations for life and being, we also can see the earliest spiritual understandings were forms of animism that attributed spirits or souls to human beings AND to animals and plants and mountains and rivers and the Sun and the Moon and natural phenomena like lightning and winds.

With revolutionary changes from nomadic to agricultural modes of existence, people naturally began to worship female deities that are generally known as Earth Mother Goddesses. These forms of worship honored fertility and motherhood and nourishment and yearly renewal in nature.

Many cultures borrow elements of their explanations of first causes in the universe from earlier myths. The Bible, for instance, incorporates many of its major themes from earlier myths that include the concept of a virgin birth

and that of a great flood, and of a 'Lamb of God' dying for mankind's sins and being resurrected three days after death. Many of the traditions and rituals practiced by orthodox Christianity were adopted from earlier religions that they disrespectfully demean as being "pagan".

"I believe in the resurrection," a friend told me at a delicious Easter dinner. I found this rather stunning. After all, the Bible story about Jesus being crucified and then resurrected from death is a plagiarized echo of many earlier myths. For instance, Egyptian believers mourned the deaths of their god Osiris, and Persians mourned the death of their god Mithra, and Greeks mourned the death of their god Adonis -- and the various faithful respectively rejoiced when these deities were reputed to have been resurrected three days later.

Death and revival themes are powerful in the human psyche as a result of many kinds of natural cycles that involve dying and renewal. Many stories found in the Bible originated as allegories for natural phenomena, such as the passage of the seasons of the year and the Sun's apparent annual journey through the heavens along the ecliptic as it passes through the twelve constellations of the Zodiac. To me, it seems obvious that the well-known stories of the Bible are among "the greatest stories ever sold"!

The adaptive use of earlier mythologies in the creation of new holy book stories might be seen as a source of hope that current day religions will likewise be able to evolve into accepting unifying understandings that are more transcendent. Maybe they will begin to more outspokenly honor crucial natural needs, and thereby enable us to collectively actualize a resurrection of hope and respect for vital natural ecosystems. What we need today is a new form of belief in a resurrection, but instead of a belief in the rebirth of a legendary deity that has died, we need a belief in a global renewal in which antiquated and destructive old ways of thinking and behaving are replaced by wiser, more fair-minded, and more ecologically intelligent ways of seeing and acting.

One of the main problems with all established religions is their inflexibility. When better understandings arise, religious authorities tend to stubbornly oppose these more realistic ways of seeing and being in the world. Established religions consecrate and glorify their own version of explanations for "Creation", and then when more accurate knowledge comes to light, they can be left stranded with absurdly antiquated antediluvian stories as the flimsy foundations of their supposed absolute truths.

Anchored to archaic dogma, and unwilling to admit the truth of more modern insights into the nature of the physical universe and evolutionary change, the central tenets of established religions can become outmoded, and domineering religious authorities often have an inherently reactionary and socially undesirable character. Some, like Cardinal Ratzinger before he became Pope Benedict XVI, want to put a ruthless 'smackdown on heresy'. Such attitudes contribute to repressive social and political stances that too frequently oppose progress toward a fairer and more enlightened and safer world.

Our collective salvation almost certainly depends on more accurate conceptions in our fore-thought, so political leaders and institutions that stand in the way of better understandings threaten our well-being, social cohesion and survival. As global challenges mount, precautionary planning and new approaches to helping ensure fairness, public well-being and sustainability are becoming ever more urgently needed.

The Dalai Lama succinctly states the obvious: "Regardless of different personal views about science, no credible understanding of the natural world, or our human existence, can ignore the basic insights of theories as key as evolution and relativity and quantum mechanics."

The Evolutionary Stages of Understanding

Divine feminine deities began to be overthrown by more war-like male gods in almost every culture about 4,000 years ago. Many influences have been supposed to explain this dethroning of female deities. When agrarian settlements were invaded by warring barbarians who worshipped domineering male gods, this may have been one causative factor. The creation of private property and inheritance through male offspring, which are associated with farming practices, may have been responsible in part for the shift to honoring male gods instead of female goddesses. Wealth generated from agricultural surpluses may have stimulated ruthlessness of competition.

Another provocative explanation for the overthrow of the divine feminine is that shifts in perceptions of reality occurred after alphabets and writing were invented and literacy became widespread in cultures around the world.

These changes caused drastic shifts from the feminine-honoring, image-oriented, holistic right hemisphere of the brain to the male-oriented and word-dominated values of the left brain. This was a physical shift in the way our brains function. More ideas about this remarkable change are explored below in an introspection into the insightful theories articulated by the late neurosurgeon Dr. Leonard Shlain.

People naturally hunger to make sense of the world. Every society in history has used creation stories they have invented to explain the presence of the physical universe and the mysteries of being, as well as the reasons for existential conundrums like misfortune and death and 'evil'. It is illuminating to see the bigger context of the development of these ideas.

There have been Five Stages in the Ontology of Existence, similar to Auguste Comte's "Law of Three Stages". The earliest explanations for everything in the Universe were 'animistic'; all life forms and physical things and natural phenomena were conceived of as having intangible souls. This conception was born of intimate associations with the natural world and anthropomorphic projections and superstitious interpretations of things perceived. These common animistic beliefs were promulgated and promoted by shamans and other 'holy men' and 'holy women'.

In the second stage, animism evolved into a more concrete attribution of "divine being" in which a polytheistic pleonasm of deities was worshipped as the rulers over all phenomena. A rich body of mythology developed like that which reached its pinnacle in marvelous anthropocentric Greek and Roman mythologies. Pagan priests and mystics and oracles interpreted these gods and goddesses and other deities to common folk.

In the third stage of the evolution of explanations, storytellers and self-professed prophets embellished these mythic concepts. Hopes, fears, vivid dreams and megalomaniacal imaginings inspired a plethora of such prophets. Each claimed to speak for some divine being. Eventually this constellation of mythological goddesses and gods finally congealed into a more sophisticated speculation that there is only one God. Eureka! This monotheistic epiphany was swaddled in deep hopes and fears, and packaged into tidy doctrinaire explanations. Eventually such dogmas and accompanying creation stories were canonized and given the status of certitude.

Believers in a new monotheistic God, and even those who doubted, were intimidated by being told that they would spend all of eternity in either one or the other of two kinds of "afterlife" -- either a perfect one or a colossally terribly one. Those who questioned the veracity of religious dogmas were regarded as heretics or infidels, and were told they would burn and suffer in a nasty place called Hell if they did not accept the new beliefs. Centuries ensued during which these doctrines became established. Then for a thousand years of persecutions and crusades in the Western world, it became dangerous to contradict the powerful clerics in Church establishments that enforced their dogmas with Inquisitions and the burning of women at the stake and other heinous activities. Corruption within established churches led to occasional periods of 'reformation', but the domineering stance of religious authorities ensured that conflict would rage, and that intolerance of others would become a serious problem in many regions.

As the human race learned more and more about Nature, biology, physics and cosmology, new metaphysical abstractions evolved that theoretically elucidated the workings of the world. They did this in an insightful yet curiously perplexing manner. This fourth stage in ways of explaining existence attracted many deep thinkers and philosophers over a period of more than 2,500 years. It is fascinating to study even an abbreviated summary of all the philosophical speculations that were conjured up. Roget's Thesaurus contains more than 140 different forms or trains of thought in philosophy, ranging from agnosticism to Epicureanism to utilitarianism to vitalism.

Most philosophers thought deeply about existence, but they were often so enveloped in established convictions and conventional wisdom that their ideas and arguments may today seem bizarre and even foolish. The famous German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz, for instance, had studied the more-or-less miraculous nature of the astoundingly providential parameters of physics and mathematics on Earth, and consequently postulated that "this is the best of all possible worlds." But he appears to have really made a big stretch to reach this conclusion, by conforming his thoughts to the belief in the existence of a beneficent and perfect God.

Circumstances have a way of undermining absurd theories, so when a powerful offshore earthquake killed thousands of the faithful while they were demonstrating their pious devotion to God in churches on All Saints' Day

in Lisbon, Portugal on November 1, 1755, the speculations of Gottfried Leibniz took on an absurd aspect, and philosophical optimism was appropriately ridiculed. Voltaire wrote his famous short story *Candide* to satirize the preposterousness of this perspective in that age.

The fifth stage overlapped with these developments. Scientific understandings had begun to come into their own before the days of Aristotle, and especially in the past 200 years. Scientists have found extensive evidence about the physical unfolding of the Universe, and the evolving genetic cellular nature of all forms of life on Earth. Physical relationships described by scientific disciplines of mathematics, astronomy, biology, chemistry and physics may seem almost as arcane to most people as ghosts or angels or the flight mechanics of Santa's reindeer, yet they describe fascinating aspects of the way things actually are. "Reality -- what a concept!"

Our modern bias toward reason and analysis discredits the shamanistic, the 'pagan', and the doctrinal nature of established religions. But we might be wise to give a greater measure of respect to the spiritual nature of our deepest inner selves. Our spiritual selves and our right-brain intuitions recognize valuable modes of making sense of the world -- and of appreciating it. The Enlightenment Era philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau exalted instinct and feeling above intellect and reason, and though this is sometimes a crazy approach, we should not overly discount the important ways that images, intuitions, metaphors, myths, parables and emotions shape our perceptions and understandings of the world. We are well advised to cultivate a better balance between the feminine wisdom associated with the right brain and the cold logic of more masculine values associated with the analytical left brain.

An Aside on the Perspectives of Mark Twain

My great-grandfather Mark Twain, as revealed in *Happy Harbingers in Good Ideas for a Better Future*, was sometimes outrageous in his irreverence for sacred cows like Gilded Age concentrations of wealth, and imperial national ambitions, and pious religious pretensions. His observations were astute, and often rang true. His wife Livy helped him edit his writings to make sure he wasn't too irreverent when it came to his drawling ridicule of things like upper class hubris, absurd religious dogmas and hypocritical sanctimoniousness.

When Mark Twain wrote his scandalously sacrilegious book, *Letters from the Earth*, he was unwilling to have it published until after he died. Apparently he had concerns similar to those of Charles Darwin, who had been afraid to reveal his understandings of the biological evolution of life, because back in those days in the mid-19th century, believing in the Bible was almost socially mandatory among people of his class in British society. Mark Twain's daughter Clara Clemens, in her turn, worked to prevent the publication of *Letters from the Earth* for many decades after his death, due to its humorously skeptical, controversial and iconoclastic views of religion.

Mark Twain's observations about the Christian Bible in *Letters from the Earth* were humorously derisive and genially scathing. He wrote that the Bible contains "... some clever fables; and some blood-drenched history; and some good morals; and a wealth of obscenity; and upwards of a thousand lies." Sometimes he went beyond sardonic irreverence and was downright cynical in lampooning human belief, pride, ambitions, frauds, contradictions, eccentricities, tyrannies and foolish hypocrisies.

"Humor must not professedly teach, and it must not professedly preach, but it must do both if it would live forever."

--- Mark Twain

It's not nice to make fun of anyone's cherished beliefs, but good satire does have constructive purposes. Satirical humor can be used critically to focus the bright light of incisive perspective on vital issues. This illumination can stimulate us to realize that human undertakings or habitual behaviors or political malfeasance or institutional propensities could, and should, be altered in ways designed to have positive impacts. Good satire seeks not only to tear down but also "to inspire a remodeling". Few can deny that our nation and world are in critical and urgent need of a big measure of creative and intelligent remodeling!

Satire shines a bright spotlight on human vices and follies, and uses irony and humor to ridicule, criticize and scorn such foibles and failings and misdeeds. Of all the vices and follies, hypocrisy and the violation of honorable principles previously pronounced inviolate are among the worst, especially in consequential matters.

The harms humankind is causing to wildlife and habitats on planet Earth is facilitated by religious worldviews that instruct mankind to "fill the earth and subdue it", and to have dominion over all other forms of life. To have any hope, in the long term, of supporting the 8 billion people alive today, and further increases to 10 billion people that are projected to occur not long after the year 2050, we need to find much better ways of conserving energy and water resources, and of protecting the environmental commons and biological diversity. We should seek ways to scrupulously avoid the rash depletion of the Earth's providential resources. And we should find ways to mitigate the damages we are wreaking on entire ecosystems.

It is common sense to understand that we will drastically undermine the well-being of our own kind if we continue to drive a significant portion of other species of life to extinction. Almost 70% of the populations of wild animals on Earth have been wiped out since 1970, according to analysis in the Living Planet Reports by the World Wildlife Fund and the Zoological Society of London. It could not possibly be a good plan to forsake life by refusing to take effective steps to alter this lethal trajectory!

Humanity's very survival depends on viewing history and the future from a clear-eyed perspective. Our survival depends on cultivating new worldviews that recognize trends and the lessons of history and their implications. In light of this clearer perspective, we can still honor the myths, symbols, mystery and understandings that offer us emotional meaning, wisdom and guidance. Prometheus, god of foresight, save us!

I feel passionately that we need to devote much more collaborative intention and committed energy to addressing the biggest challenges we collectively face. We need to give more honest scrutiny to global problems and long term considerations, and engage in more constructive efforts to deal with them with civility and common purpose and effective action.

We need everyone to be on board in this overarching endeavor -- especially including the tiny fraction of people who own half of the world's wealth and thus have a substantial monopoly on the means to help provide financing to accomplish greater good goals. Possessing great wealth is inextricably accompanied by real responsibilities to others. These vitally important goals include on-going commitments to preventing disease pandemics, cleaning up the terrible toxic messes we are making, protecting the environmental commons, creating a healthier sustainable economy, preventing the externalizing of costs and risks onto society and people in the future, altering the regressively structured Santa Claus Tax Cuts debt swindles that are so burdening our heirs, ensuring that the social safety net is more secure, encouraging lifelong education, fostering peace, and investing in undertakings designed to rapidly move our societies toward at least somewhat more sustainable uses of resources.

Reasons for Religious Strife

All the various established religions compete for adherents, in a sense. The pool of people who might want to convert to a new set of religious beliefs is small. This is one reason religious authorities dogmatically encourage their faithful flock to reproduce with a self-serving urgency. It is just much easier to inculcate children with beliefs when they are young and gullible and their brains are still malleable, rather than trying to convert them later in life to beliefs in myth-like stories and suspiciously improbable absolute certainties.

When a main feature of religious competition for adherents involves supremacism and intolerance, the outcome can be harmful for humanity as a whole. As the reactionary wings of global religions like Islam, Christianity and Mormonism fight for dominance here in the 21st century, this strife has become a danger to the survival of the larger group -- our species as a whole. Now is the time for us to cultivate our cooperative natures, and to better control alpha male impulses and exert a civilized control over excessively aggressive drives and greedy impulses.

The phrase "fishers of men" in Matthew 4:19 is one of the most well-known lines in the entire New Testament, and it is the most important metaphor for evangelical zealotry. But there is a provocative question about what this phrase originally meant. At the time New Testament Gospels were written, Roman legions were fighting Jewish rebels in the Holy Land who had revolted due the impoverishment of the Jews under a heavy burden of Roman taxation. The historian Josephus wrote in *The Jewish War* about this incredibly bloody war that took place between the Romans and the Jews. Early in the conflict, Romans vanquished Galilee in the north and killed or sold into slavery an estimated 100,000 Jews. Naval skirmishes took place on the Sea of Galilee in which Jews were

killed by Romans who fished for the men whose boats had been sunk, using swords and spears in the waters of the sea. This sense of fishing for men is a grotesque contrast to the allegorical use of this phrase for saving souls by means of the evangelical spreading of "good news" of Jesus as savior!

The false god personified as Mammon is preoccupied with riches and avarice and material gain. We should not allow Mammon impulses to remain so dominant in our societies. Similarly, extreme religious fundamentalism like that demonstrated by ayatollahs in Iran and the right wing of American religious establishments is unacceptable when it threatens true justice, the general welfare, domestic tranquility and world peace.

Now is the time to foster more farsighted sensibilities. We urgently need to find better ways to help ensure the survival of our entire social group. Now is the time for a cultural leap forward. We cannot afford to allow reactionary factions to prevail. Now is the time not only to protect basic ecological underpinnings of our well-being, but also for all nations to commit to a Bill of Rights for Future Generations to guide our societies and ensure that we do not drive ourselves to really desperate straits -- or a cataclysmic extinction.

Here is another aspect of religiosity that we should be more aware of. Richard Francis Burton was an amazingly adventurous Brit who learned more than two dozen languages, and was one of the most knowledgeable men ever about the various religions of the world. He is one of the few non-Muslims ever in history to become a Haji journeying to Mecca and its very religious heart at the monumental square black cube of the Kaaba. Burton notably scorned the idea that any true believers actually exist. "The more I study religions," he wrote, "the more I am convinced that man never worshipped anyone but himself." Burton's story is conveyed in the fascinating book *River of the Gods: Genius, Courage, and Betrayal in the Search for the Source of the Nile*.

The propensity toward religious belief has been nurtured by shamans and holy men and priests from time immemorial. This tendency has been exploited and abused by religious authorities in more modern church establishments. Many types of authorities have abused the power of their influence for selfish purposes, but those who deserve the most severe condemnation are those who unempathetically exploit and harm vulnerable people. Those who commit thefts and financial frauds are reprehensible, and so are priests who have breached the trust of the faithful by sexually molesting boys and girls. Remedial action, all around!

Jesus Was NOT a Conservative!

The most important question for us today is, "What should we do now?" But for best understandings of where we should be headed, it is a good plan to see the clearest perspective of where we stand in the big picture, and how this state of affairs happened to have come about. After all, the proper resolution of a problem often lies in knowing the seeds of its genesis. I feel strongly that good fair-minded understandings are the first step toward realizing truly fair and farsighted national policies. This belief leads me back to a towering figure in the collective imagination of people in the Western world: Jesus Christ!

The historical man Jesus was a poor Jewish laborer from Nazareth in Galilee, a region in ancient Palestine. Jesus opposed the ruthless Roman occupation of his homeland, and he courageously spoke out against the power-abusing priestly class of the Temple in Jerusalem. Many of the establishment priests in Jerusalem were well-to-do, partially because of their collaboration with Roman authorities and the moneychangers in the Temple. Jesus championed the interests of poor people and the downtrodden, and said that uncompassionate rich people had little chance of getting into Heaven. By speaking out in defiance of authorities, he risked his life, just like many other religious zealots had done who roamed Palestine back in those tumultuous times.

Ironic and bizarre developments have taken place in the USA today in the name of this Jewish revolutionary. Both evangelical fundamentalists and Christian Dominionists have thrown their lots in with power-abusing demagogic politicians and economic fundamentalists and religious authorities to champion the interests of rich people. How could this outrageous and blasphemous betrayal of Jesus' message and principles have come to be?

Though Jesus was a revolutionary during the first decades of the first century CE, the Bible anomalously says he preached that the faithful should love thy neighbor and turn the other cheek when affronted. This treatment was, of course, strictly for people who were part of the in-group of his Jewish kin. The same God he preached about called for stoning to death anyone who "has served other gods", and this God reputedly brought terrible

adversities upon non-Jews like the Egyptians in the Exodus story, and 'He' also called for everlasting punishment of 'sinners' who disobey 'His' commandments. And this God condemned, to a life in eternal hell, anyone who committed the ultimate sin of not believing the tall tales in the Bible.

Historians and scholars who have studied the era of the Jewish Revolt against the century-long Roman occupation of their homeland give us an astonishing perspective. They theorize that the early Christians who wrote the canonized gospels of the New Testament had been forced to distance themselves from the Jewish independence movement that Roman legion troops crushed ruthlessly in the Jewish War from 66 CE to 70 CE. They realize that the disciple Mark in his Gospel, for instance, tried to erase any hint of revolutionary radicalism or violence or zealotry from the story of Jesus. The Jews who followed Jesus, after the messiah had become a pariah, found it expedient to portray Jesus as a pacifist preacher of good works, rather than a fierce Jewish nationalist.

Scholarly writer Reza Aslan says in his compelling book *Zealot* that Mark, Matthew, Luke and John had very good reasons to tell a patently fictitious story in their New Testament Gospels. He posed the question why these four apostles absolved the Jew-loathing Roman governor Pontius Pilate of blame for Jesus' crucifixion, and instead blamed the Jews for Jesus' death. He concluded that it was because the Christian evangelical movement had shifted from Jewish Palestine to Greek and Roman cities around the Mediterranean by the time the Gospels were written, so this betrayal of Jews by early Christians makes sense in the aftermath of the utter annihilation of the Jews who had revolted against the merciless hegemony of Roman emperors and legions, and corruption and venality in the priestly ranks.

"John then adds one final, unforgivable insult to a Jewish nation that, at the time, was on the verge of a full-scale insurrection, by attributing to them the most foul, the most blasphemous piece of pure heresy that any Jew in first-century Palestine could conceivably utter. When asked by Pilate what he should do with 'their king', the Jews reply, 'We have no king but Caesar.' (John 19: 1-16)."

"Thus, a story concocted by Mark strictly for evangelistic purposes to shift the blame for Jesus' death away from Rome is stretched with the passage of time to the point of absurdity, becoming in the process the basis for two thousand years of Christian anti-Semitism." *Good God, Christians!*

There is a big problem with fervent beliefs that hold holy book stories to be literally true. Such beliefs have too often in history been used to justify prejudices, discrimination, hate, oppression, pogroms, genocides and wars. And such beliefs have been used to rationalize atrocities, as terrorist attacks by Islamic extremists have made shockingly evident in recent years.

"I DEMAND THE RELIGIOUS FREEDOM", reads the text superimposed above a photo of Supreme Court Justice Amy Coney Barrett, "TO IMPOSE MY RELIGIOUS BELIEFS ON YOU." There is a sad and objectionable truth to this perspective on haughty religious offensives in our society, and in our courts. "There are three branches of government," Your Lifelong Augustness, "and your church is NOT one of them!"

I feel strongly that we must begin to transcend religious strife and shift our focus so that we take into account more important things, and recognize the real costs of violent conflicts, militarism and policies that exacerbate injustices and discriminatory biases. We cannot cannot cannot continue to ignore problems of resource depletion, pollution and excessive emissions of climate-destabilizing greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. We must implement farsighted energy policies that wean ourselves from our addictions to burning fossil fuels.

Entrenched interests like oil and coal conglomerates must be dis-entrenched, and we must rein in companies like Exxon that have known for decades that their profit-making will result in terribly high costs. Their power to corrupt our politics is unacceptable. Their blatant profiteering during times of anger-provoking high inflation is treacherous greed.

Every crisis is accompanied by danger and opportunity. The best investments in history are those right now that we should be making in policies that protect people from contagious pandemics and extremes of inequality and ecologically insane activities.

Great returns will also be reaped by investing in democracy, strongly supporting it by strengthening voting rights and making elections fairer, and by responsibly requiring greater accountability and better transparency. We must

demand that our political representatives act more honorably by serving as a strong check-and-balance against public corruption.

Controversy in the Service of the Greater Good: The Greatest Deception in World History

Having read *Zealot, The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*, it got me to thinking again about how Jesus must have been a revolutionary who opposed the Roman occupiers of his homeland and the corrupt priests of the Temple in Jerusalem. Another even more startling hypothesis about Jesus is provided by the scholar Joe Atwill in his book *Caesar's Messiah - The Roman Conspiracy to Invent Jesus*. Just imagine how astonished Mark Twain would have been to discover this stunning perspective. There is somewhat convincing evidence that reveals the likelihood that the Gospels in the New Testament were actually re-written by authorities in the Roman Empire.

Some scholars even believe they have found proof that Jesus may not have been a real historical character. Jesus, they say, may actually have been a fabrication of Roman propaganda. This possibility that Jesus may never have existed as a real live person, and was not a flesh and blood Son of God on Earth, will strike many of the faithful as radical heresy. Regardless, there is no doubt that Jesus exists today in the minds of many more people than were alive on the entire planet in the first century CE, and that the idea of his existence has become a central tenet in the lives, self-identities, worldviews and hopes of many millions of people. Let us salute the positive aspects of those beliefs. (And be honestly aware of their negative aspects.)

"And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."

--- Corinthians 13:13

New research has found a substantial likelihood that much of the Gospels in the New Testament were written by Roman authorities and their collaborators in about 70 CE. This was 40 years after the supposed crucifixion of Jesus on a cross and his legendary resurrection after death. The primary collaborators involved in this literary creation were the Jewish Roman historian Josephus and the families who collected taxes for Rome in Judea (the Herods) and in Egypt (the Alexanders). This possibility would help explain why Jesus recommended in Matthew 22:21 that the people of Judea obediently pay taxes to the imperial Roman rulers: "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's".

This surprising historical research is extensively explored in Joe Atwill's compelling book, *Caesar's Messiah - The Roman Conspiracy to Invent Jesus*. Caesar was the title of every Roman emperor, not just the individual Julius Caesar who ruled long before the Gospels were written. Joe Atwill points out that Roman emperors had a powerful vested interest in subduing religious people who opposed Roman hegemony, so they conspired to add new testaments to the Bible to create a peace-embracing Messiah who advocated that disciples turn the other cheek and love their enemies. This new Messiah was devised to help Romans control and manipulate the populace in far-flung reaches of their empire without having to rely so heavily on costly military efforts to suppress rebellions.

The biblical character Jesus suspiciously happened to live out some of the stories from earlier pagan religions that featured a deity born of a virgin mother and then dying and being resurrected three days later. Jesus, it turns out, resembles a composite of many Messianic leaders of the time. The stories about Jesus never describe what he looked like as an individual, and they are couched in a literary creation that fulfills Old Testament prophecies. And complex hidden codes known as "typologies" are embedded in the written text. Remember that none of the biblical scriptures are contemporaneous with the events they describe, and that every part of the Bible has been subject to many revisions by later authors and various religious authorities over the centuries.

One thing is highly probable: Jesus Christ did not exist as a divine being that people imagine him to have been, not any more than God exists as a deity who loves us and actually intervenes in our lives. God is not a moralizing and easily angered being, and 'He' is not all but impatiently waiting to judge each of us upon our own individual deaths. It seems that many conservatives who hold such beliefs suppose that God has already judged us all in this life, and rewarded the worthy with wealth and social privilege, and the unworthy with their more challenging financial lots in life. These are transparently biased, overwrought, discrimination-enabling rationalizations!

According to Joe Atwill, the status of Jesus as the Son of God suspiciously parallels the circumstances of the Roman Emperor Vespasian and his son Titus. The Romans purportedly concocted this sophisticated tale to more

persuasively convince the populace that the father Vespasian was divine, and his son Titus was the son of God. These stories were manipulative propaganda propagated focused on usurping the Christian religion, and implanting a new pro-Roman, revolt undermining and more benign set of religious precepts on Jews in ancient Palestine, in the persona of this peace-loving, turn-the-other-cheek Messiah.

In this shrewdly manipulative political re-writing of the Bible, new testimonies were appended to Old Testament scriptures that claimed Jesus was anointed as the true Messiah, as had been foretold in the Old Testament. Many Messianic prophets seemed to have been wandering around the Holy Land in those unrest-filled days of old. The Hebrew term Messiah is the same as the Greek term Christ, and both of them mean "anointed". It is provocative to realize that the Old Testament had been written between about 900 BCE and 150 BCE, long before Jesus was supposed to have lived, so the Bible ostensibly had been ripe for centuries to have a manipulative sequel written that featured the appearance of a long-awaited anointed one.

A notable aspect of human nature is the drive to control and dominate others. Long before Niccolo Machiavelli, one of history's most famous political scientists, had written his best-known book *The Prince*, mankind had been smitten by ruthless ambitions of master manipulators, including those of egomaniacs, scheming despotic tyrants and domineering religious authorities. This Roman propaganda in the Gospels of the New Testament is a fascinating synthesis of Judaism and pagan beliefs, and the Romans saw to it that this new story formed a new set of religious doctrines in Christianity.

Not only did Romans succeed in using religion as a kind of early opiate administered to gullible people, sometimes forcibly, but they also made wholesale use of the mythologies, rituals, symbols, paraphernalia and cosmic events of pagan religions in the founding scriptures and structure of the Roman Catholic Church itself. Roman emperors thus cleverly satisfied their need to more easily control the populace in their extensive empire, and particularly in the turmoil-roiled Holy Lands. This helped them save on future costs of military suppression, because such costs had been very high when Roman legions slaughtered the Zealots in military campaigns between 66 CE and 70 CE.

The Romans had originally conquered Judea in 63 BCE. Judea was the western part of the famous Fertile Crescent, a broad swath of land that corresponds roughly to today's territories of Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Jordan. More than 120 years after the Romans had first conquered this region, when the Jewish revolt against Roman despotism began in 66 CE, Nero and his commander Vespasian brutally repressed the rebels. Then Nero died in 68 CE, and Vespasian became the Roman Emperor, and his son Titus slaughtered the remaining religious rebels, and finally completely destroyed the Second Jewish Temple in Jerusalem after a long siege in 70 CE.

According to historians, Nero's rule is associated with excessive spending, entertainment extravagances and dastardly tyranny, so he may have been one of the original "après-moi le deluge" kings. The emperor Nero was the last of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, a line of Roman rulers that had begun with Julius Caesar and included Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula and Claudius. It was during Nero's reign that a Great Fire took place in Rome in 64 CE, and Nero was said to have "fiddled while Rome burned". During this period, wars were bankrupting Nero's empire and there were widespread political struggles, and corruption and a struggling economy, and serious religious conflicts. (Sounds a little like today, eh? Once again, NOW is the time for new and more auspicious and spiritually enlightened religious stories. And more honest and responsible authorities, and fairer national policies!)

Vespasian was the first ruler of the Flavian dynasty that succeeded the line of Julio-Claudian emperors in Rome. Vespasian and his son Titus conspired, according to Joe Atwill's theory, to have a back-dated story written in the Gospels about a divine father and son, in order to legitimize their own claims of divinity. This story was designed to give credence to the idea that this original Flavian duo was actually God and his son. It is a historic irony that this story has become a tale almost 2,000 years later that contends a supernatural divinity exists who gave his divine virgin-born son as a sacrifice for mankind's sins. And look! -- the narrative talks about our ancestral wrongdoing in the Garden of Eden (the first woman Eve's fault!), which has caused so much suffering, and so many waves of guilt and shame to wash across us like searing baptisms by fire.

"Apotheosis" is a term that describes the glorification of a person by elevating them to the level of divinity. The deification of a subject raises them from being a mere mortal to having a stature like that of a god. Holy Christian apotheosis may have started out as a kind of hero cult worship in Classical Greece. Later Roman emperors liked to

deify their predecessors after they died to give them greater legitimacy and glory, and to secure a rosier personal regard for themselves after they in turn would die. A humorous political satire by Seneca the Younger titled *The Pumpkinification of (the Divine) Claudius* ridiculed the apotheosis of the limping, partially deaf and initially inexperienced emperor Claudius. Satire surely does sometimes have easy and deserving targets!

(According to Wikipedia, Claudius actually was "an able and efficient administrator", and he helped put Rome on a saner course "after the excesses of Caligula's rein.")

Deified men were posthumously awarded the title *Divus* -- and *Diva* for females! -- to signify their divinity. Traditional Roman religion often distinguished between a "real god" and a *Divus*, who was a mortal that had become divine by deification. Christian doctrine portrays Jesus as part of a pre-existing God who undertook mortal existence. This conception represents a creative new twist on this process of deification that stands in contrast to previous tales of mortal beings who were accorded divinity only after death.

Throughout history, kings have tried to adopt a cloak of having "divine rights". This doctrine was so self-serving that it is astonishing anyone actually believed that some monarch derived his or her right to rule directly from the will of God. Then again, it was no doubt exceedingly dangerous to speak out in disbelief or denial -- for speaking truth to power can be doggone dangerous!

Toward the end of the Age of Enlightenment in Europe, it was King Louis XV of France who saw the writing on the wall and observed, "Après moi, le deluge." Sure enough, after many years of despotic rule and debauchery in his court, and after bankrupting financial policies and high taxes on the peasantry, the flood figuratively did come with the French Revolution in 1789. The grandson of King Louis XV was the ruler by this time, and the extent that divine privilege was preposterous had been so clearly exposed that a few brave souls finally stood up and figuratively declared, "The king has no clothes!" The autocratic rule of King Louis XVI was then overthrown, and he became the only king of France ever to be executed. His head was lopped off by a guillotine in January 1793.

But I digress. Perhaps there is Good News in the understanding that Jesus may not actually have existed at all as a real historical character. The good news is that there would be one less barbaric black mark on humanity's trail of tears and suffering, if the image of Jesus having been nailed on a cross were merely part of an epic grifting ruse.

But make no mistake about it; plenty of crucifixions took place back in those barbaric days, just as there have been many political assassinations, repressions of dissenters, burnings at the stake, pogroms, genocides and other atrocities that have been visited upon people in the name of gods or in the service of merciless tyrants and their ideologies, or as a result of hateful prejudices. Notably, the specific crime that merited death by being nailed to a cross in ancient Judea was acting as a rebel and fighting against the hegemony of the Roman Empire.

An independent film titled *Caesar's Messiah* has been made from Joe Atwill's book. It can be viewed online right now. It has not yet been widely seen, but it should be, for its conclusions are important. In a world where the human population has increased from 1 billion to 8 billion in only the last 220 years or so, and in which we have used up more resources in the past 100 years than in all the many millennia of history, the needs for us to find ways to coexist peacefully and to compete fairly, and to honor overarching ecological precautionary principles, have become more important than almost anything else. To adapt to rapidly changing demographic challenges and mindless assaults on wildlife and habitats and ecosystems, it is becoming ever-more necessary to find better ways to unite and cooperate together to create a more sane and propitious future.

In considering the provocative book *Caesar's Messiah*, think closely about this idea that Jesus may not have actually existed. The supposition that Jesus may not have really existed is supported by other scholars who have studied the Bible and the Gospels of the New Testament, in contexts of the writings of Josephus and some long-hidden Gnostic codices that were found in Nag Hammadi Valley in upper Egypt in 1945, along with the Dead Sea Scrolls that were discovered between 1947 and 1956.

This book about the Romans, Jews and Jesus is not just a debunking of rigid dogmas of the Christian religion. It contains valuable conclusions that could lead us to devote more energy to work together in the service of greater good goals. The American people live in a free country, and people should be free to believe in whatever God they

like, or whatever prophet, be it Jesus or Muhammad or Mormon -- or angels or the Devil, for that matter. But one of the most dangerous of all threats to the human race is organized and highly-regimented "religion-on-the-march", especially when it is taken so seriously that faithful adherents act out its worst and most intolerant precepts. In this time of ethnocentric strife, and of nationalism and Islamic jihad and a costly militaristic global "war on terror" in reaction, it is madness to allow religions to be the cause of terrorism and preemptive warfare and existential battles and cultural conflicts between intolerant religious folks.

Military aggression and terrorist opposition counter-support each other. They thus give strength to repressive right-wing authorities in Christian and Muslim nations alike. The powerful impetus engendered by this counter-support is used by authority figures like Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini to augment their influence by distracting, controlling and suppressing the populace, and by eliminating subversives who oppose them, and by repressing those who have differing views or who refuse to conform to preachy moralities and dogmatic certitudes -- or yield to supremacist gambits and domineering power. Get rid of "morality police" everywhere!

We cannot allow authoritarians to dominate our freedom-loving societies, or to use harsh tactics to enforce their hegemony. As planet Earth gets more crowded, Golden Rule perspectives need to be honored, and authoritarian church establishments should be rejected when they conflict fanatically, or when they mercilessly discriminate against people or violently assault them in the name of righteousness of their particular religious creeds. We must find ways to defuse tensions caused by drives for supremacy and ethnocentric biases.

The dangers here are manifest. Donald Trump proposed what might have sounded like a real effective strategy -- to him! -- to solve the Islamic State terrorist problem by killing every one of those vile extremists and their families too, and punishing Islamic suspects with waterboarding and other Trump-enhanced harsh interrogation tactics. That's sure to work, isn't it?? -- and if any of them object, we could punish them to the third and fourth generation for the iniquity of their fathers, or some other convenient scheme.

Not to be outdone, Ted Cruz promised during his presidential run in 2016 to solve the Islamic State problem in Syria by carpet bombing the country, and it is almost as if he believes that peace would reign in Syria if only we could kill every Muslim there, sparing only the Christians, who could be protected in a grand and supernatural Passover gesture where the right believers would be spared from the plague of our carpet bombing, perhaps by slaughtering a lamb and using a branch of a hyssop plant to dip into the lamb's blood and smearing it onto the houses of the Christian Syrians, like the good Israelites did on their houses in the Exodus story in Egypt, where marvelous monotheistic righteousness got its start.

God sent plagues upon Egypt to show the people that they should worship the Creator, not the creation. Well, that's an interesting hypothesis! John Gardner, founder of the reform-minded watchdog organization Common Cause, astutely observed, "Political extremism involves two prime ingredients: an excessively simple diagnosis of the world's ills, and a conviction that there are identifiable villains back of it all."

It is irksome that people like Ted Cruz arrogantly belittled President Obama for having been weak because he tried to end George W. Bush's military occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq. Cruz found it inadequate that President Obama had only been selective in his bombing in Syria. Scheming politicians like Cruz almost make you miss that Obama-trash-talking smart-alecky Marco Rubio, who parroted the hateful sentiments of the angry extreme partisans in the Republican echo chamber in asserting that the black man in the White House was responsible for every social ill and economic woe that existed -- despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary, and despite the contributory sabotage of Republican politicians in the House and Senate.

"The strength of democratic societies relies on their capacity to know how to stand firm against extremism while respecting justice in the means used to fight terrorism."

--- Tariq Ramadan

Benazir Bhutto, a former Prime Minister of Pakistan, gave a provocative warning: "Extremism can flourish only in an environment where basic governmental social responsibility for the welfare of the people is neglected. Political dictatorship and social hopelessness create the desperation that fuels religious extremism."

Maajid Nawaz, a British activist and founder of a counter-extremism think tank, provides another compelling

caution: "As people's opportunities to succumb to confirmation bias increases online -- only seeking out information that confirms their prejudices -- ignorance, extremism and close-mindedness have continued to rise unabated."

A greater clarity concerning the historical facts surrounding religious myths may be important for us to recognize deeper truths. We should strive to honor truer spiritual impulses that offer us the greatest wisdom, and simultaneously strive to avoid being blinded by manipulative doctrines. We can no longer afford to allow religious rationalizations to condone damages to planet Earth's habitats and ecosystems. We can no longer accept interpretations of myths that justify ecological harms like the ones that say the Genesis story in the Bible tells humanity to subdue the earth and have dominion over all other forms of life. Religious leaders should clearly communicate the overarching necessity for us to protect creation, and to demonstrate a more expansive and proper stewardship of the natural world. Kudos to Pope Francis for his efforts in this regard.

One of my goals in this manifesto is to convince readers of the vital value of principles of ecological intelligence in our communities, cultures and countries -- and for the global populace as a whole. Appropriately, I know that it is a poor plan to alienate anyone by setting forth ideas that are overly controversial, for we are all in this existence together. In the largest scheme of things, we all share the same common good goals, and need to find better ways to collaborate together to actualize them.

Significant aspects of the greater good can be found in more broadly actualized well-being and in better opportunities for the majority of people to flourish. Social well-being requires civil measures that help reduce health risks and economic inequities, and mitigate stresses and minimize conflicts between people in different social classes. The greater good really can be extensively described, as I have done comprehensively in *The Common Good, Properly Understood*. The propriety in these understandings comes not from dogma or strict ideologies, or orthodoxy, or agendas with ulterior motives and discriminatory biases, but from open-minded and honest evaluation, and enlightened thinking, and a dedication to purposes consistent with our collective well-being.

Controversy attracts attention, and can create motivating energies, for better or for worse. The big picture understandings herein represent a flourishing forest of trees of the Knowledge of the Greater Good. In the Bible, when Adam and Eve ate from the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, God got really angry at their disobedience. Supposedly God was exceedingly jealous and did not want mankind to somehow become immortal by being familiar with the divine Pandora's Box knowledge of good and evil. This allegory is a means of setting up the doctrine of original sin, and of absolute deontological good and evil, in order to establish the idea that "those who obey God and follow his path shall be rewarded with everlasting life in Heaven, and those who disobey God and stray away from his path shall be punished in Hell." Believe, or else suffer for ever and ever! What's with that?

Some people who believe the Bible contains literal truths assert that the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is an actual type of tree. Oh, sure! This is transparently a symbolic tree representing moral knowledge and guidance, not immortal prerogative. Good grief -- Let's not be stupid! This story has been used as a naked ploy to establish a sublapsarian religious doctrine that asserts God decreed the fall of mankind to create a duty for people to seek salvation by believing this story and professing faith in its dogmas and singing glory be to God and being obedient to the dictates and money appeals of Church authorities. This story in Genesis is nearly as clearly an allegory as the characters in John Bunyan's book *The Pilgrim's Progress*, who are named Christian, Evangelist, Obstinate, Hopeful, Pliable, Goodwill, Hypocrisy, Piety, Faithful, Wanton, Envy, Ignorance and Atheist. These characters journey through places like the City of Destruction, the Slough of Despond, the Valley of the Shadow of Death, Vanity Fair, the Doubting Castle, River of Death and the Celestial City. Literalism of belief, in any case, can be dangerous folly, not just literary flights of fancy!

Reflections on Holy Book Stories

God rested on the seventh day of his biblical Creation, having gone to all the thankless toil and trouble of having spent six days conjuring up light and darkness, the earth and the heavens, the waters and dry land, and grass, herbs and fruit trees, and stars in the heavens that serve "for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years", and the Sun and the Moon, and all manner of living creatures, and fowl and great sea creatures, and beasts of the earth and cattle and creeping things. Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness, and let them have

dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth."

"And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good."

--- Genesis 1:31

Food for thought: Who the heck was God talking to when he said "Let us make man in our image"? Since all Holy Books develop by incorporating many stories and beliefs from prior mythologies, this God of the Bible was in a sense talking to the sophisticated successors of Titan and Olympian gods of the Greek pantheon.

God reputedly rested on the seventh day "from all his work which he had made." There is little time for rest in this modern day and age, so I am going to continue relating some curious perspectives in this epistle. Wisdom counsels us that it is a good plan to occasionally take a day of rest and reflection in our lives. Wallace Stevens once poetically suggested: "Perhaps the truth depends on a walk around a lake". So let's breathe in deeply, and exhale slowly, and appreciatively make an imaginative and Nature-respecting circumambulation around some beautiful body of water in the mind's eye. Pay particular attention for any signs of guidance from the heavens!

In the second chapter of the Bible, God created a garden eastward in Eden for the first man to tend, but told Adam in no uncertain terms that he must not eat from "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil". In this chapter, God also made the first woman from one of Adam's ribs. In the third chapter, a talking snake cajoled the first woman into eating of the fruit of the forbidden tree, despite God's prohibition. The snake told her that "in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil."

The first woman was naturally curious, and this particular tree was apparently to be desired to make one wise, so the woman ate from the tree and gave also unto her husband some fruit to eat. An old joke summarizes the story: "Adam blamed Eve, and Eve blamed the serpent, and the serpent didn't have a leg to stand on!" LOL.

Anger-prone God, in any case, was so upset about the disobedience involved in the fruit eating caper that 'He' cursed all snakes and condemned all human beings forevermore to live in mutual enmity, and made women suffer pain in childbirth, and made it crystal clear that wives must be subservient to husbands -- which can be a very heavy burden for a woman. And 'He' cursed the ground so that all future generations of humankind would be forced to eat of the land and grow herbs and grains for food and bread, amidst thorns and thistles in the field.

By chapter six of the Bible, "God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart. And the LORD said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it repenteth me that I have made them." Shucks -- a divine mistake?

It appears as if this God of the Bible is a fickle God, not a forgiving one, and not one that is just, fair-minded or compassionate. God sent forth a great flood upon the earth for forty days and forty nights to destroy all flesh, except for six-hundred-year-old Noah and his wife and three sons and their wives and two of every kind of beast on Noah's ark, one male and one female of each kind. (And probably a lot of fish, because they aren't generally bothered by floods.) Mark Twain, in *Letters of the Earth*, relates his humorous version of this story:

"The Ark continued its voyage, drifting around here and there and yonder, compassless and uncontrolled, the sport of the random winds and the swirling currents. And the rain, the rain, the rain! It kept on falling, pouring, drenching, flooding. No such rain had been seen before. Sixteen inches a day had been heard of, but that was nothing to this. This was a hundred and twenty inches a day -- ten feet! At this incredible rate it rained forty days and forty nights, and submerged every hill that was four hundred feet high. ... At last the Ark soared aloft and came to rest on the top of Mount Ararat, 17 thousand feet above the valley."

Orthodox folks believe the Bible is literally true and historically accurate. That is quite a leap of faith! In bright contrast, early religious Gnostics viewed the Bible as myth, allegory, morality tale, legend and even poetry. Gnosis is a Greek word that means knowledge. The central belief of Gnostics is that there is knowledge that is superior to blind faith, and independent of it. Imagine that.

Salvation is the big deal in the Bible. The Greek word *soteria* is generally translated as salvation, but it also means deliverance and health, and thus healing. One who offers salvation is like a teacher who offers wholeness and well-being. The early Gnostics believed that there are three types of people: (1) those ensnared in material things; (2) those caught up in intellectual thinking; and (3) those awakened souls who live a life of spirit and soul. An early Gnostic theologian named Valentinus taught his followers that they could attain a divine state of spiritual fullness through *gnosis* (knowledge), while ordinary Christians were caught up in confused thinking and could only attain a lesser form of salvation. Materialistic people, he prejudicially asserted in referring to pagans and Jews, were beyond salvation and doomed to perish. Yikes!

When the treasure trove of early Gnostic scriptures, gospels and treatises was found in the Nag Hammadi valley in Egypt in 1945, this revealing discovery dramatically transformed biblical studies, as explored in *The Genesis Factor*, an article online by Stephen Hoeller, and in Bill Moyers' *Genesis: A Living Conversation*, a ten-part television series. Now known as the Nag Hammadi library, this discovery consisted of a collection of 12 ancient leather-bound papyrus books that had been buried in a sealed jar in a cave. These writings contained more than 50 handwritten Gnostic treatises that had been preserved despite a condemnation of a wide range of gospels and writings by the Christian theologian Bishop Athanasius in 367 CE. This Bishop of Alexandria claimed everything was heresy that was not in strict doctrinal conformity to orthodox views. Athanasius later became known as "the father of orthodoxy". He ordered books to be burned that contained alternate perspectives to the official Bible.

"Where they burn books," the German playwright Heinrich Heine noted in 1821, referring to the burning of the Muslim holy book during the Spanish Inquisition, "so too will they in the end burn human beings." Ironically, Heine's own books were among some 20,000 books burned a century later under the instigation of Adolf Hitler and Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels during the infamous Nazi book burning that took place in May 1933. And sure enough, within 10 years, the Nazis began burning millions of people, most of them Jews, whom they had killed in gas chambers in concentration camps during the Second World War.

The famous psychotherapist Sigmund Freud's books were prominent among those that were burned. Freud quipped, "What progress we are making. In the Middle Ages, they would have burned me. Now, they are content with burning my books." Five years later, in 1938, Freud and his Jewish family saw the writing on the wall, and fled Vienna for good as the terrible dangers of Nazism encroached on Austria.

Republican fervor for book banning in the year 2022 should spark principled opposition, and be roundly rejected, for the greater good.

"From the beginning men used God to justify the unjustifiable."

--- Salmon Rushdie

The orthodoxy of Bishop Athanasius was in the process of being established in the year 325 CE, when the First Council of Nicaea was held. Constantine had convened this council of Christian bishops to promulgate an official version of their creed, and make it into a semi-coherent whole, presumably to cut down on the absurdly unwieldy and prolific diversity of stories and beliefs that characterized early Christianity. The Council had a goal of establishing one specific creed, and to make sure people conformed in professing it, and to exclude those who did not. The council correspondingly created a whole bunch of strict new church laws, known as religious canons.

It is provocative to realize that there were literally hundreds of gospels and epistles during the early years of Christianity. One of the most divisive differences of opinion was whether Jesus was divine and the literal son of God, or instead a figurative son, like many other "sons of God" in the Bible. After having struggled with efforts to resolve wide disagreements for decades, an orthodox version was pronounced that asserted Jesus was definitely divine, and then all other versions and beliefs and speculations were banished.

Orthodox ideas are rather ridiculous in light of much scholarly study and introspective evaluation. Consider the big contrast between narrowly orthodox ideas promulgated by Christian fundamentalists and the more expansive interpretations of people like Valentinus, who almost become Pope in the second century CE. Those who faithfully hew to Christian orthodoxy hold that Jesus was the divine Son of God and the savior of mankind, AND that personal salvation can only be achieved through faithful believing. In contrast, Gnostics believed Jesus is an

archetype and a teacher who can lead a person to salvation through a process of enlightenment, generally through mystical insight. Orthodox believers think Satan is the source of all evil in the world, while Gnostics think that illusion and ignorance themselves lead to many of the things we regard as evil.

Orthodox believers blame Eve as the cause of original sin. To Gnostics, Adam and Eve were not actual historical figures, but representatives of two "intrapyschic principles within every human being". One is the masculine embodiment of psyche, or soul, and the other is the feminine embodiment of pneuma, or spirit. A convincing argument can be made that a greater honoring of feminine spirit and perspectives is needed in modern times. This point of view is viscerally articulated in my essay *A Feminine Vision of an Achievable Better World - Anima Should Reign!*

These concepts are important because creation stories in every culture are frames of reference that help determine the character of societies. Since the most daunting challenges facing humanity today are ecological ones, the time has come for us to commit ourselves to truly striving to ensure that the legacy we leave to future generations will be more likely to be a salubrious one.

"We'd better start saving' up
For the things that money can't buy."

--- Bruce Springsteen

An Interrupting Happenstance

The largest breast cancer charity in the United States cut off funding on January 31, 2012 that had been dedicated to Planned Parenthood clinics for breast cancer screenings. The backlash to this decision by the Susan G. Komen Foundation was strong and immediate, and the charity was forced to reverse its position a few days later, to emphasize that the organization really was committed to helping women. It is women, after all, who have been the biggest supporters of this cancer-fighting cause. Curiously, the Komen Foundation had cut off funding for embryonic stem cell research a year earlier. Both decisions appear to have been politically motivated, due to leadership by Nancy Brinker, Komen's conservative founder, and Karen Handel, its then-new senior vice president for public policy. Karen Handel had run unsuccessfully as a Republican candidate for Governor of Georgia, where she pledged to eliminate funding for cancer screenings provided by Planned Parenthood. She was forced to resign from the Komen Foundation on February 7, 2012 to defuse the bad public relations furor caused by the funding cut announcement.

Women's health should not be a political football. The Susan G. Komen Foundation should recruit only people who are committed to an overarching interest in women's health and well-being. Ultra-conservative people should let up on their staunch opposition to Planned Parenthood, and stop undermining family planning efforts and women's and children's health programs and maternal well-being. Some of our best investments would be those devoted to reducing rates of population growth in developing countries, and helping reduce childhood malnutrition, and addressing the driving influences behind having big families. We should do so by altering the tenets of our winner-takes-all economic system so that it more fairly represents the interests of those who are most seriously insecure and underrepresented.

No one could convince me that continued rapid population growth in the developing world is a good thing for humanity's future prospects. I couldn't be convinced that 9 billion people on Earth in less than 20 years won't involve much more severely depleted resources, shortages of freshwater, diminishing biological diversity and more intense social stresses and conflicts. I couldn't be convinced that it is smart national policy to allow governments to interfere in women's personal decisions about family planning and contraception and their prerogatives to make their own healthcare decisions, and especially a right to choose to have a safe abortion. I couldn't be convinced that it will be a good plan to continue spewing rapidly accumulating amounts of greenhouse gas emissions into Earth's atmosphere every year, causing more extreme weather events and ocean acidification and rising sea levels. I couldn't be convinced that it is smart for us to continue mindlessly damaging ecosystems that sustain us. And I couldn't be convinced that *We the People* should allow extensively corrupt and power abusing Trump Republicans to continue to exert so much political influence.

In the Bible, after "God created man in his *own* image", according to *Genesis 1:27*, God said unto them, "Be fruitful and multiply ...". That was good advice when there were few people on Earth, but now that there are 8 billion people competing for resources and causing significant harm to Creation, circumstances have changed. It is now time for narrowly self-serving religious authorities to alter this decree. Otherwise, we will continue to wreak havoc on the planet and drive untold numbers of species of life to extinction. Any all-knowing and benevolent God would surely change 'His' counsel in these current day circumstances. Inflexible church authorities, please stop opposing family planning programs, contraception, and all abortions!

The stakes in the 2016 national election were very high. Women had a constitutional right to choose to get an abortion ever since the Supreme Court made its historic *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973, but then conservatives illegitimately grabbed control through their treacherous court capture scheme. Reactionary leaders in red states want to criminalize women's choosing to have an abortion, and reduce the choices they have in personal health and reproductive decisions. Republicans seem to feel a deep level of contempt for women's prerogatives, and it is revealing that Trump has a great amount of respect for women only in one regard -- he lusts over sexy babes with alluring cleavage, like his third wife Melania, who is 24 years younger than him.

Maya Angelou once said, "When someone shows you who they are, believe them." When Republicans chip away at women's reproductive rights, we should seriously believe they care more about power and their narrow ideologies than they care about the rights and well-being of members of the female sex!

Criminalizing abortion not only violates Original Choice and women's natural rights, but also has adverse health consequences. A report from the Guttmacher Institute found that restrictive abortion laws do not decrease abortion rates, but instead lead to higher numbers of unsafe abortions. This all too frequently has fatal consequences. During the exceedingly ugly 2016 presidential campaign, Donald Trump admitted that banning abortion would force some women to seek out abortions illegally, but still said, "We have to ban it." His subsequent appointments of anti-choice judges to the federal judiciary and the Supreme Court made this prohibition come true. The truth is, it is a despicable idea to enact inflexible abortion bans, and the best interests of society would be served by protecting every woman's right to choose to have an abortion, at least in the first trimester of a pregnancy.

The egomaniacal Trumpster criticized the Supreme Court's decision in *Roe vs. Wade*, which allowed women to legally get a safe abortion, implying that he would like to see abortions outlawed. And once abortions are illegal, he declared that women getting an abortion should be subjected to "some form of punishment". When candidate Trump was surprised at the backlash to this statement, even from some hard-line conservatives who pretend they care about women's health, he backpedaled and said that it is the doctors who perform abortions who are the ones that should be punished. With regard to the males who get females pregnant in the course of satisfying their sexual drives, Trump makes no suggestion that they should face any consequences at all.

Think about this. Trump claims to believe in a "culture of life", but oddly enough females are not going to have reproductive rights in his Trumpian dystopia, for if a woman becomes pregnant and is not absolutely willing to carry the embryo for nine months, he thinks they should be punished. This is grotesque politicking. What next? Shall we condemn every woman to be responsible for cultivating any and every embryo conceived for the rest of her life?

Criminalizing abortion could send women or doctors to jail. Defunding Planned Parenthood, and otherwise limiting access to abortion and other health programs, is far worse, because history proves that for a variety of reasons, women sometimes will be so desperate to terminate pregnancies that they will seek any available means. When women terminate pregnancies without having access to medical professionals, many of them die. As conservatives across the country enact punitive laws, they will be imposing potentially deadly punishment on women who make the existentially difficult decision to seek an abortion.

Biological Evolution Today

Some say that human beings may be devolving today because weak and unintelligent people and the infirm are reproducing, to too significant an extent, more than the strong, healthy and educated. But this trend is only a momentary blip in the context of geologic time. Evolutionary changes tend to speed up when conditions are

changing more rapidly, and it is indisputable that conditions will change more rapidly in coming decades and centuries as human impacts on the environment and ecosystems and weather patterns intensify, and as habitats are altered and many species are driven to extinction.

Now that it is no longer cool to kill outliers in our societies, or those with genetically undesirable maladies, we have temporarily suspended some of the selective pressures that have always been integral to the evolutionary process. On the other hand, it is enlightening to realize that the effects of civilization itself have significant impacts on evolution. The growth of villages and towns and cities has had the effect of making people more secure than in the days when every one of our ancestors was aware in every moment that they could be eaten by predators at any moment.

Since greater security allows people to feel less anxiety and stress, their nervous systems produce less stress hormones such as adrenaline. This allows people to be calmer, and makes them feel better, and decreases their propensities toward aggression and violence, so it subtly encourages social tendencies to cooperate with others.

Success, in evolutionary terms, is surviving by better adapting to prevailing conditions. The transcendent implications of these understandings are clear: we must collectively act in smarter ways to ensure we achieve greater good goals for our entire social group, *Homo sapiens*. We should demand that our leaders not only reverse the trend toward increasing inequality, but also that they take effective steps to alleviate the desperate stresses associated with healthcare insecurity, high levels of poverty and homelessness, cuts to social safety net programs, too much unemployment and underemployment, and widespread environmental injustices.

A Digression on Dogs

Evolutionary biologists who study the remarkably diverse varieties of "man's best friend" reveal that all dogs are descended from grey wolves in the relatively recent geologic past, like in the past 15,000 years. Dogs now come in an amazingly wide variety of appearances and dispositions, and the process of selection that created such diversity may be correlated with the fact that, as dogs became tamer and more secure around humans, they produced less adrenaline, the stress hormone involved in fight-or-flight impulses. This can have genetic effects on characteristics like skin pigmentation and the shape of ears and tails. Artificial selection and inbreeding have also been contributory factors in the expanding diversity of size, anatomies, temperaments and colors of dogs.

Dogs are ideal companions for human beings because of their genetic inheritance of wolf pack behaviors from their ancestors. Wolf social groups have a dominance hierarchy, and all members of a wolf pack are deferentially loyal to their leaders. This instinctive characteristic made their descendants perfectly adapted to human tendencies to love companions that "suck up" to them with eager and enthusiastic appreciation. This was practically a match made in heaven! Good doggy -- fetch! Roll over! Stand by me.

Lord, help me be the person my dog thinks I am.

--- Philosophically humorous bumper sticker

"Use it or lose it" is an evolutionary axiom. Traits that are not actively maintained by natural selection tend to disappear. Species of fish that live in lightless underground caverns eventually lose their sight. Some birds on isolated islands that had no terrestrial predators, like kiwis and kakapos in New Zealand, lost the ability to fly. Mammals that once lived in trees where a tail was an important appendage gradually lost their tails once they descended from the trees and began to walk upright on the savanna. Each of us has a vestigial tailbone that is a physical remnant of this behavioral change that took place far back in ancient prehistory.

Even within an individual, "use it or lose it" is an operative biological fact. An active brain stays more alert and healthy than an inactive one. Reading, doing crossword puzzles, or playing word games or card games are activities that can help maintain brains in good working order. The neurons of our brains apparently create a greater number of receptive dendrites when they are actively used than when they are allowed to atrophy.

This ability of neurons to generate more connections in response to stimuli, and to change adaptively when challenged, is known as *neuroplasticity*. To improve memory and processes involved in thinking, and to prevent neurodegenerative diseases, it is a good idea to engage in stimulating activities. So, reading is good for your brain. Read on!

Think about This, and the Very Nature of Our Thoughts

The majority of people on Earth belong to the religion and religious denomination into which they were born, and loosely follow the rituals and doctrines of their faith without questioning them much, and often without knowing a lot about the beliefs behind them. Most people are comfortable with the communal, belonging and identification aspects of their religions, deriving identity and feeling a vague reassurance that some mystical Supreme Being may really care about them and their destiny.

Religious people and modern societies have long disparaged primordial shamanism. It does, however, represent a complex and significant expression of the human spirit that has a 'historical pedigree' extending back 30,000 years to the Ice Ages in late Paleolithic times. The shamanic phenomenon has had a remarkable durative power since antiquity, and it has also existed in striking ubiquity across many cultures worldwide. The reasons for this reside deep in our psyches. The roots of our understanding and being are found not only in our experiences, but also in the structure of our brains themselves.

All of our conceptions -- and indeed all our thoughts, ideas, emotions and myths -- spring in part from the way our brains are structured. We all have a kind of 'hard-wiring' that reflects universal dispositions of our minds, or typical images known as archetypes. Carl Jung called the sum total of these richly evocative images the collective unconscious. Myths, religious beliefs and symbols, metaphors, dreams, personas and psychoses are rich mines of archetypes that we inherit as instinctive aspects of our minds. Our perceptions are strongly influenced by these archetypal understandings, so they contribute in a roundabout way to determining our fates.

The highly-accomplished surgeon and author Dr. Leonard Shlain wrote in *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess* about the evolution of the human brain into two specialized lobes. This specialization of the brain as higher thinking functions developed is called "hemispheric lateralization". Scientists have made surprising discoveries in recent years about the various functions of the right brain and the left brain. For instance, the right side of the brain is the ancient part of the brain that is most familiar with the authentic needs and drives that stem from the early stages of human existence. It is the nonverbal hemisphere that generates non-logical feeling states such as love, faith, euphoria, inner peace, mystery, humor and aesthetic appreciation. It operates by recognizing images and integrating feelings, and it resonates with metaphors and intuitions, and relates to myths and parables, and is finely attuned to music. This is the hemisphere of the brain that was revealed to Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor, with astonishing import, in the life-altering experience she describes in her thought-provoking book, *My Stroke of Insight*, and in her TED Talk on the topic.

In contrast, the more recently evolved synapses of the left hemisphere of the brain specialize in reasoning, logic, speech, analytical thinking and abstract ideas. A harmonious balance between these two hemispheres of perception, and their differing ways of interpreting experience, could provide people with more holistic and valuably integrated worldviews. We should honor the spiritual natures of our being, and our drives for spiritual transcendence, by honoring the various ways that we search for deeper levels of awareness and understanding.

The Correlation of Left-Brain Specialization and the Suppression of Female Deities

Dr. Leonard Shlain's intriguing premise in *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess* merits further regard. Dr. Shlain noted that a historic transition took place around 1800 BCE in the nature of creation myths. He postulated that the reason Great Mother Goddesses gave way to patriarchal myths and warrior-like male gods at the time was due in large part to the cultural phenomenon of writing, expanded literacy and associated left-brain dominance.

Here's why. Early writing evolved from rock art, and came in the form of cuneiform ideograms in Mesopotamia more than 5,000 years ago that consisted of more than 600 picture-like characters. At roughly the same time, hieroglyphs were developed in Egypt that used more than 2,000 picture-symbols and complex rules of 'grammar'. These early forms of writing were still partially right-brain ways of seeing the world through suggestive images. Such complex systems made literacy an aptitude and prerogative of only a small fraction of people, who were exceptionally well educated.

When these image-oriented ideas evolved into simpler, more abstract alphabets that had less than 30 letters, they could easily be learned by anyone at a young age, so literacy in words became much more widespread. This caused

profound changes in the nature of how we perceive things, and even in the very structure of our brains because "neurons that fire together, wire together." Left-brained dominance gained power, and abstract thinking became more pronounced in interpreting the world. And concurrently, female deities that had been pictured in statuary and images were overthrown by abstract representations of male gods and their prophets, as conveyed in written words.

The use of alphabets made cuneiform pictographs and hieroglyphics of early civilizations obsolete, and they were figuratively buried by the blowing sands of antiquity. This led to a sea change from the worship of female deities through representative imagery, and resulted in new modes of male God worship in which deities were revealed in written "holy scriptures" that prohibited imagery and idols.

Harsh patriarchal written rules of law almost simultaneously appeared in the historical record. Most famous of these was the Code of Hammurabi, named after a Babylonian chieftain who created the earliest extant code of written laws around 1750 BCE. The Code of Hammurabi prescribed harsh forms of justice, like calling for "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth."

The Code of Hammurabi was also sexist. It treated women as little more than chattel, like slaves. The Code of Hammurabi was instituted around the same time that Babylonian Goddess Tiamat was dethroned in the macabre *Seven Tablets of Creation* story. In this myth, the Great Goddess was violently slain after an epic battle with one of her upstart grandsons Marduk, male god of gale and storm. Leonard Shlain wrote that this story is the most violent and misogynistic of any creation myth ever found in thousands of cultures worldwide. He saw strong correlations in these developments.

Creation myths can be quite entertaining. Marduk's vassal gods complained that their existence was dreary because they lacked worshippers to make them offerings, so Marduk responded by creating mortals to honor the gods submissively. Ha! -- that story provides a surprising motive for why human beings were created!

Early emotive images and intuitive understandings were suppressed when religious beliefs were taken over by the written word in 'holy books'. This is a main reason why the Bible's Ten Commandments featured such strong prohibitions of images of deities -- "idols". The men who wrote the Bible, over a span of many centuries, recognized the importance of repressing *images* from their new belief systems so that people would more cerebrally believe the Written Word that asserts their God is the one and only true God. The new monotheistic male God seems to have had a desperate need to banish pagan deities and earlier beliefs and Mother Earth Goddesses. This must have been a really perplexing early marketing challenge! And the new God wanted to receive offerings, sacrifices and obsequious obedience -- and absolute exclusivity of belief. Contemplate that.

A prohibition of images of the Islamic prophet Muhammad erupted into controversy and violence after editorial cartoons depicted Muhammad visually in Danish newspapers in 2005. The fact that political cartoons reflected critically on Islam contributed to the righteous anger, but some of this bizarre sensitivity may be related to this phenomenon of the domineering nature of written words in the analytical left hemisphere of our brains.

There is justifiable cause for severe criticism of violent Islamic extremism. Islam had first gained ascendance in Arabic cultures by some terribly violent means, and the desperate modern fanaticism of Islamic extremists in sectarian conflicts and terrorist bombings is giving Islam a deservedly bad image. Again, moderates and liberals, don't let reactionaries dominate your faiths!

It is noteworthy that long ago there was a true Islamic Golden Age during which many historic Arabic and Islamic cultures attained great pinnacles of scientific knowledge, brilliant architecture, advanced medicine, scholarship, good education, art, poetry and philosophy. This was accomplished by encouraging openness to creativity and self-expression -- NOT through dogmatic conservatism. A more empathetic sensitivity to the role of this great religion in the world would accept criticism and spark calls for more liberal attitudes and real transformative reforms, especially including greater freedom for females in Muslim societies.

Beliefs in deities have evolved in all civilizations. Historians of mythology observe the evidence of this evolution, and realize that changes in societies are mirrored by concomitant changes in the gods they believe in. Which came first, in this case, the proverbial chicken or the egg? Real chickens and chicken eggs, of course, evolved in tandem.

It seems probable that dramatic changes in societies caused by altered economic or social developments have led to revisions in the spiritual explanations of those cultures. Natural disasters, or invasions by conquering barbarians, or perceptual changes like the widespread literacy that followed the development of simple alphabets, all tend to significantly influence the ways people make sense of their worlds. In turn, new spiritual beliefs not only affect the way people see the world, but they also facilitate social changes and revisions in moral codes. Perhaps, indeed, we make our destinies by the gods we choose AND by the things we believe.

On a grand scale, entire civilizations shape their destinies by the myths they create. These myths are strongly correlated to the economic and social status quo, and are powerfully affected by trends in changing roles and evolving moral visions, and by the factions that dominate and control societies. To the extent that we can choose progressive or regressive ideas to form the character of our societies, we should choose progressive ones. The same is true of choosing between liberal-minded ideas and more reactionary ones, or the Nurturant Parent constellation of beliefs compared to Strict Father ones. I believe we should rightly choose moderately permissive approaches rather than harshly suppressive ones. Long live the human potentials movement!

All these choices should be part of overarching commitments we should make to national goals consistent with the greater good. We should rise up and reject rationalizations that result in "tragedy of the commons" outcomes.

Greg Mortenson, author of the bestsellers *Three Cups of Tea* (and *Stones to Schools*), asserted that literacy helps thwart intolerance and challenge dogma and reinforce our common humanity. He says that education for girls and women is one of the best ways to reduce poverty and violence in the world. This idea is a provocative and inspiring one. It is thus a curious conundrum that literacy may historically have been correlated with analytical changes in the way we see the world, and that such transformations have had strong suppressive effects on the privileges and status of women in patriarchal societies. We should now begin to use our left-brained reasoning in conjunction with our right-brained empathetic feeling to alter our societies and change them into ones that are fairer toward females, and saner for us all. Visualize that!

The evolution of writing and literacy has appropriately been heralded as an important development in human history, so it is a grand irony that this development may also have had a devastating effect on the tolerance of differing beliefs, and on the role of women in societies worldwide. It is a provocative understanding that violence against others on account of religious beliefs may first have come into being because of beliefs in a masculine God. A good understanding of the reasons for this could lead to the next revolutionary transformation in our civilizations, and one that could make our societies fairer and more peaceful and more likely to be sustainable over the long run.

How, Exactly, is the Medium the Message, Marshall McLuhan?

Dr. Leonard Shlain intriguingly proposed that the *process* of reading alphabetic writing itself, more than the *content* of what is read, is the essential factor that has caused a shift of sensibilities from the image-perceiving right brain to the word-perceiving left brain. This shift causes a profound shift in *values*. The prominent linguist George Lakoff's ideas about the constellations of values that typify the Strict Father can be seen to encompass perspectives generally associated with left-brain thinking; and his ideas about the more empathetic perspectives of the Nurturant Parent are generally associated with right-brain thinking.

The right brain, being the intuitive-feeling hemisphere of the brain, facilitates the nurturance of children, and generosity toward others, heartfelt sympathy, the love of nature, appreciation of beauty, spontaneity, laughter, playfulness, mysticism, equanimity, tolerance of dissent, forgiveness of enemies, and nonviolence. In contrast, the left brain is engaged when a person is absorbed in work, organizing, achieving goals and focusing on getting power and money, so in these capacities, the cerebral left brain takes over and there are heightened propensities to be uncompassionate, argumentative, authoritarian, strictly disciplinarian, violent or cruel. Left-brain thinking is also associated with a distinct disregard for nature and healthy ecosystems, and a lack of concern for the poor, the underprivileged, the weak, the disabled and the mentally ill.

When one tunes in to images that are in accord with accurate ways of seeing the world, holistic understandings and propitious outcomes become more likely. Those who tune in to an imageless male God, and who dedicate their

purposes in life to such a deity, may find that they have tuned into a few good virtues, but also some harmful biases, preposterous purposes, and extremely conflict-stoking ways of being. We should choose visionary and intelligent goals rather than narrow and unjust ones. Remember, the evolution of religion and ethics has its roots in social cohesion -- not in social discord and deviancy.

Common sense is the combined wisdom of all the senses. Thus it is "a holistic and simultaneous grasp of multiple converging determinants". It is intuitive as well as logical. Common sense can also be understood as a form of wisdom generated in common with others.

Enantiodromia: The Pendulum Swings!

Psychologist Carl Jung pointed out that any superabundance of force inevitably produces its opposite. This tendency for any one pole to seek its opposite pole has a sesquipedalian name: enantiodromia. This is similar to the principle of equilibrium in the natural world: any extreme tends to encounter resistance and move back toward a balanced state. Polar opposites and seemingly contrary forces are interconnected and interdependent in the natural world. One gives rise to the other, in turn.

On the political scene, the proverbial pendulum tends to swing from conservatism to liberalism, and then back to conservatism in reaction. American historian Arthur Schlesinger once said there are tides in American politics that operate in cycles from periods of relative conservatism to periods of liberalism and reform. "As problems piled up, people were stimulated through reform to resolve them; as people tired of the ferment of change, they lapsed for a time again into conservative repose."

"The strife of opposites is an attunement. From this, it follows that wisdom is not a knowledge of many things, but the perception of the underlying unity of the warring opposites."

--- The philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus, circa 480 BCE

Hmmm. Wisdom is seen to be found in accurately perceiving the common good that underlies the sound and fury that divides opposing interests.

People tend to invest exaggerated hopes in leaders who promise to deliver them from problems, just as they did with Barack Obama in 2008, and then they are often disappointed. The step from hoped-for savior to blamed scapegoat is a short one. Unfortunately, jumping from conservative bandwagon opinions to liberal ideas and then back again is a poor way to run a country -- and it is an inadequate approach in trying to find good solutions to big problems. The disappointment of a minority of voters having chosen Donald Trump to be a savior encountered hurricane headwinds, and was forestalled for four years only by the unbelievable strength of propaganda, lies, emotion hijacking, stonewalling and obstruction of justice.

When people swing toward extremes, as those in the Tea Party movement did, there is a counterbalancing propensity to respond in ways that restore an equilibrium state. Occupy Movement protests in late 2011 and early 2012 were a reaction to the extremely inequitable concentration of wealth in the hands of the few, and to social unfairness, political corruption, and the unjust impetus of right wing conservatism that has tried to dominate American society since the Reagan Revolution and its extreme manifestation in the form of often reactionary, racist, sexist and homophobic impulses of conservative partisans.

Political extremism ironically tends to strengthen what it opposes. John Fowles called this tendency "countersupporting" in his monumental book *The Aristos*. Violence begets violence, and strength breeds opposing strength, and excessive injustices breed angry discord and terrorism in opposition. In reaction, terrorism generates violent suppression. "All opposition points to the opposed," wrote Fowles. "Look how attractive Christianity has made sin." That is a grand irony! John Fowles also states: "The best opposition is always scientific, logical, rational. The more unanswerable to reason it is, the better it is."

A Scientific Perspective of Existence

Most people are content to have faith in some neatly packaged belief system. They apparently prefer this to studying and thinking for themselves and being open-minded to clear visions of reality by following reason, logic and intuitive seeing. Established religions eagerly provide simple and dogmatic explanations for the genesis of the

universe, but since their stories are so highly improbable, they run the risk of becoming outmoded and obsolete as new discoveries and better understandings evolve.

Picture this: Light travels at a speed of 186,000 miles per second, or about 6 trillion miles per year. It takes about 8 minutes for sunlight to travel from the surface of the Sun to the Earth, a distance of 93 million miles. The light from Proxima Centauri, the nearest star to our Sun, takes about 4 years to traverse the distance from its source to our perceiving eyes. Marvelous optical instruments like the space-based Hubble Space Telescope have detected light that emanated from the most distant objects in the Universe ever detected. This light has been traveling for almost 14 billion years before arriving to our perceiving eyes. That is how vast the Universe is. It is beyond unfathomable.

The implications of this fact are astonishing and awe-inspiring. Light is arriving in every instant from trillions of stars, each of them at vastly different distances from us. All of this light is arriving simultaneously as we see it, so this means we are seeing a visible snapshot of the almost eternal scope of the history of the universe in every moment.

Every star is an energetically burning mass of matter that is hurtling through space, away from some apparent central starting point. The 'Big Bang Theory' credibly explains this circumstance. This vision of the unfolding universe sees it as the result of a massive exploding forth of physical matter from some obscure starting point, as if it came from a colossally energetic nothingness.

It may be that, in the highest state, all matter is energy that has not yet materialized. Albert Einstein's famous equation, $E=MC^2$, mathematically expresses the fact that Energy and Mass are different forms of the same thing; they are EQUIVALENT. Nothingness (no matter) may happen to be the highest form of expression of the Universe. This timeless and dimensionless high-energy state might figuratively have run down almost 14 billion years ago, due to a property like "entropy" Then it exploded forth into fiery balls of hurtling matter.

One cannot easily imagine a super-charged energetic Void or the processes involved in its winding down and reaching a sufficiently unstable condition that caused energy to suddenly burst forth into matter, its equivalent form. But this materialization into existence sure appears to have occurred with such force that hundreds of billions of galaxies of burning elements are still spiraling through space, some at millions of miles per hour in the far distant aftermath of this seminal event.

Perhaps now is the time for Carl Sagan's aforementioned prophesy to come true: "A religion that stresses the magnificence of the universe as revealed by modern science might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by traditional faiths. Sooner or later, such a religion will emerge."

Faith in primitive religious stories somehow seems to be more satisfying to many people than the awe-inspiring understandings of modern science. How else can the fact be comprehended that fundamentalists cling to their dogmas and deny the overwhelmingly extensive evidence of evolution that is found in the fossil record and the discoveries of the scientific disciplines of genetics and molecular biology? Beliefs in personal deities offering hope in a next life are apparently more reassuring than the crushing impersonal imperatives of cause and effect, and of the certainties of individually terminal death for each and every living being.

The famous Chinese thinker and social philosopher Confucius wrote long ago: "Learning without thought is labor lost; thought without learning is perilous." I advocate that we cultivate clearer and more open-minded ways of thinking; and never stop learning!

We need not be wild in our speculation about the place and situation where we find ourselves. Humanity awakens into awareness on a home planet that majestically rotates around a center-of-gravity axis once every 24 hours, and while it does so, it speeds through space at more than 66,000 miles per hour on its 585-million-mile orbit around a life-enabling source of heat and photosynthetic energy, the burning ball of fire we call the Sun. A fixed 23.5 degree tilt of the Earth relative to the plane of its orbit around the Sun gives us summer weather patterns in the northern hemisphere when the planet is tilted toward the Sun, and then winter conditions six months later when Earth is on the other side of its orbit and its northern hemisphere is tilted away from the Sun. Aware, we contemplate and we imagine.

"A wise man proportions his belief to the evidence."

--- David Hume

Being a big-brained and curious bunch, we humans have studied and investigated the surroundings in which we find ourselves from time immemorial. In doing so, we have gained an ever-evolving better understanding of the physical nature and conditions of our existence. Unlike more primitive mythologies, modern science presents a worldview that is much better articulated and coherent with regards to observable reality. Its very essence, found in the scientific method, is to remain open-minded and adaptive to more accurate ways of seeing things.

In contrast, religious doctrines consist of speculative stories that have an extremely low order of probability. Many creation myths, like the one in the Bible, assume in the beginning what they are trying to explain, i.e., intelligence and complexity, so they actually explain nothing. Geophysical evolution and the evolution of life by natural selection are ideas that start simple and then explain increasing complexity, so they are much more valid explanations of reality.

"Acceptance without proof is the fundamental characteristic of Western religion," wrote Gary Zukav in *The Dancing Wu Li Masters*. "Rejection without proof is the fundamental characteristic of Western science."

Let There Be Light!

Fascinating discoveries have been made about our world. We have found, for instance, that there is an entire spectrum of radiation that accompanies the hurtling forth of matter in the universe. Scientists categorize these various forms of radiation according to their wavelengths. Only a small part of this electromagnetic spectrum actually consists of light that is visible to our eyes. The entire spectrum ranges from cosmic-ray photons, gamma rays, x-rays and ultraviolet radiation to visible light, infrared radiation, microwaves, radio waves, heat waves and electric currents. These things exist, and are not merely some decreed Creationist idea being held in force by a kind of biocentric 'divine will'.

Elemental forces govern all matter. These include strong bonding forces in the nuclei of atoms and weak nuclear interactions, and electromagnetic forces and the forces of gravity. All elements of matter have an essential physical nature. They even have surprising 'periodic law' relationships, as can be found by studying the Periodic Table of the Elements. It's a great mystery why! Hydrogen atoms have been fused into all the heavier elements in the fiery crucibles of burning stars. We can see the results of many supernova explosions across deep space, and we can come to understand that stars have collapsed, and new solar systems have been created, and galaxies have collided. We, and every atom in our solar system, are all literally 'stardust' from earlier stars.

Astronomers and astrophysicists confirm these things. They see that galactic matter had been hurtling through space for more than 9 billion years before our solar system and planet Earth formed about 4.5 billion years ago. They find that life was sparked into existence on Earth in the form of ancient single-celled ancestors of all living things, hundreds of millions of years after the Earth smashingly came into being. They also find that life existed for some three billion years as single-celled organisms before these life forms found a way to organize themselves into more complex multi-cellular species of life.

Biological Insights

The proliferation of species of life into more complex species is found in the fossil record beginning about 540 million years ago during the Cambrian explosion. This biological proliferation probably resulted from pressures of predation. Some speculate that it may even be correlated to the competitive evolution of primitive forms of vision in early creatures in the oceans. Dr. Andrew Parker advanced such a hypothesis in his 2003 book *In the Blink of an Eye - How Vision Sparked the Big Bang of Evolution*.

On Earth today there are something like 10 million species of life. Each and every individual among these species is descended from generations before it, throughout previous centuries and millennia and untold eons and geologic eras. Some of the ancestors of every species alive today somehow managed to dodge every bullet of extinction in the long punctuated equilibrium history of geologic and climatic and biotic events.

Look up 'Geologic Time Scale' in any good dictionary. This Time Scale gives a remarkably concise snapshot of Geologic Eras: the Precambrian Era (before the Cambrian proliferation of life into multi-cellular organisms), the Paleozoic Era ('old life' era), the Mesozoic Era ('middle life' era) and the Cenozoic Era ('recent life' era). Each of these three Eras of multi-cellular life was demarcated by a mass extinction event in which a large percentage of life forms were wiped out, as if eradicated by some meteorite impact or volcanic winter or devastating ice age.

Today it is human activities that are altering environmental conditions and causing widespread habitat damages. These changes are driving many species of life toward extinction. The 65-million-year-long Cenozoic Era is, in this sense, ending -- and a new era of life is beginning: the *Anthropocene*. We are contributing to these extinctions by over-harvesting animals and plants, harming habitats, and contributing to global warming that drives changes in weather and precipitation patterns in locales worldwide. The species of life that are surviving are in the process of adapting to our destructive presence, and they will be the ones that will be the ancestors to all future species that come into existence in the millennia and eons that are to come. This is thought provoking, and it leads naturally to many of the fundamental ecological insights contained in this manifesto.

The species of life living right now, it turns out, comprise less than 1% of all the species that have ever lived. We share the Earth with millions of species of plants and animals that are all descended from forebears, grand forebears and great grand forebears in an incomprehensibly long chain of ancestry extending back through a period of more than 500 million years to ancestral single-celled organisms. We find that the 99% of species of life that have gone extinct are found only in the sketchy record of fossilized remains.

Fossils are relatively rare because they are only a miniscule and fragmentary sampling of life that happens to have been preserved in lithified sediments or amber from the world long before us. Fossils contain compelling evidence of the corporeal remnants of creatures that evolved and died out millennia ago. The processes by which fossils came into being continue at this very instant: birth, death, evolution and extinction -- and sedimentation, petrification, the slow lithification of rock, mountain uplift and erosive exposure.

It is difficult to imagine our lives in the perspective of profound contexts of the vastness of geologic time. This is one reason why so many people believe in literal interpretations of simplistic religious myths, as if they are valid explanations of existence and geologic history. We can only roughly comprehend the incredible span of time that has existed up until this instant. We are cogently aware that each of us is alive for all too brief a duration during our individual physical lives, and we ponder the vast eons that will pass after we are dead and gone. And we wonder how all this came to be, and we hope against hope for some measure of immortality.

I've personally found that most things in the world have a pretty good explanation for them, or a variety of convergent good explanations. The "Presto, God made things the way they are" explanations tend eventually to be superseded by much more probable natural explanations as experience and evidence are examined more closely, and as knowledge accumulates.

Religion and Science

"The one thing we do not know is the limit of the knowable."

-- Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Human beings have evolved the ability to think and reflect, and to understand many aspects of the unchanging physical laws that govern the universe. We have been able to analyze the past and make predictions about the future. Our curiosity, creativity and imagination have also led to an on-going diverse cultural evolution in which a creative spectrum of explanations have been set forth as to how all this has come to be. Most of these explanations have naturally been solipsistic and self-centered, and they often involve supernatural deities oddly visualized in our own image.

Most of these belief systems assume that humanity is central to the purpose of the whole shebang, even though we are Johnny-come-lately beings who actually know nothing of any true purpose of the universe, if such a thing is possible. And most of these mythologies pre-suppose that the Earth is the center of the Universe, though this, alas, is exceedingly far from accurate.

Mythology, *n.* The body of a primitive people's beliefs concerning its origin, early history, heroes, deities

and so forth, as distinguished from the true accounts, which it invents later.

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

Those who believe in religious doctrines generally have faith in a God as described by mythic revelations in one of many "holy books" that have been written in the past several thousand years. Deists, in contrast, are people who believe in the existence of a God based on evidence of reason and nature, but not on supernatural revelation. Agnostics go one sophisticated step further, and believe that we can only know about nature and its physical aspects, not about the causative force before the emergence of matter and light, or indeed anything about the Void that we assume existed before Nature sprang into being in all its awe-inspiring aspects of matter, space, time, order, atomic structure, elemental forces and infinitely eternal change.

Background History of Religions

All cultures leave evidence of their religious conceptions in their artifacts, icons, records, burial grounds and ruins. An insightful study of archeology and cultural anthropology reveals general parameters of this evolution of thought, ideas, rituals and beliefs.

Indigenous cultures were more intimately tied to the land and wildlife than our cultures are today. They were more closely connected to the elements, the seasons and wild plants and animals. As a consequence, their expression of what we now call religious beliefs had its genesis in veneration of Mother Earth and the life-giving energy from the Sun. They respected and appreciated animals and the cycles of nature. Though human beings were much closer to the natural world in ancient times, they had little of the knowledge that science has since given us about the physical nature of Earth and the Universe and life. In this early context of uncertainty and mystery, beliefs in supernatural entities and superstitions naturally developed to help explain the inexplicable.

All evidence indicates that human beings in the earliest civilizations in Mesopotamia and Egypt and China revered Earth Goddesses that honored fertility and the annual renewal of springtime. For thousands of years, the divine feminine was exalted, and the status of women in these early societies was correspondingly high.

Later, when Sun gods and deities representing fertility and bountiful harvests and varying forms of animism and fetishism and the worship of images dominated, hopes and fears played larger roles in early belief systems, just as they do in religious doctrines today. During the days of Classical Greece and Rome, people worshipped a fascinating pantheon of goddesses and gods. A study of the anthropomorphic characteristics of these deities of early Athens and Rome provides revelations about human nature and thought. Check out Jean Shinoda Bolen's *Goddesses in Everywoman*, and *Gods in Everyman*. for intriguing observations about human nature as revealed by archetypal impulses in our subconscious minds. Or read the Earth Manifesto 'magnum opus' *Comprehensive Global Perspective: An Illuminating Worldview*, and, in particular, see Chapter 22 - *The Gaia Understanding*.

Mythological deities like Zeus, Athena and Aphrodite were very real to people back in the days of ancient Greece and Rome. Though Creation myths of Greek mythology were once the dominant cosmological, religious and spiritual explanation of existence for many centuries in the most advanced civilizations in Europe, today we regard these gods and goddesses more like mere figments of primitive imaginations. We essentially belittle early polytheistic beliefs because religious beliefs have evolved into more sophisticated and more all-encompassing conceptions of a Supreme Being. After the relatively new monotheistic 'one God' conception arose, it became widespread and now undergirds the doctrines of most of the major established religions of the world. Such conceptions, unfortunately, are peculiarly patriarchal, and demand suspicious exclusivity of belief in a monotheistic God that causes religious conflicts and sometimes-terrible violence, and is often used to violate the natural rights and prerogatives of women in cultures worldwide.

The Crux of the Matter

Monotheism was an evolutionary leap forward from earlier belief systems, so we regard polytheistic ideas, in retrospect, as primitive and naïve. But people today are mired in their own myths of often ethnocentric faiths. Many people refuse to recognize that no one faith has a rightful monopoly on an exclusively true version of God. There is only one true actuating force in the Universe, independent of the narratives we create about it, and this one real force is extremely unlikely to be accurately understood as a glorified, jealous or wrathful old man God as

is portrayed in the Bible and the Quran. In his book *God against the Gods*, Jonathan Kirsch provides a surprising perspective on one superior and praiseworthy advantage that polytheistic belief systems had over monotheistic ones: they featured acceptance of others who believed in different deities than theirs.

To most comprehensively describe what God actually is, one of the best conjectures we can make is one that unifies and incorporates the truths contained in each and every way of seeing the world. Every person, regardless of their upbringing, education or indoctrination, has his or her own unique worldview. This includes agnostics and atheists. When all of these worldviews are taken together, they represent a mosaic of all the many particular perspectives we have of the greater reality.

We are all like the blind men in the old parable that were given a task of touching an elephant and then describing it. In the parable, each man had a different description of the elephant because each had felt a different part of the animal. Each one of them thus had a different perception and point of view. There were several different perspectives and varying experiences -- but only one elephant.

Richard Dawkins points out that, "When two opposite points of view are expressed with equal intensity, the truth does not necessarily lie exactly halfway between them. It is possible for one side to be simply wrong." Hmmm ... Given the dangerous conflicts rationalized by ethnocentric viewpoints and religious certitudes, it is time for us to find fairer ways of comprehending existence. Greater compassion and solidarity are called for.

The Need for a New Mythology

Think again about Carl Sagan's idea that a new religion will sooner or later emerge. Let's honestly ponder this. The next step in the evolution of religious beliefs should be one that is inclusive and farsighted, and more ecologically sound. It must embrace unifying themes, because it is becoming too risky to allow ethnocentric religions to promote divisive doctrines and strive to vanquish all others. Organized religions should honorably evolve to become more accepting of efforts to improve the prospects of peaceable coexistence, truer justice and mutual security in the world. They should utilize the great fonts of faith, mystery and spirituality in new ways that emphasize inspiration, positive connections, peace, rationality, fairness, ecological sanity, beneficent long-term commitments to the common good, and an acceptance of cultural and ethnic differences in order to achieve goals consistent with overall well-being and sustainable existence.

John Fowles wrote provocatively in *The Aristos*: "All the old religions cause a barbarous waste of moral energy; they are like ramshackle water mills on a river that could serve hydroelectric dynamos." Imagine the positive outcomes that could be achieved if these formidable energies were redirected into more wholesome channels. A fresh and unifying reverence for life might be achieved. Forceful new doctrines could be cultivated and gain sway that would establish greater human responsibility toward other people, and toward our descendants in future generations, and toward a more auspicious biological health of other species of life on Earth.

I love the quote attributed to Virgil, a Roman poet in classical antiquity, "*We make our destinies by the gods we choose*". One reason I appreciate this adage is that it gives us hope that by choosing a new concept of the divine, we might be able to improve the probable destiny of our species. We need a new mode of seeing that has firm underpinnings in concepts of reality that honor justice for all, truer prosperity, and a fairer legacy for the well-being of people in the future. We should demonstrate greater integrity and commitment through ecologically-sound initiatives. Our success or failure in the responsibility of properly protecting biodiversity and natural resources will be a crucial element of our legacy.

A paradigm shift is needed that emphasizes virtues of fairness, peace, inclusivity, responsible stewardship, and a committed caring for Mother Earth. We can no longer afford to believe in a God that says all others with beliefs that differ from ours are not only wrong, but evil to boot. Beliefs in any God should not continue to represent a rallying cry for ethnocentric intolerance, discrimination, hate, terrorism, repression, violence or aggression in war.

Bill Watterson, in his comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes*:

Calvin asked Hobbes: "Do you believe in the devil? You know, a supreme evil being dedicated to the corruption, temptation and destruction of man?"

Hobbes replied: "I'm not sure that man needs the help."

Too much energy is poured into bigoted religious beliefs, and too much energy is channeled into ethnic supremacy, puritanical prudishness, sexism, racism, oppression, and prejudice against gay men and lesbian women. Insidious efforts are being made to keep women subservient to men, and to oppose female education and empowerment. Staunch efforts are being made to relegate minorities to the status of second-class citizens and keep them there. Condescending and even seemingly hate-motivated animosity is often directed at hard-working immigrants, as revealed by Donald Trump's inflammatory generalizations about Mexicans and refugees from Central America. Throughout American history, similar prejudicial and discriminatory episodes have taken place when most of our predecessors immigrated from Europe, Latin America and Asia seeking better opportunities and escape from destitution or persecution. Let's find better ways to redirect these negative energies!

Anthropocentricity and Delusion

"So much of man's thinking is an anthropocentric delusion. The root of the greatest errors in philosophy lies in projecting our human purposes, criteria, preferences, hopes and fears into the objective universe."

--- Baruch Spinoza, 1632 - 1677 CE

The aim of the study of philosophy is to find out what other people have thought in the past AND to find out what the truth of the matter may actually be. Philosophy seeks truths that are the most probable, not some mere dogmatic 'scholasticism' form of truth that coincides with preconceived notions. This manifesto has been created mainly to make an incisive exploration of the currents of thought and feeling that flow through written history, and to see the yin and yang, the light and the dark, the female and male points of view, and to investigate and evaluate the ebbs and flows of authority and liberation, of doctrine and illumination, of both progress and the back-flowing eddies of retrogressive dominion. It's compelling to imagine the impulses behind the cathartic cataracts of revolutionary change that have taken place at various times throughout history.

No matter what we believe, or how hard we try to understand and explain the nature of the Universe, our emotional and spiritual propensities and thoughts are couched in limited ideas and conceptions. Most of our impressions are rooted in solipsistic, anthropocentric and biocentric perspectives, and our beliefs are naturally biased. Not only do we make curious projections of archetypal aspects of our collective unconscious onto the Universe, but we are also intrinsically incapable of seeing the Universe in a way that encompasses the fullness of infinity and eternity. We can't be completely objective. We can't comprehend the ultimate nature of reality, or the ineffable or the inexplicable. Our imaginations are feeble when it comes to visualizing the nature of a 'Supreme Being'. Is God a biologically living being? Or is God an awareness that is part of physical nature that predates life by billions of years and somehow created the Universe and is not actually a form of life?

We can never know the purpose of the Universe, or whether any purpose exists independent of our lives and our biological purposes and those of other forms of life. Each person can have a purpose-driven life, of course, without there being a knowable purpose of the Universe. Every creature has its own purposes of surviving and reproducing to perpetuate its own kind, and of seeking safety and its own animal kind of contentment.

All our established religions represent varying versions of the current myths of our kind. Science may be a type of mythology of its own, but in contrast to religious myths, it presents a worldview that is better articulated and more coherent, accurate and adaptive with regards to observable reality.

Religions have many aspects. They are deeply personal expressions of our inner spiritual natures, and they are also a reflection of cultural belief systems that are internalized within each of us. At the very core of our consciousness, deep within our psyches and souls, our religious beliefs are an expression of profound human hopes and needs for meaning, significance, identification, validation, belonging, fulfillment, identity, inspiration, spiritual connection, wisdom, and maybe even enlightenment.

From the vantage point of 1,000 years from now -- should our race manage to survive that long -- today's concepts of God will likely appear as primitive and naïve as the mythological deities of old, like those marvelously revealing gods and goddesses in the Greek pantheon. As Lao Tzu, the famed philosopher who wrote the marvelously abstruse *Tao Te Ching* might have said, "That which you say it is, it is not."

Perception, Knowledge and Philosophy

Do we really want to know about the Universe? Or are we like the prisoners in Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* who had been chained since childhood in a cave in such a way that they could see only shadows? Those prisoners, according to the parable, preferred to see the customary shadows, and therefore did not want to explore or listen to someone who had actually seen the truer aspect of reality that was casting the shadows. Are we capable of revising our worldviews? Yes, we are, and yes, we can -- and the wondrous neuroplasticity of our brains makes us primed for the adventure.

Change-averse folks seem unwilling to learn more accurate ways of understanding the world because it means they must face the terrifying certainties and uncertainties of reality. We might even be forced to change our habits, loyalties and behaviors -- oh, chagrin! And we might find it necessary to accept the fact that each and every one of us will someday die -- and, relatively speaking, our individual deaths will occur not all that far in the future.

Most people cling to ideas propagated by organized religious establishments because they seek a sense of certainty in a world where uncertainty is unfortunately a fundamental fact, and the vicissitudes of fate are a mystery. In the most modern and arcane understandings of reality, as expressed in quantum physics, there is actually a principle called the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle that confirms the fact that even the physical nature of reality and perception are rife with intrinsic uncertainties.

Meanwhile, the ground shifts beneath us. Change accelerates for our race in a relativity that is oddly parallel to the general theory of relativity that Albert Einstein proved mathematically. Technological change seems to be accelerating, and cultures are changing. Contradictions exist deep within every one of us, and both economic insecurities and political conflicts are intensifying. Extreme inequalities of wealth and correlated inequities and dire vulnerabilities persist in countries worldwide. Existential questions are fluid, and hot-button social issues perplex us, creating divisive wedges between people. These are hurdles that prevent us from uniting to make our world a better place.

Simultaneously, global risks are rising. The moral moorings that guide us are being swept away by a variety of influences, including secularism and profound technological and demographic changes, and immigration challenges and record numbers of refugees. Authority figures offer us guidance in this uncertain world, and a shred of certainty, and a sense of solace. They offer us, and then they're on us. It is reminiscent of the old joke that goes, "She offered her honor; He honored her offer. The rest of the night, it was honor and offer." Ha!

Human knowledge seems to be evolving toward ever-better understandings, though unsteadily due to the deceit of Dividers. When we are flexible and adaptive, we can progress and strive to keep ourselves adequately in balance with natural ecosystems. This is becoming increasingly necessary to ensure our species' survival. But such struggles with narrowly selfish and often reactionary forces tend to hinder progress. An intense storm of adverse developments is making progress unnecessarily challenging. Our societies are beset by resource scarcities, wasteful consumerism, hyper partisan politics, speculative excesses, mindless pollution, excessive carbon emissions, overpopulation, violent conflicts and unprincipled forms of unfair competition and corruption. Since we can achieve wiser courses of action by gaining more accurate and comprehensive understandings, it naturally follows that it behooves us to be open-minded to adaptive progress, so that we will have a better chance of saving ourselves.

Our fate is not predetermined. The proverbial die is still in the on-going process of being cast. Architects and construction workers alike know that solid foundations are crucially important to the safety and durability of a building. We should not scrimp on the integrity of structural materials that go into the foundations and physical infrastructure of our societies. It is not too late for us to collectively choose to mix superior batches of concrete, rather than substandard ones likely to crumble.

A physicist named James Trefil relates an interesting personal realization in the Preface to his book *Human Nature - A Blueprint for Managing the Earth - By People, for People*: "The universe does not give a damn about us or any other living thing on our planet. As far as our survival and well-being are concerned, we're pretty much on our own." Let's act to save ourselves!

Spiritual Truths

Many of the shamans, priests, bishops, rabbis, imams and monks who have ever lived have promulgated fervent beliefs and spiritual truths. But these truths are more like Rorschachian revelations of human nature than they are accurate insights into the fullness of objective reality. All spiritual leaders and prophets have been influenced by natural human drives and propensities and visions, and have been motivated by a wide variety of impulses, intentions and purposes. These include humanitarian concerns, altruistic impulses to serve others, searches for meaning, faithful obedience to convictions, the expression of noble aspirations, the drive to reveal inspired prophecies -- or being driven by ambition, pride, avarice, illusion or desires for personal recognition, glory, social status, fame, celebrity, notoriety, delusions of grandeur, compulsions to gain influence over others or drives to control others.

"Religion is nothing but institutionalized mysticism. The catch is, mysticism does not lend itself to institutionalization. The moment we attempt to organize mysticism, we destroy its essence."

--- Tom Robbins, *Skinny Legs and All*

Religious establishments are influential social institutions. They are powerful forces that can influence people in highly positive ways, as well as in horribly negative ones. They can be forces for 'good' or for 'evil', for justice or injustice, for peace or conflict. Their purposes today, as they have been throughout recorded history, are often corrupted by the desire for power, money, dominion, plunder, control, discriminatory supremacy, political intrigue, control or military victory. Religion has played a pathological role in many governments worldwide, and had extremely troubling impacts on the lives of people and on the geopolitics of the world.

"Instincts and passion are magnificent as driving forces, but dangerous as guides."

--- Baruch Spinoza

It becomes increasingly clear, year after year, that people should strive to create conditions in which the positive elements of organized religions flourish and the negative elements are diminished. This is why it would be best for moderate and progressive aspects of spiritual doctrines to prevail. And it would be advantageous for the majority of the faithful to marginalize reactionary, patriarchal, doctrinaire and extremely conservative factions of organized religions. Recent years have sadly seen fundamentalist forces in churches grab the microphone and the steering wheel away from those who are more sensible, moderate, accepting, progressive, pragmatic and socially intelligent. The 'Taliban wing' of all religions should be dethroned!

Mark Twain once noted that, "If Christ were here now, there is one thing he sure would not be: a Christian." Twain was highly skeptical of the laughably ludicrous improbability of the anthropocentric myths contained in the Christian Bible and the Islamic Koran and the Book of Mormon. He recognized the preposterous hypocrisy of conservative establishments in churches, with their staunch orthodoxy and obstinately absolutist and inflexible doctrines, and their too often bigoted narrow-mindedness. Let moderates and progressives rule!

"Our Bible reveals to us the character of our god with minute and remorseless exactness. It is perhaps the most damnatory biography that exists in print anywhere."

--- Mark Twain, *Reflections on Religion*, 1906

Humorous Interlude

"A sense of humor, properly developed, is superior to any religion so far devised."

--- Tom Robbins, *Jitterbug Perfume*

Here is a clever and entertaining comedy sketch by George Carlin that can be listened to online at *Zeitgeist Movie.com* (toggle to minute 11:38 of the 2-hour-long film.) "I gotta tell you the truth folks; I gotta tell you the truth. When it comes to bullshit, big-time, major-league bullshit, you have to stand in awe of the all-time champion of false promises and exaggerated claims -- RELIGION. Think about it! Religion has actually convinced people that there's an invisible man, living in the sky, who watches everything you do, every minute of every day. And the invisible man has a special list of ten things he does not want you to do. And if you do any of these ten things, he has a special place full of fire and smoke and burning and torture and anguish where he will send you to live and suffer and burn and choke and scream and cry forever and ever till the end of time ... But he loves you!!"

"He loves you. He loves you -- and he needs money! He always needs money! He's all powerful, all perfect, all knowing and all wise ... somehow just can't handle money! Religion takes in billions of dollars, they pay no taxes, and they always need a little more. Now, you talk about a good bullshit story! Holy shit!!"

Modern Ecological Understandings

Maya Angelo evocatively expressed this compelling idea: "The idea is to write it so that people hear it and it slides through the brain and goes straight to the heart."

The profound realizations of ecology are like a visceral upwelling of a primeval spiritual veneration for Mother Earth and its denizens. Deep down we all know that we basically depend on natural resources and the benefits and services provided by healthy ecosystems. We should teach our children to believe in a God that favors those who are strongly committed to PROTECTING this Creation.

Perhaps the best way to save ourselves would be to forget about seeking salvation through God and join others in championing a revolutionary transformation in our economies, national priorities, healthcare system, allegiances, lifestyles, habits and behaviors. A balanced modicum of discipline is almost certainly required. We might even stretch a little and adopt more of a "small-is-beautiful" attitude. Maybe we could go SHOPPING a little less, and prioritize our lives around activities that are more salubrious and truly fulfilling!

As we are moving into the era of Peak Oil production, we are exceeding the capacity of Earth's atmosphere to absorb additional greenhouse gas emissions without catastrophic consequences. Our material demands and on-going population growth are already pushing natural ecological limits. Our exploiting and polluting activities are beginning to have devastatingly detrimental impacts on the ability of Mother Earth to sustain our growing numbers. The insights of *The Reality and Ramifications of Peak Oil* are included herein by this reference.

Some of these ideas were originally recorded near the occasion of Earth Day in April 2010. In commemoration of Earth Day, let us give attentive awareness to one of the fundamental truths of ecology: a healthy environment is indispensably important for a prosperous economy. This is a practical issue, as well as a highly moral one. We should find good ways to reduce pollution of rivers and lakes, and to limit damages to wildlife populations, forests, wetlands, coral reefs, and entire ecosystems.

Why is it so important to do this? Because serious adverse unintended consequences in the long term are associated with activities that damage the ecological commons. This is why our economy should be restructured, and our behaviors and habits should be modified. This can best be accomplished by using effective incentives to encourage activities that are sustainable indefinitely into the future. These incentives should be accompanied by disincentives that are also targeted to advance the greater good. We can no longer afford to be led by head-in-the-sand cheerleader throwback apologists for old school machine-politics and entrenched corporate interests and schemes to privatize profits and socialize costs.

A true, honest, and rapid 'greening' of our activities must take place soon. A mere greenwashing of the status quo is not enough. All companies worldwide should be required to include all true costs in product prices, including the mitigation of pollution and toxic wastes and other costs associated with resource depletion, health harms, ecological degradation, and the adverse impacts of greenhouse gas emissions. The moral good is found in refusing to allow such costs to be externalized onto society and future generations.

Revelations Regarding Shortsighted Fiscal Policies

The amount of money we are borrowing from our children and grandchildren (and foreigners) should be reduced. Deficit spending is an expediency that helps some people make big profits in the short term, but it is socially irresponsible in the long run, and it is myopic to borrow huge sums of money for short-term-oriented purposes. We are effectively fleecing all taxpayers in the future by immoderately indulging in this expediency. It may be a great game for greedy beneficiaries of tax cut policies in the short run, and it was an urgent and desperate necessity to keep our economy from crashing during the 2008 recession and again after the calamitous pandemic began, but it is unnecessarily risky to keep increasing the national debt faster than the economy grows. If we accept the short-term exigency of borrowing money, we should do it to invest the money wisely, not to squander it on corporate welfare and unaffordable 'entitlements' and low tax rates for those with the highest incomes.

This sentiment flew in the face of developments in 2009 and again in 2020 when economic conditions had seriously deteriorated and a consensus arose that the federal government must borrow huge sums of money to stimulate the economy. The wisdom of some of the purposes in the stimulus measures was questionable. We backed ourselves into a desperate corner where declining asset values and growing levels of unemployment made this course of action necessary, for otherwise, inaction and feedback loops could make economic setbacks much worse. But it may be a Pyrrhic victory to borrow so much money to stimulate the economy. We should have strived to make all such stimulus programs "green", and to take advantage of the crisis as a positive opportunity to structure taxation more progressively, and to create a more indefinitely sustainable economy.

We need honest leaders to tell us what we really need to hear, which is this: we should invest in good citizen goals and intelligent courses of action, and stop rewarding and subsidizing short-term-oriented polluters, extractors, speculators, con artists, war profiteers and other exploitive insiders. Barack Obama made points such as this during his first presidential election campaign, and we need to now take them to heart. Bold progressive long-term-oriented reforms must be enacted!

John Steinbeck wrote about a "Congress of honest men" in his *Log from the Sea of Cortez*. He was referring to representatives in Congress who declared we cannot afford to spend large amounts of money on social programs, but then readily approved much more expensive military expenditures. Today we are led by many politicians and business leaders who similarly say we cannot afford to pay-as-we-go, or to put a price on pollution or carbon emissions, or to invest in vitally important domestic priorities, and yet they seem to believe there are no limits to how much money we can shell out for war. Check out *Tall Tales, Provocative Parables, Luminous Clarity and Evocative Truths - A Modern Log from the Sea of Cortez* for a deeper appreciation of John Steinbeck's valuable ideas relating to existence, life and war.

Nobel-Prize winning economist Joseph Stiglitz once wrote that the full costs of the Iraq War will eventually exceed \$3 trillion. We have mortgaged our nation to go along with aggressive ideologies of preemptive warfare and the overweening influence of the military-industrial-congressional complex. Let's change course!

Back to the Future

"God is love," some people say, and as many said during the Sixties. Hold that thought.

The idea that we need a new spiritual awareness leads us to the conclusion that we need to be more pragmatic and far-sighted about healthcare and economic and environmental issues. A bright awareness should be cultivated that truly respects all of Creation and honors the ethic of wholesome ecological understandings, and we should do this with evangelical enthusiasm!

An honest new religion should be immune to being hijacked into jihad terrorism against innocent civilians, and it should be less susceptible to being used to justify injustice, aggression, oppression or preemptive wars. It should be effective in countering violence and brutality, and diminishing arrogance, hate and mercilessness. Its leaders should not be unduly authoritarian or wantonly eager to get into bed with extremist politicians. Religious leaders should encourage the faithful flock to be more accepting of others, and less sexist, and less discriminatory, and less hostile to gay people. They should act with a more ecumenical resolve, and reject ethnocentric conflict-causing convictions of superiority. Give us a break!

Religious freedom should be guaranteed in all countries, and people should be free from persecution for their religious beliefs. At the same time, both Golden Rule principles and a strong separation between Church and State should become primary tenets of governments worldwide. An enlightened ethos similar to 'secular scientific humanism' should be incorporated into Church doctrines to guarantee fairer societies around the globe.

Every religion is grounded in its own traditions, rituals, dogmas, bodies of myth and revealing expressions of the nature of humans. Each religion not only has its own specific creation story, but each and every religious brand seems to stick to its stories, "come hell or high water". They stubbornly resist evolving, even in the face of advances in knowledge and scientific understandings of the physical Universe and living things in such fields as astrophysics, earth sciences, anthropology, genetics, neuroscience, psychology and evolutionary biology.

I personally favor wisdom traditions like Buddhism that are founded on a search for knowledge and truth, rather than faith traditions like Catholicism, Islam and Mormonism that are expressions of deep-seated yearnings for guidance and belonging, but are founded on hopes and fears and comforting delusions about an anthropocentric and judgmental God. As long as we are leaping in the dark, we might as well leap towards clarity and light!

It is exceedingly interesting that Western religions seem to be focused on controlling people, while Eastern spiritual disciplines like Buddhism are more focused on liberation. Hmm ... I'm ready to pass judgment!

Church Establishments

Spokespersons for God should begin to accept understandings that are more intelligent and socially beneficial. Instead of allowing conservative extremists in their faiths to assert control and impede progress, they should advocate more progressive understandings. This is especially true for Christian and Muslim churches, because together these two faiths claim about three billion adherents. By fiercely conflicting with each other, these religions are making strife and global conflicts worse.

Most churches are extremely undemocratic institutions. For instance, Pope Benedict XVI was chosen in April 2005 by fewer than 120 people -- and all of them were old men (Catholic cardinals). White smoke from the burned ballots of each Papal election vote traditionally goes up from the Sistine Chapel in Rome to announce the anointment of a new Pope. Before the white puff went up announcing the selection of Benedict XVI, the name of the man they were to choose was Joseph Ratzinger. He was a Cardinal who had been charged with the orthodox religious responsibility of staunchly defending Church doctrine "by putting the smackdown on heresy".

Revelations in March 2010 surfaced about Ratzinger's role in the cover-up of sexual molestation by Catholic priests of trusting children, some of them deaf. This scandal made it clear that church officials should have spent more time putting the smackdown on sexual predators, instead of protecting them and transferring them to other parishes. The film *Deliver Us from Evil* makes it clear that the Church has been egregiously irresponsible regarding priests who abuse children.

As Mark Twain pointed out, "The church is always trying to get other people to reform; it might not be a bad idea to reform itself a little, by way of example." There is a whole hell of a lot to reform!

Heresy is any opinion that differs from established religious dogma. An honest perspective of what is condemned as heresy is that it is often an aspect of reasonable debate and possibly greater truth. Rational skepticism of all religious dogmas is generally well founded, so such perspective could help us see the world more accurately, and in doing so, we might assure ourselves of fairer policy outcomes.

Cardinal Ratzinger was chosen from his previous position as head of the conservative Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. This was the office that began centuries ago as the Sacred Congregation of the Universal Inquisition. Yes, this is the very same Inquisition that had a horrific central role in torturing people and burning untold numbers of women at the stake over a 300-year period during the Dark Ages. This course had to be corrected by the so-called Reformation before a salubrious Renaissance could come about. The Inquisition represents a terribly tragic and bloody episode in human history.

The great Voltaire was so disgusted with the treachery of the Church in his day that he declared, "Nothing can be more contrary to religion and the clergy than reason and common sense." He lived during the respect worthy Age of Enlightenment, when core ideas of the period were attitudes that questioned traditional institutions and customs and morals. Being open-minded can have positive adaptive value.

Some say that one of the principal problems in the world of debate is that we tend to pretend that there are two sides to every story. Ha! I agree with this; and I alternatively want to play the devil's advocate. Some points of view definitely deserve more credence than others. Some ideas are based on a preponderance of evidence and fact, while others are based on dogma, delusion, illusion or wishful thinking. Almost everyone today realizes that the Sun does not revolve around the Earth, for instance, and that the Earth is not flat. Presenting both sides of an argument about things like this is palpably absurd. Teaching the dogma of Creationism in public schools as if it is equally valid alternative explanations of existence is similarly ridiculous.

Galileo Galilei was persecuted in the early 1600s for supporting the contention of Polish astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus, who 70 years earlier had published the then-heretical idea that the Earth was not the center of the Universe. Galileo cautiously agreed with this understanding, contending that the Earth actually speeds around the Sun in an annual orbit. He had vastly improved the technology of the telescope, and thereby discovered visible confirmation that there are moons orbiting other planets like Jupiter. This physically contradicted the Church's doctrine grounded in early scientific ignorance that postulated the Earth to be the center of the Universe and contended that everything else revolves around it. To regard the Sun as the center of the Universe was heresy, but it turns out to be somewhat more accurate than regarding the Earth as the center of the universe.

Church authorities put Galileo under house arrest for the last decade of his life for defying their dogmas by espousing this idea of Earth's motion around the Sun. It took Church officials more than 350 years to finally admit the now-obvious notion that the nature of 'heliocentric planetary motion' is scientifically correct. Church establishments once again proved they are stubbornly doctrinaire, and not nimble or honest -- and often not exactly reasonable or merciful.

While it is contextually impossible to be truly objective and see the world "as it really is", some understandings do correspond to reality more closely than others. It seems clear that, no matter how much it was taken for granted as a fact that the Earth is the center of the Universe, it was a superior understanding when Copernicus and Galileo discovered that the Earth actually makes one full rotation on its axis every day, creating the illusion that the Sun orbits around the Earth. No matter how fervently people believe in an idea, if it contradicts objective reality, eventually the belief will lose its utility and slip into the dustbin of history.

The Church always exhibits a self-interested need to defend its dogmas because it fears that once some aspects of its primitive worldview begin to be proved false by more accurate understandings, the Church might eventually be forced to admit that God did not make man in 'His' image, as the Bible indicates. In fact, they might be forced to actually admit the much more obvious fact, if you think about it: that human beings have invented every deity, and basically made them all in our own image! The doctrines set forth by religious establishments are generally ones that are simplistic and manipulative and conducive to patriarchal control, and NOT ones that are reality-based, fair-minded, salubrious, or honoring of feminine values. It is time we began to really honor Mother Earth!

Some people are like Socrates, seeking knowledge and being skeptical and demonstrating a willingness to cultivate reasonable doubts. Others cherish certainties and embrace ignorance. Some believe that cosmic and biological evolutionary processes have taken place over the eons. Others believe in a relatively recent Biblical Creation. There is extremely little probability that Creationism is a more accurate explanation of the Universe than physical evolution, which has overwhelming evidence supporting it. For some deeper perspective, see *Chapter #101 - The Evolution of Life*, which can be found in *Comprehensive Global Perspective: An Illuminating Worldview*.

Faith, Religion and God

Westerners tend to be puzzled by stark divisions in the Islamic faith. The two primary factions of Islam are the Shia and the Sunni. It is hard for non-Muslims to imagine that so much strife and violence has been invoked over doctrinal divisions between these two factions. It must be a really big dispute, right? Well, let's look into it: what is the conflict about? It appears to be a stubborn disagreement over which of four original Caliphs was the rightful successor to the Prophet Muhammad after he died. That's all this terrible conflict is about?! Peace, brothers!

Christian faiths themselves have been fractured into so many different branches that it is hard to figure out their differences. Who can specifically say what the differences are between Catholics, Protestants, Baptists, Episcopalians, Lutherans and Methodists? A true Jesus savior would have been perplexed by all the conflict that has been fomented in his name, if indeed he existed as a real peace-loving man. How, he might wonder, could people have lost his most important messages about loving thy neighbor and caring for the poor? How could honorably religious people vote for conservative politicians that pander to the rich and abandon the poor?

God represents many different things to many different people. Countless religions and cults and mythological conceptions have been propounded throughout the long course of human history, and almost without exception each

one has had its own Creation story, its own moral doctrines, and its own symbolic mythologies. None of them are absolutely right or wrong. They are alternative ways of trying to explain the way things are, and to provide guidance. There is no certain truth, because subjectivity is ultimate. Absolute truths do not exist in a quantum world, and the language-oriented constructions in our minds are related only indirectly to 'reality'.

"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*

No one person's God is a better or truer God than anyone else's God. If there really is a Supreme Being, it is a God bigger than the narrow concepts provided by our limited imaginations and our solipsistic, biocentric and anthropocentric thoughts and religious doctrines. If there is a God, it is a God that presides over ALL of humanity, a God that does not take sides in partisan conflicts, a God whose highest virtue is love, a God that represents Golden Rule acceptance for those who believe differently. If there is a God, it is a God that equally accepts Christians, Muslims, Jews, Mormons, Hindus, Buddhists, agnostics and atheists, and rich people and poor people, the powerful and the weak, males and females, old people and young, black people and whites and Latinos and Asians, citizens, immigrants and foreigners, heterosexuals and homosexuals -- EVERYONE!

The Gods that humans have created throughout history have always had qualities that are anthropomorphic because people have generally felt desperate hopes and psychological needs to worship concrete symbols of inexplicable and implacable forces. Billions of people hope to sway their deities from what seems to otherwise be demonstrably impersonal indifference in the Universe. They do so by praying and exhibiting righteous devotion in hopes of getting God to grant them personal favors. But if there is a God, it must be a God that doesn't side with one person against another, a God that loves peaceful coexistence between 'His' human subjects, a God that helps those who help themselves, a God that favors reason over irrationality, a God that offers salvation to those who most deserve it because of their own efforts to live a good life. If there is a God, it should be a God that smiles upon those who act with honesty and virtue and compassion, a God that appreciates people who have an attitude that they are going to make the best of whatever comes their way.

It is no wonder that, in conjunction with widespread acceptance of mythological deities as simple and convenient explanations of existence, many people have also created a plethora of versions of the Devil. Human beings have always been quite busy 'making bargains with the devil', so maybe that's why so many people assume such a diabolic entity must exist!

"The fundamental irony of American history is that we follow the better angels of our nature when we honestly and compassionately confront the devilish realities we would like to ignore or deny."

--- Cornel West, *The Atlantic*, November 2007

At varying depths within each of us there is a laughing philosopher self, a self that recognizes what is essentially a preposterous anthropocentricity of every conception of God. There is a profoundly suspect superstition-like foundation for all cherished convictions about a Supreme Being and an afterlife. We are all spiritual beings, but true spirituality and religious doctrines do not mix well. Doubts lie in wait for every person who is honest with themselves. Packaged religious beliefs may be convenient and captivating and reassuring, but they are addictively opiate-like in their seductively simplistic temptation.

Karl Marx infamously observed that "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness." People in modern times cherish freedom, so we need not abolish anything, but let us evolve and open our eyes and hearts!

Since many people desperately seek solace in the belief that there will be some sort of "afterlife" once they die, they tend to be more accepting of an unfair fate in the here and now during their only real life in all of eternity. Opium may make a person feel dreamily at peace, but it is not a healthy addiction, and neither is naïve acceptance of religious indoctrination. We should not gamble our lives away on hopes for some future life, especially when our energies would be better spent on joining together with others to demand that a more just world be created *here*

now, while we are alive. Our human potentials can only be achieved while we are alive, and it is all but certain that no joy or meaning or satisfaction will come to us once we are dead.

There is substantial power in believing, belonging, praising, praying, singing together, and sharing convictions. But the positive social and psychological aspects of religious experiences do not in any way prove that the stories told by established religions are true. Instead, they reveal much more about us as human beings. They are like Greek myths revealing archetypal human characteristics that exist within each of us, and like Rorschach tests that manifest subconscious psychological traits.

Our attitudes are vitally important to us personally, especially our attitudes toward circumstances, adversities and successes, and our attitudes toward others. We have rather limited control over the circumstances that affect us, or the emotions we feel, but we can and do choose how to respond to them. To live well, it is good to have a positive attitude, and to let go of negative impulses. And it is valuable to live by the tenets of the Serenity Prayer:

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;
the courage to change the things I can;
and the wisdom to know the difference.

Here is another insightful excerpt from Mark Twain's *Corn-Pone Opinions*:

"We get our notions and habits and opinions from outside influences; we do not have to study them out. ... We are creatures of outside influences; as a rule we do not think, we only imitate." ... "It is our nature to conform; it is a force which not many can successfully resist. What is its seat? The inborn requirement of self-approval. We all have to bow to that; there are no exceptions. ... But as a rule our self-approval has its source in but one place and not elsewhere -- the approval of other people."

"Broadly speaking, there are none but corn-pone opinions. And broadly speaking, corn-pone stands for self-approval. Self-approval is acquired mainly from the approval of other people. The result is conformity. Sometimes conformity has a sordid business interest -- the bread-and-butter interest -- but not in most cases, I think. I think that in the majority of cases it is unconscious and not calculated; that it is born of the human being's natural yearning to stand well with his fellows and have their inspiring approval and praise -- a yearning which is commonly so strong and so insistent that it cannot be effectually resisted, and must have its way. A political emergency brings out the corn-pone opinion in fine force in its two chief varieties -- the pocketbook variety, which has its origin in self-interest, and the bigger variety, the sentimental variety -- the one which can't bear to be outside the pale; can't bear to be in disfavor; can't endure the averted face and the cold shoulder; wants to stand well with his friends, wants to be smiled upon, wants to be welcome, wants to hear the precious words, "He's on the right track!" Uttered, perhaps by an ass, but still an ass of high degree, an ass whose approval is gold and diamonds to a smaller ass, and confers glory and honor and happiness, and membership in the herd. For these gauds, many a man will dump his life-long principles into the street, and his conscience along with them. We have seen it happen. In some millions of instances."

Trying to Think about God

If there is a God, it must be a God that loves a healthy environment and biological diversity and responsible stewardship of the natural world. If there is a God, it must be a God that demands respect for the ecological underpinnings of 'His' creation. If there is a God, 'He' surely would not be supportive of our ceaseless human efforts to control and exploit the natural world for our own selfish ends without giving greater respect to the underpinnings of its well-being.

Nature itself is supremely indifferent to any particular individual. Nature is ordered according to the impersonal certainties of physical laws. Things take place due to causes and effects that we can't quite fully understand. If a large meteorite were to crash through the atmosphere and wipe out a large proportion of all organisms on our planet tomorrow, as occurred 65 million years ago with the Cretaceous Extinction, it would be just another day in the Universe.

If there really is a God, it must be an all-inclusive God that encompasses all of time and space and nature. God must be infinite, eternal and ineffable. God cannot conform to limited human concepts or mythological imaginings

or superstitious beliefs or doctrinaire dogmas designed to manipulate the faithful. God surely cannot be limited to mere anthropocentric projections of our hopes, hubris, ethnocentricities and insecurities upon a Universe that is far more complex than our understandings can ever fully encompass.

Followers of God should accept the higher priorities of God's role in loving, not hating. They must favor the greater social good, and support true justice, not narrow partisanship or oppressive religious extremism. God should embody true moral concepts, not jealousy, pride or cravings of adulation and praise. And doggone it, religious authorities should stop promoting attitudes that are discriminatory or regard gay people as abominations, or subvert people's privacy rights, or oppose family planning and women's reproductive rights.

It is tragic for humanity -- and oddly paradoxical -- when religious fervor is channeled to ends that are self-righteously discriminatory, reactionary or extremely sexist or violent. People who are self-professed born-again Christians have formed unholy alliances in recent years with politicians who adhere to right-wing doctrines. In such bargains with the devil, religious people are often manipulated into supporting shrewd politicians who espouse regressive social policies and aggressive foreign policies. These religious people have, as a consequence, been swindled into supporting an agenda that contradicts the major moral tenets of their faiths.

As Martin Luther King noted, "Any religion that professes to be concerned about the souls of men but is not concerned about the city government that damns the soul, the economic conditions that corrupt the soul, the slum conditions and social evils that cripple the soul, is a dry, dead, do-nothing religion in need of new blood." He wisely added: "Too often the church talked about a future good 'over yonder', totally forgetting the present evil over here."

Many religions have their roots in appeals to the poor and the downtrodden. They set forth doctrines that promulgate ideas of what is morally good. Their holy books speak of love, social justice, peace, charity, mercy and neighborly good will. After generally terrible struggles against persecution, the prophets of new religions occasionally gain enough adherents to achieve wider acceptance. Eventually they may even grow into movements and obtain political power, and when they do, they often abuse their power with astonishingly hypocritical fervor. Instead of advancing the ideals upon which they have been founded, they often repressively collaborate with those in power.

In the United States so far in the twenty-first century, religious establishments have helped involve our nation in unjust imperialism and crusading foreign interventionism and preemptive wars and empire-building activities. They have often directly or tacitly supported politicians whose policies serve to increase inequalities, and are anti-democratic, and are deeply dishonest or condone unjustified secrecy in the government or punitive torture of prisoners. And this state of affairs got glaringly worse during the Trump regime.

What existential irony this is! What sinister cynicism! It is amazing that people in positions of power can so dishonorably exploit gullible people and take advantage of the blind faith and willful ignorance of this 'coalition of the willing'. Powerful people act this way to achieve narrowly selfish objectives, and they do so with ignoble and brazen hubris when they target people whose religious beliefs are founded on what should be noble ideals, greater good morals, and honorable traditions. Scheming politicians exploit such people with disguised contempt, and advance the narrow interests of the rich, the powerful and the privileged. This is unconscionable!

Our superpower nation, bristling with nuclear missiles, has been acting arrogantly, as if MIGHT is actually RIGHT. And in 2022, Vladimir Putin has upstaged us, waging a brutal criminal war against Ukraine. But NO authority-abusing leader should ruthlessly lord it over others as if ANY means is justified to achieve ends, no matter how egomaniacal, power hungry, base, selfish, or crassly materialistic these ends may be. Such attitudes betray our humanity. To harvest peace, we must sow justice!

An ancient Chinese proverb says, "May you live in interesting times." Well, we sure do live in exceedingly interesting times! As urgently fascinating as these times are, with all the economic malfeasance that is calamitating our societies, these times are going to get even more interesting as fossil fuels are depleted and carbon 'sinks' overflow, and the climate becomes more destabilized, and our human numbers continue to increase due to religious and ideological pronatalism ("the encouragement of fruitful multiplying").

Future generations will be forced to deal with the consequences of the actions taken during these interesting times. Experts like Nobel Laureate Joseph Stiglitz point to the crippling legacy we are leaving in the form of enormous debt, which has been incurred in outlandish amounts in the past 20 years for expediencies like enriching the rich and fighting wars without requiring current taxpayers to pay for them. This must change!

Self-aware, humanity teeters on a precipice. We are powerful, yet vulnerable, driven by strong biological drives, and animated by an ancient hierarchy of needs and desires. Most people are moved to faith in a God, and their faith has an underlying motive of seeking hope in their lives, assuaging vague fears, and feeling self-justification in their beliefs and biases.

A pop-culture guru once made a curious observation: "Life is eternal. But even if it isn't and I made it up, I like it! I mean as long as you're going to make it up (the way that REALITY IS), you might as well make it up the way you like it." This is a surprising way to look at things, isn't it? ("Get an Afterlife!") To the extent that it is true we make up our realities, we should choose beliefs we like, but only if they are not inimically harmful to our well-being, or to the well-being of others, like our children and theirs. Let's interpret reality in ways that are modern and accurate and meaningful. Let's choose to see reality in ways that are strongly in accord with spiritual nobility and important human values. Let's make 'growth choices', not 'fear choices'; let's progress, not regress.

Sometimes bold action is required, and much can be accomplished through sheer 'chutzpah' in acting to get things done. The force of personality, however, is not always the most trustworthy or reliable of adhesives, or a good lubricant for cooperative endeavors.

The compelling film *Racing Extinction* makes it viscerally clear that our priorities need to be shifted to give us greater hope for a healthier natural world. Check it out! Protect the beautiful manta rays and whales and such.

Jared Diamond, the professor who has written a book about how societies choose to fail or succeed, indicates that at times behaviors and institutions become antiquated that once had served society well. When that happens and they no longer serve healthy utilitarian, social or ecological values, the societies must either change or face unnecessary adversities or collapse. It is high time that we boldly pursue positive adaptive change at this critical juncture in history. This should involve not only our religious institutions, but also our business, financial and political ones!

Was John Lennon onto Something?

Entertain this possibility: God is a fiction, like an über-Father-figure icon invention of the human mind. The soul and the mind and the independent individual self are all, in a similar sense, merely fictions of our imaginations. Just ask an expert in neurobiology. This is among the most advanced of the understandings of contemporary scientists and philosophers. Think about the ramifications!

What if there is no God, no hell below us, above us only sky?

Imagine there's no heaven
It's easy if you try
No hell below us
Above us only sky
Imagine all the people
Living for today...

Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion too
Imagine all the people
Living life in peace ...

You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one

I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will be as one

Imagine no possessions
I wonder if you can
No need for greed or hunger
A brotherhood of man
Imagine all the people
Sharing all the world ...

You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will live as one.

--- *Imagine*, John Lennon

Belated Preamble

Feel free to believe what you like. Yay for you! And, "Yay for us!"

The essential concept of FAIRNESS that is embodied in the Golden Rule is a basic underpinning of democracy. The first Amendment to the great American Bill of Rights establishes the freedom of religious belief. It should be an overarching requirement in all societies for rules of law to be established that guarantee religious freedoms. The reason for this? Because we know that too much conflict has been caused by religious differences throughout history, and the fairest way to prevent this is to guarantee all people equal rights to believe what they like, and to make sure governments do not endorse any one religion over another, or persecute those who belong to minorities.

People have a profound desire to live their lives in freedom and dignity, and to be guaranteed individual rights. Everyone feels deep-seated insecurities, so most people seek the security of certainties in a world that is ultimately subjective and relative and insecure. Each of us has a strong need to believe and to belong, so leaders seeking positions of authority make powerful appeals to our emotions.

But religious authority is highly undemocratic, and it generally imposes a reactionary suppression of alternate ways of seeing things, censoring information and denying alternate understandings and discriminating against those who believe differently. People who think they are absolutely right tend to be self-righteous, zealous and sometimes dangerously fanatical.

Not only should every person be entitled to believe whatever they want, but no one should be allowed to impose their beliefs on others. It may be natural to feel a kind of bemused contempt for others who seem so wrong from the perspective of one's own strong convictions, but supremacism, intolerance and hatred are too much of a threat to the greater good to be given an official foothold. We should all admit that there is always a possibility that our own cherished ideas and beliefs are, in fact, erroneous. People in different parts of the U.S. live in substantially different perceptual bubbles, like the sensitivities found in the generally liberal San Francisco bubble and the contrasting convictions held dear in the Bible Belt bubble.

"God works in many ways his wonders to perform." But God is not a skillful mechanic. A man drives over a cliff and "by a miracle", he only breaks his back. It would be more divine if God made the man a better driver and he stayed on the road. (!!!)

--- Paul Goodman (paraphrased)

People are frequently sheep-like in their beliefs. Often, beliefs are inherited through genetic and family propensities and through social and religious indoctrination. This is much more common than that beliefs are arrived at through evaluation and reasoned consideration. This is one reason why people are susceptible to being manipulated by demagogues, religious zealots, charismatic charlatans and devious absolutist certainty-proclaiming politicians. When people seek security in traditional beliefs, this makes them vulnerable to being exploited for purposes completely contrary to the noble aspects of their beliefs.

Religious beliefs can have a positive utility, but they can become detrimental to the true safety and security of those who believe, and of others. When harmful outcomes occur, the beliefs should be reconsidered or jettisoned, especially when values espoused have become outmoded or detrimental due to changing circumstances or greater truths or more important understandings of the true self-interest found in the common good.

The late Christopher Hitchens described his experiences in a disciplined English boarding school where he was "compelled to sit through the sinister fairy tales of Christianity". This school was in a region where the natural beauty was marvelous, and Hitchens noted the positive influence of many of his teachers who expressed enthusiasm for birds and animals and trees. St. Francis of Assisi would have been heartened to behold it. But some of Christopher's teachers were petty tyrants who tried to impose absolute domination in their small spheres. This gave Christopher Hitchens a cogent early understanding of the tendency for many people to be "micro-megalomaniacs". What a concept!

Hitchens' experiences at boarding school brought home to him the fact that religion has often been used as "an excellent reinforcement of shaky temporal authority." Recognizing that people like to exert power over others, Hitchens discovered that words can be used as weapons in schools and peer groups and families. It is certainly the case that domestic violence is often the result of struggles between people where inadequate respect is accorded to the ones we supposedly love.

This treatise explores conundrums like these because humanity increasingly needs a new era of enlightenment, and new-found respect for the Golden Rule to get us through the tricky straits of our economic, social, political, spiritual and environmental predicaments. Thinking clearly about our lives gives us the ability to step outside our everyday ways of seeing things, and to appreciate the rich interrelatedness of all life. Think about the amazing beauty, diversity and complexity of all living things. Yay for them! But let's not ignore their vulnerability.

Politics and Religion in Recent Years

The winds of change are blowing, and the American people hunger for leaders who are more honest, ones they can trust, and ones who act for the common good. They want leaders who are committed to more fair-minded goals, and to policies that are consistent with the ideals upon which our country was founded. Oddly, the Republicans who competed to win the Presidential primaries in 2008, 2012 and 2016 were quite retrogressive. Each of them stumbled over themselves to appeal to born-again-Christian religious fanatics and social conservatives. The political calculus of this loyalty is understandable, but it is an excessively narrow political loyalty to conservative stances on hot button social issues and failed ideologies. It has also been, since 9/11/01, a form of pandering to those who have been conditioned to fear terrorists above all else. John McCain's views on war and attacking Iran and his once stated belief that we should stay in Iraq for 100 years were frightening and would have been prohibitively costly. I called on all 2016 Republican candidates to moderate their views and partisan orthodoxy, but in a cold calculus, they chose the devious divisive demagogue Donald Trump.

Religion is a vital part of our culture. This is why the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution included this provision: *Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.* The government is limited by this first provision of the Bill of Rights to remaining neutral on religion, and not taking sides. Yet many Republican politicians declare that we are a Christian nation, and Mitt Romney faithfully stood by the mythology and bizarre tenets of his Mormon grandfathers. All other American politicians strive to reassure the populace that they have deep personal convictions in God, for otherwise they would probably have little chance of getting elected.

Before the advent of Trump, the Republican coalition had splintered into a struggle between progress-opposing religious folks and change-averse social conservatives and power-hungry apologists for military strength and those who put top priorities on profiteering and substantial monopolies on wealth concentrated in the hands of the few. Voices for a sensibly balanced budget, fiscal restraint and far-sighted policies have rarely been heeded in the past 20 years. When Republicans were the minority party from 2009 to 2017, they united in opposition to obstruct almost all Democratic initiatives. Divisive strategies are paramount in our politics, but this harsh partisanship is a *modus operandi* that is harmful, so it is undesirable. We do not need a 'party of no': we need a party that supports visionary good ideas to help solve the daunting existential problems we face.

Republican politicians gained a majority in the U.S. Senate in the November 2014 elections, and then they demonstrated little sign of choosing to govern responsibly. Nonetheless, a surge of discontent is growing among people who oppose unfair economic policies, corporate abuses, regressive tax policies, irresponsible fiscal policies, deep dishonesty, divisive partisanship, manipulative fear-mongering, military aggression, drone bombings, and the hypocrisy of anti-evolution and anti-choice religious zealotry. Our leaders need to be able to rise above short-term-oriented expediencies and extreme polarization, and begin to act with greater honesty, integrity, fairness and far-sighted intention to make our nation a healthier and fairer country. Can they?

When Barack Obama was first elected President in 2008, the majority of Americans expected dramatically positive new directions. Young people were beginning to recognize how antagonistic the status quo is to their own long-term interests. Their outlook is naturally solipsistic, but they can be surprisingly alert and intelligent, and they are becoming increasingly aware that their future well-being is being threatened by the status quo of wasteful consumerism, mismanagement, corrupt corporatism, crony capitalism, vituperative partisanship, the sadly conservative domination of the Supreme Court, enormous debt, wars, policies that primarily benefit older people, and profligate uses of fossil fuels that are causing copious emissions of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere and associated climate disruptions.

Theocratic movements pose big threats to democracy and personal freedoms and a healthy separation of Church and State. So do religious extremism, discriminatory self-righteousness, or blind beliefs in parochial doctrines. Revivals in the religions of the world should be progressive, not fundamentalist, reactionary or overly patriarchal. Unfortunately, it seems to be the case that anxieties and fears tend to propel religious people and others away from moderate views and socially valuable common sense. The Age of Enlightenment was also known as the Age of Reason, so it is quite curious that today there are so many assaults on reason in the name of established religions!

The Medium is the Message, and Today's is Distorting, Not Moderate

Rush Limbaugh worked a profitable vein for more than 30 years. Limbaugh relished making fun of women's contentions that they are often victims of excessive discrimination. His attitude, though deplorably reprehensible, was highly profitable for him. He made more than \$30 million every year for decades on his radio show, and over \$80 million annually in recent years before he died.

One might wonder how Limbaugh got his start. Revealingly, it involves the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine, an official policy of the Federal Communication Commission from 1949 until 1987. The purpose of the Fairness Doctrine was to ensure that all radio and television broadcast stations provided a diversity of viewpoints to listeners and viewers. The Fairness Doctrine stipulated that radio and TV stations must present controversial issues of public importance in a manner that was honest, equitable and balanced. Ronald Reagan and Republicans decided that the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine would suit their political interests best, being astute in areas of linguistic framing and targeted political messaging and manipulative propaganda. Limbaugh exploited the repeal of this fairness doctrine better than any other media personality. Freed from requirements to provide rebuttals to provocative opinions, Limbaugh's reactionary and confrontational style became sensationally profitable, and he soon signed with ABC Radio Networks. Subsequently his program was syndicated by Clear Channel Communications, a radio network now owned by Bain Capital LLC and another private equity firm. (As of 2014, Clear Channel did a make-over and officially changed its name to iHeartMedia.)

Follow this closely. Clear Channel started as a company with one radio station in 1972 in San Antonio, Texas. The company benefitted from an Act of Congress in 1996 that deregulated media ownership and allowed media outlets to be consolidated into the hands of huge corporate entities. Not long thereafter, the influence of giant corporations in radio and television broadcasting became dominating. Today Clear Channel owns more than 800 broadcast radio stations, and it proudly pushes its conservative biases. Most of its talk-radio stations feature right-wing personalities like Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, Glenn Beck, and the Savage Nation's rude Michael Savage, all of whom seem to practically rant and rave with ill will, pandering to a low common denominator of resentment, insecurity, paranoia and racial prejudice. A number of years ago, crippling debt associated with leveraged acquisitions forced Clear Channel to lay off thousands of employees in what was described as an employment

"bloodbath", and their radio stations moved to more centralized programming with less local content. This is not good for our democracy.

In 2006, Clear Channel was taken private in a leveraged buyout by Bain Capital, the private equity company that Mitt Romney and two other partners formed in 1984. These partners made huge profits from this enterprise, and the money was, of course, taxed at historically low rates. These profits then helped fuel Mitt Romney's presidential candidacy, which was intent on reducing taxes on rich people even further.

Meanwhile, conservative media mogul Rupert Murdoch from Australia created Fox News Channel, and Fox News has become an astonishingly opinion-manipulative media presence in Britain and the U.S. Rupert Murdoch, like Limbaugh, exploited the deregulation of media ownership and the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine. For years, the head of Fox News was the staunch and influential Republican Roger Ailes, whose extreme partisanship affiliated him as a media consultant with Nixon, Reagan, George H.W. Bush and other conservatives. A documentary film titled *Outfoxed* makes a convincing case that Fox News is very far from being accurate or honest, in brash contradiction to its self-characterization as being "Fair and Balanced". Nonetheless, it used this slogan for years to imply it actually fairly presents news stories and issues.

I felt in 2012 that a new "Game Change" was taking place that involved a resurgence of more liberal ways of seeing the world, and greater respect for women's rights. One of our Founding Fathers, Patrick Henry once said: "United we stand; divided we fall. Let us not split into factions which must destroy that union upon which our existence hangs." These are perceptive words, on many levels. Finding common ground is surely better than allowing ourselves to fall prey to divisive partisanship and intransigent conflicts of interest. Since Republicans have been wielding too much influence in recent years, this hope is hard to achieve.

On Education

Mark Twain included some entertaining sayings in THE PUDD'NHEAD MAXIMS in his book *Following the Equator* (1897). He wrote, "These wisdoms are for the luring of youth toward high moral altitudes. The author did not gather them from practice, but from observation. To be good is noble; but to show others how to be good is nobler and no trouble." LOL!

One of these maxims reads: "There are those who scoff at the schoolboy, calling him frivolous and shallow. Yet it was the schoolboy who said, 'Faith is believing what you know ain't so.'"

I feel it would be valuable for every person to gain more comprehensive understandings of various religions of the world and their motives. To better understand driving forces behind churches and social mores and their impacts on societies, I wholeheartedly advocate the teaching of courses in religious studies in all high schools and colleges and lifelong learning programs. The defining doctrines of all major religions should be studied, along with the understandings of agnosticism and atheism. The genesis of all these beliefs should be studied along with "primitive" worldviews that were ascendant before the more sophisticated (though more conflict engendering) idea of monotheism evolved.

The curricula in Comparative Religion courses should be unbiased, and based on a comprehensive assessment of the tenets of each body of doctrine and thought. It should investigate the history of religion, the genesis of religious thought, and the psychology of religious belief itself. It could be based on a textbook similar to *Philosophy for Dummies*, which more or less fairly analyzes the deep underpinnings of religious and philosophical beliefs, even though it has distinct theistic biases. It could incorporate the thought-provoking insights of the compelling book *Spontaneous Evolution*.

Young people should be exposed to the essential differences between Western religions and Eastern religions in their explanations of existence and Creation. They should ponder the fact that Jewish, Christian and Islamic religious beliefs hold that the Universe was created about 6,000 years ago and someday in the future it will end, while Hindu and Buddhist beliefs hold that the Universe has always existed and it always will; that it will change, but it will never end.

Science offers a differing understanding, intriguing for its extensive and convincing physical evidence. This is the Big Bang theory. Scientists think the Universe will either expand forever or eventually begin to contract and

collapse back into a central place in untold billions of years, maybe then 'to Big Bang again'. The latter outcome would no doubt involve fascinating impacts and explosions, I imagine! These metaphysical abstractions lie billions of years away, and there are much more imminent things to be concerned about.

Albert Einstein once incisively observed, "The further the spiritual evolution of mankind advances, the more certain it seems to me that the path to genuine religiosity does not lie through the fear of life, and the fear of death, and blind faith, but through striving after rational knowledge."

It would be valid for students to explore the likelihood that all Holy Books contain the words of men, and NOT the Word of God. Many authors of Holy Books sought to provide legitimacy in the words they wrote. For instance, the authors of the Book of Mormon reassured readers in the book's preface that the words the book contained were the absolute truth. They adduced "evidence" of sworn testimony by a number of witnesses who claim that they'd seen "the golden plates and the engravings thereon." Joseph Smith claims to have translated these engravings by means of some mysterious process to create the Book of Mormon. The Golden Plates were allegedly delivered by an angel of God that came down from heaven. "And we lie not, God bearing witness of it," they asserted. (It reminds me of Richard Nixon angrily declaring, "I am not a crook." It made one wonder what he was covering up!) The fact that the Golden Plates mysteriously disappeared after their translation explains why such testimony was required. Phony Moroni?!

The Book of Mormon came into existence much more recently than the holy books of most other religions in the world today, so its genesis and evolution are of heightened interest. Joseph Smith purportedly published his translation of "golden plates" in 1830. He claimed to have found these plates buried near his home in upstate New York, and declared that they were inscribed with "reformed Egyptian" language. He supposedly dictated his translation using a "seer stone" in the bottom of a hat that he placed over his face to view the words written within the stone. Magic! There is no mention of any drugs or intoxicants having been involved. After having translated the plates, "Smith said he returned the plates to their angelic guardian", so there has never been any proof that they existed, except for testimony provided on the first page of the Book of Mormon by the eleven witnesses who claim they had seen the plates, for sure.

The credibility of the claim that the plates existed is a "troublesome item", according to a historian of the Mormon Church's Latter Day Saints movement. Ya think? I don't suppose we even need to bother investigating the fact that no linguist or Egyptologist has ever heard of "reformed Egyptian" language! One theory holds that Joseph Smith composed the Book of Mormon by plagiarizing it from a number of nineteenth century authors like Oliver Cowdery, Solomon Spalding and Sidney Rigdon. It turns out that Cowdery happens to have been one of the witnesses attesting to having seen the plates, and thus appears to have conspired to advance the flimsy legitimacy and impact of these scriptures.

Mark Twain expressed the opinion that several Scriptural phrases had been ladled into the Book of Mormon to prevent it from sounding too modern. He wrote that, if pretentious phrases like "And it came to pass" had been left out, the Book of Mormon "would have been only a pamphlet." Aha! Ha Ha!

This religious holy book is less than 200 years old, yet extensive mysteries surround its genesis and evolution, so it is no surprise that the holy book of Islam, which originated more than 1,000 years ago, and the holy book of Christianity, various parts of which originated between 1,700 and 3,000 years ago, are shrouded in mystery and have been subject to extraordinary amounts of creative editing and manipulative revisionism.

Mark Twain took note of the absurdities in Mormon scriptures, and wrote humorously in *Roughing It*: "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 have ever heard of that man before or not, and even if I do not know the name of the angel, or his nationality either."

Tears and laughter converge in both the poetic and the preposterous, and tragedy and comedy can be seen to have certain unsuspected affinities. The profane can approach the sublime, and the profound and the nonsensical may not really be all that much different!

A Trinity or Two of Perspective

The convoluted mental gymnastics involved in belief systems of monotheistic religions are stunning. Religious scholars perplexingly posit one God, a two-fold dualism, and a Holy Trinity. It is a bizarre and mysterious conception to believe that God is actually a Father, his Son and a Holy Ghost -- all rolled up into one being. It's real curious, in fact revelatory, that the original creative force of the universe is conceived as a BEING at all. If a human-like supreme being did create the entire universe, what about the vital other half -- the Mother, the Daughter, and the Holy Soul? This part of our humanity has been suppressed by men in patriarchal religions, so the doctrinal Holy Trinity actually represents only half of any true unity that lies deep within each of us.

The Star of David is a religious symbol of Judaism and Jewish identity. It consists of two equilateral triangles that are interlaced together, as if two Trinities are intertwined. This is an evocatively compelling symbolic representation of the complementary male trinity and female trinity, both merged together in an essential balance. This perspective is a valuable way to regard our world because it represents a more holistic, fair-minded, hopeful and healing point of view.

The ways our brains perceive sensory input affect the way we interpret what we perceive. Even the language constructs through which sensory inputs are filtered have an influence on how we perceive. So we actually do make up our own realities to a certain degree. Cathy Gere states in *Knossos and the Prophets of Modernism* that "There is no escaping the fact that we read the human past to understand the present, and then interpret it in the light of the future that we fear or desire."

We see patterns and then our brains fill these patterns in to eliminate ambiguities, even when our fabrications do not correspond to reality. This can be seen in visual puzzles and conundrums like the generative aspects of perception revealed in the Gestalt Law of Reification, or in psychological projections unveiled by Rorschach inkblot tests. What we see is often conceived as containing more information than what is really conveyed in a sensory stimulus.

While these ideas are abstruse, the vital point is that errors of perception undeniably occur, and it behooves us to be aware of some sources of such misunderstandings. Anyone who experiences altered states of consciousness like those characterized by an energized and impressive focus of attention and competence during moments of "flow", or by the psychoactive "highs" caused by certain drugs, may understand that opening the doors of perception a bit wider can stimulate creativity and provide alternate ways of seeing things that are valuably insightful and potentially more holistic than conventional perspectives.

Scrutinize the following sentence. Oru cabitapileis to dcehiper wettrin wdors from naer grebibsih aer rhatre anamizg. Tihs si yuor biran at wrok. I satule this semenig mraclie. Oru alibtiy ot raed is pherpas eevn btteer tahn oru alitiby to haer wehn it cmeos to filnlig in nosancinsel blakns. Nwo let su trun oru antetoitn ot sppusoed Edn Teims.

Good and Evil and Judgment Day and 'the Rapture' and Such Things

Sometimes I feel that we inhabit a world of melting clocks like the one depicted by Salvador Dali in his famed painting *The Persistence of Memory*. Consider those folks who believe that a Rapture-like Day of Doom is imminent. Judgment Day may metaphorically be upon us, but it is not the particular judgment by God of each person when they die, as Christian eschatology asserts. This is a real judgment that will be a reflection of future generations looking back on the economic, political, social and ecological ethos of today, and judging that we have acted with obtuse selfishness, heedless shortsightedness, harm-engendering denial, and rashly risky behaviors.

The metaphorical Judgment Day of modern times will be "Biblical" in a fascinating and pathetic sense: Sure enough, all future generations will suffer, and they will do so for our sins. But in this case, the suffering will be a tangible carry-forward of our shortsighted selfishness in squandering natural resources and polluting the planet, and in contributing to the destruction of habitats, the annihilation of wildlife, and the upsetting of global weather

patterns, and in causing many forms of life on Earth to be driven to extinction, and in saddling our descendants with huge amounts of debt and interest expense for generations to come.

These are sins that reflect an obtuse lack of concern for the nature of the legacy that our actions portend. Unless we alter our public policies and habitual behaviors soon, will we suffer punishment in an afterlife of eternal Hell for our wrongdoing? Or will it *actually* be our children and our descendants forevermore who will be the main ones to do the suffering for our follies today, here on Earth?

I offer this ringing prophecy: There will be no End Times. There will be no Armageddon. THERE WILL BE NO RAPTURE. Hucksters who claim otherwise rank right up there with the most extreme of right-wing Iranian ayatollahs in their religious fanaticism. Yes, there will be more floods, droughts, tornados, hurricanes and wildfires. There will be earthquakes and tsunamis, and famines and plagues and species extinctions. These are natural events, with a little help from human beings in those cases where anthropogenic influences have real impacts on outcomes. We curiously call such natural events "Acts of God". Right, "and so it came to pass!" There will, of course, also be more economic panics and recessions and depressions and wars and repressive regimes; these are the consequences of human nature and greed and folly and unbridled ambition.

We should not despair; instead, we should act boldly to create a more salubrious fate. We should not even think of welcoming ecological devastation like the Rapture crowd is apparently wont to do, as Bill Moyers pointed out in a thought-provoking speech he gave about beliefs in Rapture End Times and the dangers that such blind beliefs pose to civilization. See *Rapture Mania: Bizarre Beliefs and Epic Epiphanies* for related insights and the full text of Bill Moyers' observations in his speech.

The psychology of End Times beliefs is curious. Most everyone has seen the cartoon image of a bearded, gnome-like, down-on-his-luck prophet who stands with a roughly-carved signboard that says "The End Is Near". Oh, really, is it now? No, a Day of Doom is not imminent; rather, the dramatic event that approaches is not the end of Time, but the beginning of a revolutionary transformation that will necessarily take more holistic ecological facts into account, and begin to better protect the foundations of our collective well-being. If we're lucky, this transformation will balance gender roles and allow women and feminine values and Mother Earth to be treated with more respect in our patriarchal societies.

We might, alternatively, suddenly blow ourselves to smithereens with nuclear weapons, or fail to take effective steps to avert ecological collapse, but these would be such colossally stupid outcomes that we should make every effort possible, and then more, to assure that this will not be the insane denouement of our kind.

Rapture believers are not dumb or simply ignorant of the realities of nature. Their beliefs are like a misguided credulousness that is a form of madness. Their certainties of conviction in what are demonstrably delusional stories, especially of malicious attributes of a deity, reveal a type of debasement of honorable concepts of God.

Zeitgeist Movie makes a convincing case that theories about supposed End Times are actually a misinterpreted astrological allegory that misconstrue the words in *Matthew 28:20* about "the end of the age." The film makes a compelling case that this verse of the Bible refers not to the end of the world, but to the end of the Age of Pisces, and the beginning of the Age of Aquarius. The phenomenon is correlated to the "precession of the equinoxes", a visual transformation that is caused by a majestically slow angular wobble of the Earth in its orbit around the Sun. This slow periodic change causes the Sun to sequentially rise in one after another of the twelve constellations in the sky that ancients named in the Zodiac. The Sun appears in each of these segments of the sky for a period of about 2,150 years.

The Sun moved from the constellation Aries into the constellation Pisces near the time Jesus was supposed to have lived, and it will leave the constellation Pisces about the year 2150 to go into the constellation Aquarius. I recommend watching Part I of *Zeitgeist Movie* online to better understand this. But in any case, whether the Bible predicts End Times or not, it is a bizarre anthropocentric concept that does not correspond to geophysical or astrophysical realities on the scale of human time.

In the fairy tale *The Chronicles of Narnia*, written by C.S. Lewis, powerful forces for good heroically defeat forces of evil. But things in the real world do not always work out this way. 'Evil' people and 'good' people are not easy to

identify, because even good and bad are relative, and there is good and bad in many people's intentions and activities. Any person who reads *Cannery Row* by John Steinbeck will find that the main character in the book observes that traits leading to success in our society are often vices such as greed, meanness, egotism and self-interest -- and that traits leading to failure may be the result of virtues like kindness, honesty, openness and generosity. Go figure!

The Bible says we are all paying for the terrible sin that was our due for the Fall of Man in the Garden of Eden. This story is much more like a manipulative construct of Bible writers than the likely justice of a loving God. Shouldn't God have been prescient enough to know that human nature is susceptible to the powerful allure of forbidden fruit? The penultimate skeptic, Mark Twain, sure knew about the nature of temptation. He wrote, "There is a charm about the forbidden that makes it unspeakably desirable." Ooh la la! Give me that fruit!

The comedian Bill Maher tellingly says, I would like people who think more like me to understand that it is okay to stand up and say, "We're not the crazy ones. The crazy ones are the people with the talking snake." Downright *Religulous!*

"It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand."

--- Mark Twain

A Feminist Perspective

The alluring temptations of today are more mundane than the search for the knowledge of good and evil, and they often involve such things as males inappropriately trying to take sexual advantage of females without their consent, or Ponzi-scheme perpetrators like Bernie Madoff trying to get their hands on assets of other people that do not belong to them; or "rent-seeking" people profiting from the inadequately disciplined largess of the government. The United States of America is supposedly governed by fair-minded rules of law for this very reason: we need clear rules to provide guidance for socially acceptable and beneficial behaviors.

Harken back to *The Alphabet versus the Goddess* and Dr. Leonard Shlain's examination of the curious transition of early civilizations from Mother Goddess worship, with high levels of respect for women and their roles in society, to the starkly contrasting worship of a male God with accompanying restrictions on the rights, freedoms and prerogatives of women. One of the changes that accompanied this sexist revolution was a devaluation of symbols and images that had formerly been highly regarded.

Take snakes, for instance. As Leonard Shlain pointed out, "Western culture has long reviled the snake, associating it with evil and temptation. But at the dawn of civilization the snake was a positive symbol of feminine energy. Ancient Egyptians perceived the snake as a beneficent, vital creature intimately associated with female sexuality, and, by extension, with life. A snake's sinuous mode of locomotion is evocative of a nubile woman's walk and dance." Ooh la la, Lenny!

Serpentine visualizations and metaphorical associations aside, snake-lover associations and women-appreciating organizations alike lament the male arrogance that has devalued the divine feminine and suppressed women's prerogatives for so many centuries. Marshall McLuhan's famous aphorism "the medium is the message" has a more profound meaning than is commonly comprehended. The advent of alphabets and written words, and the concomitant spread of literacy, have had powerful affects upon our brains and our consciousness. These developments are positive in many ways, yet they have ironically facilitated left-brain dominance and domineering male control. This has aided the oppression of females in human societies because dominant cultures became increasingly patriarchal as these changes took place, according to Shlain's provocative theory.

Perhaps we all share a degree of nostalgia of the soul for the estranged divine feminine. Maybe we feel a kind of regretful sadness that the heartfelt feminine within each one of us has been so rudely suppressed in connection with the dominion of male gods and linear thinking and the outsized influence of the analytical left hemisphere of the brain. We all indistinctly see, as if we are sitting in the flickering light of a crackling campfire that warmly illuminates the darkness with brightness and shadows, that our inner selves could feel greater equanimity and appreciation if we could achieve some sort of transcendent epiphany of expansive feeling and holistic being.

Women have gained increased civil liberties and voting rights and cultural freedoms in the last century in most Western nations. That is not true in most Muslim nations, where women are strictly required to submit to Islamic cultural conservatives. There is a significant hangover effect in those societies, which are still predominantly patriarchal and repressive around the globe today. This is a residual influence of the days when patriarchal religions relegated women to a lowly status in which their rights were substantially circumscribed. Widespread protests against the "morality police" and the Ayatollah in Iran in 2022 are giving emphasis to such injustices.

Established religions and male-dominated governments oppose liberalizing changes to the status quo. Regardless of how this came to be, it is only right and fair that we now commit ourselves, and our governments and social institutions, to the education, empowerment and fairer treatment of girls and women. We should find effective ways to ensure that females are given rights and privileges that are equal to those of men, despite bitter howls by social conservatives.

Reason, too, can be used to rationalize atrocities. It can be responsible for wars, imperialism, sexism and rash abuses of natural ecosystems, just as it can be credited for positive movements to facilitate individualistic accomplishment, democratic fairness, environmental protections, stimulating prose, compelling drama and engaging philosophy. Plato noted in the fourth century BCE that effective individual action should be characterized by desire and passion, and it should be warmed and banked with feelings and emotions, and guided by knowledge and wisdom. I second that notion!

Today, with the advent of visual mediums like movies, documentary films, television and YouTube, there may be a new and offsetting trend that is allowing us to be more aware of the evocative and affective imagery that is most influential in the right hemisphere of our brains. This may be contributing to a valuable and salubrious feminization of our cultures. There may even be a parallel between this trend of feminization in our societies and a similar trend in the evolving ideas within the Earth Manifesto. Since nobody has yet read this manifesto, this theory will have to wait for its eventual corroboration until after these ideas become better known to the general public, or to historians of ideas, philosophy and literature.

Bizarre Concepts, Concluded

"Strange ... a God who could make good children as easily as bad, yet preferred to make bad ones; who made them prize their bitter life, yet stingily cut it short; who mouths Golden Rules and forgiveness multiplied seventy times seven, but invented Hell; who mouths morals to other people and has none himself; who frowns upon crimes yet commits them all; who created man without invitation, then tries to shuffle the responsibility for man's acts upon man, instead of honorably placing it where it belongs, upon himself; and finally with altogether divine obtuseness, invites this poor, abused slave to worship him!"

--- Mark Twain

Greek novelist Nikos Kazantzakis imagined Jesus' first sermon on a hillside above the Lake of Genesee in Galilee in his book *The Last Temptation of Christ*. "Jesus' voice was tranquil and wavering; a gawky bird he was, struggling to twitter for the first time; and his eyes, instead of burning, caressed." He said, "Forgive me, my brothers, but I shall speak in parables. The sower went out to sow his field, and as he sowed, one seed fell on the road and the birds came and ate it. Another fell on stones, found no soil in which to be nourished, and withered away. Another fell on thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it. Finally, another fell on good soil; and it took root, and sprouted an ear, and brought forth grain and fed mankind. He among you who has ears to hear, let him hear!"

Listen! Jesus' message was "Love one another!" "God is love", he said. "He is our Father. He will leave no pain unconsolated, no wound unhealed. However much we suffer pain and hunger in this world, by that much, and more, shall we be filled in heaven. Rejoice, for blessed are the poor, the meek, and the wronged; it is for them that God has prepared the kingdom of heaven." A voice jeered at the prophet's words: "Pie in the sky when we die!"

Laughter ensued. The message, nonetheless, of blessing and redemption and reward appealed to the poor, the meek and the downtrodden, who abounded in those days, as they do today. Later, Nikos Kazantzakis imagined Jesus going off into the desert alone, seeking God. Jesus finally realized the terrifying truth that had eluded him his whole life: he was the Son of God! Yikes! Really? Wow!

The struggle for survival was harsh in those Biblical days. The land was arid, and most people were desperately poor, so they hungered for a Messiah, a Savior. Prophets and false prophets abounded. Perhaps, Judas thought, the Messiah was the entire people. In our conflict-strewn, dog-eat-dog world, we lose sight of the simple fact that by uniting together, much good could be accomplished. Unity in narrowly-shared evangelical dogmatic beliefs is a thin, precarious means of achieving a lasting unity that would be sufficient to save us all. On the other hand, unity in universal understandings and reasoned convictions and sensible commitments to the common good would likely provide a much sturdier framework upon which to pin our collective hopes for a healthier existence, and ways of living that would prove to be sustainable in the long run.

If God created anything, he also created wine, women and song, so eat, drink and be merry! Of course it is true that over-indulgence in wine can harm one's health, and relationships between males and females may become rocky, and eventual suffering and inevitable death do not inspire an overly happy song. But those who evangelize about the kingdom of heaven overlook the woes that are partially caused by religious leaders who confederate themselves with the powers-that-be in the here-and-now. These leaders help, all too often, to deceive people and get them to ignore the benefits provided by nature and the providential ecosystem services available from our home planet when it is in a healthy condition. The real purpose of human beings is lost in the rabble of zealous and gullible believers in God, and in certainties of conviction in misguided pursuits.

What is our real purpose? To live in the present, to appreciate the authentic in life, to nurture the spirit as well as the body, and to enjoy life in balance and moderation; and to be of compassionate service to society and have mercy and forgiveness for others as well as for oneself. AND to leave a legacy that renews rather than destroys the hopes and well-being of all our descendants in future generations.

Disclaimer

I went to confession in a magnificent hilltop cathedral not long ago, and renounced all presumption, so readers can rest assured that it is only the slow pace of my editorial efforts that allows any of it to remain in the expression of these ideas. I'm a gal who sees herself as distinctly unlike the teachers described by Christopher Hitchens in his English countryside boarding school, who he described as *micro-megalomaniacs*, or "those who are content to maintain absolute domination of a small sphere". LOL ... !

I have also made a commitment to my personal Muses to try and reduce the widespread redundancies that pervade various Earth Manifesto writings. I continue to scrutinize the tone and content of my expressed opinions to make sure they are more scrupulously fair. Succinct, laconic and Spartan just do not seem to be in my makeup! It may be true that "brevity is the soul of wit", as William Shakespeare asserted in *Hamlet*, so perhaps I am witless. Then again, Shakespeare's character Polonius in *Hamlet*, who proclaimed this aphorism, had a propensity to give long and rambling speeches, so the joke may be on us all. If brevity is the soul of wit, I'll eat my hat!

After all, sloganeering is brevity. Tweeting can be a form of manipulative brevity. Simplistic propaganda, like that promoted by Faux News, is loquacious but distorted blind brevity, ad infinitum.

Even more humbly I apologize for any tone or content that unfairly maligns or mischaracterizes any of the protagonists or villains in this serious and yet somewhat preposterously comedic farce. The good news is that the natural selection of the passage of time is winnowing out some of the superfluous chaff from the vital seed, and I imagine receiving intelligent editorial feedback from readers someday that will allow a leap forward in conciseness and comprehensiveness and right perspective that will propitiously strengthen the focus and force of these ideas. Through the power of clarity and fair-mindedness, the transformative power of reasonable ideas may be given wing. That's the theory of it, anyway. (Focus!)

Maybe Mormonism?

A final observation about religion: John Krakauer indicated, as I recall, in his compelling book *Under the Banner of Heaven*, that in the early days of the Mormon Church, anyone and everyone was empowered to receive revelations from God. This quickly became an unmanageable tenet, as one might easily imagine. It was probably like a bad dream of omnipotence that begat impotence, or a proverbial bad drug trip on LSD. Maybe it was more accurately like the wildly creative expressions of people at the annual Burning Man festival in the Black Rock Desert of

northwestern Nevada, where tens of thousands of revelers gather near the end of every summer in an astonishingly harmonious expression of anarchic creativity, community, music, fire and wild abandon.

During the early years of their Church, Mormon leaders found it too hard to control the flock with a democratic approach to revelation. So a revelation came from God to Church leaders telling them that only the leader of the Church could receive revelations. How convenient is that?! Curiously, leader Joseph Smith, after being married for many years and just possibly having become a bit bored with the charms of the Missus, suddenly had a brilliant revelation in the year 1831. He claimed that God told him he could have as many wives as he wanted. Oh, I can just imagine what a hell of a good time he had with younger women for a while thereafter. It turns out that Joseph Smith probably had a good number of his 33 wives before the revelation, and that he was just "covering his ass". Who knows?

But God soon thereafter revealed to Joseph's wife that she could have as many husbands as she wanted. Horns on the man! Predictably, darned if God didn't set the record straight the very next night with a revelation to Joseph that only men could have multiple spouses. Whether any of this story is actually true, it suggests an allegorical fact that seems true: egalitarianism always seems to suffer at the hands of the patriarchal, and those people who are obsessed with control and dominion tend to unjustly prevail. And made-up stories seem to cotton suspiciously to the motives of those who make them up!

Maybe Mitt Romney, a Mormon, or Warren Jeffs who is currently incarcerated for life in a Texas prison for sex crimes, can provide a more honest and accurate understanding than my satirical one regarding Mormon polygamy and the control traits of Mormon men in their extreme fundamentalist faith. I want to be fair. But it irks me that the Church of the Latter Day Saints has helped make Utah one of the worst of the 50 states in the U.S. for women, and that the Church has strongly opposed human rights for gay people just as it staunchly opposed religious pluralism in the 1800s. Back then, having recognized that mankind is challenged to govern himself, Mormon leaders concluded that the best of all possible worlds would be one in which Mormons established dominating power and eliminated the Babel of voices, and the perplexity of choices, by making everyone bow to the orthodoxy of their particular beliefs. Most people have strongly differing and more fair-minded points of view!

Utah is one of the most staunchly Republican and anti-progressive of the states in the USA, and the role of the Mormon Church contributes to this pathetically unfair state of affairs. Shame on it!!

Dignity in Dying

Life is a terminal condition. Every living creature eventually dies. We humans sometimes act defiantly heroic, yet we desperately seek consolation and hope against hope for a better "life after death." The father of one of my good friends had a stroke a few months before he died. He made sure to establish a "do not resuscitate" order as his health deteriorated. Instead of being helped to die mercifully, however, he was essentially starved to death. This state of affairs in our nation's medical ethics opposes allowing people to die with dignity, often because religious dogmas oppose this right. For instance, the position of the Mormon Church on euthanasia is that it is "a violation of the commandments of God."

Think about this issue. Euthanasia is a word derived from a Greek word meaning "good death". It refers to the practice of allowing someone to choose to end their life to relieve unbearable pain and suffering during a terminal illness or affliction. Oregon was the first state in the U.S. that made it legal for terminally ill patients to choose the time of their own death, and to have physicians give patients the means to freely make this choice, subject to a number of common sense restrictions. Oregon voters enacted this Death with Dignity initiative in 1994 by a close vote of 51.3% to 48.7%. Three years later, 60% of Oregon voters rejected an attempt to overturn this law, having seen its compassionate nature. The U.S. Supreme Court upheld the law in 2006. The states of Washington and Vermont thereafter reasonably allowed this kind of dignity in dying. California and Colorado passed similar laws in 2016, and Hawaii, Maine and New Jersey in 2019, and New Mexico in 2021.

It is humane and compassionate to allow people the choice of dying with dignity when their death is near or they are suffering terrible pain. Besides, lifetime medical costs are heavily skewed toward the end of life, so a common sense utilitarian argument can be made that it would be far more sensible to let people choose to die when the end

is near than to invest huge amounts of money to keep them alive. Some drug industry representatives, surgeons and hospitals may disagree, but their deep conflicts of interest in making profits from tortuous declines in people's health make their perspectives less respectable in considering this issue.

The fact that we don't spend enough money to ensure that young people are healthy makes the status quo particularly poorly prioritized. Investments in the health of young people are a much better use of limited funds than investments in keeping terminally ill people alive. Young people derive much greater benefits from health care spending in the long lives ahead of them than old people gain in the short time that remains in their lives as they approach death.

Oregon's Death with Dignity Act should be expanded to become legal in all 50 states, with all the covenants and restrictions necessary to ensure that it will not be abused. Patients and their families and doctors should make end of life decisions, not governments or religious authorities. Watch the documentary film *How to Die in Oregon* to see a broader context of this issue.

The Power of Positive Thinking Leads Us toward a Conclusion

The day after Halloween, November 1st, is All Souls' Day in many sects of Christianity. This date is also known as All Saints' Day, and as Dia de los Muertos. In commemoration of this day, many people in Mexico and New Mexico and some pagan locales celebrate by building and then burning a giant 'Zozobra'. This is a tall effigy that is said to represent "Old Man Gloom". By setting fire to such a figure, celebrants symbolically incinerate all of their personal worries and troubles and gloom in the hopefully healing flames. Recent years have been extraordinarily difficult ones for millions of people, so let's all imagine a little Zozobra conflagration of our own -- one in which we ceremonially project our troubles into the heavens and symbolically get rid of them.

Good luck! A sedulous philosophic sibyl aspiring to attain a status as a percipient prophetess recently received a vivid vision in which she saw a transcendent truth. Reasonable reasoning, she realized, can get lost in a fog of words and a maze of quibbles. The essence of what is vitally important can become concealed or obfuscated. I beseech the Muses to help make the essays in this manifesto more meaningful, clear and widely understood!

Wandering in a Literary Daze

"I didn't attend the funeral, but I sent a nice letter saying I approved of it."

--- Attributed to Mark Twain

Another image arises as this Book Three moves along toward to its 212-page conclusion, and it is a bright image of expanding awareness and personal transformation. It is an image of Dante Alighieri furiously composing his stunningly complex condemnation of unrepentant sinners and villains and bad actors and greedy people in his *Nine Circles of Inferno*. Dante Alighieri himself, bereft at his having been forced into exile from his hometown of Florence, Italy, made an imaginary journey through *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* en route to a reunion with the subject of his chivalrous infatuation with Beatrice in *Paradiso*. In the process he experienced psychological and spiritual growth and healing as he grappled with the intense angst of injustices and unnecessary suffering.

How can we have the audacity to think we can change the world? Niccolo Machiavelli would have laughed out loud. Here we are dealing with some of the most powerful motivations in all of human nature: status seeking behaviors, the thrill of power, the prepossessive allure of money, the willingness to do almost anything to get it, weaknesses for vice, the archaic impulse of domineering greed, and the whole passel of material and emotional motivations that have driven so many of our kind into the nine circles of Dante's *Inferno*.

Then again, Dante himself did manage to transcend the terrible angst of his personal circumstances and made a transformative journey through *Purgatorio*, guided by Virgil, the veritable embodiment of rationality, and inspired by an alluring muse of passionate yet unrequited love. He saw deeply that the touchstones of remorse and reconciliation were needed to make his way upward, and he was able to transform his own life. Maybe we too, collectively, are on a similar journey through the pitfalls of hell and the expiatory passages of purgatory, and maybe we too will be able to reach a relative paradise of a better life on Earth. It is possible!

Conclusion

Let us pray. Help us see the true distinctions between moral actions and immoral actions, as they are rightly judged through the lens of consequentialist ethics. Let us grasp the great Garden of Eden epiphany of the fair knowledge of good and evil, of what is really in the best interests of our families, our communities, our nation and humanity in the long run as a whole. And let us act accordingly.

The Earth Manifesto is certainly not a holy scripture, but its ideas deserve reverence more than the narrowly parochial patriarchal doctrines and propaganda of most of the holy books of old. Together, understanding the ideas in this manuscript, humanity could improve the collective prospects of our kind, now and far into the future, for decades and centuries and millennia to come.

I believe we should all seek redemption and salvation while we are able to do so in this life, by choosing to act in fairer, more intelligent, more catholic and more responsible ways. Let's 'pay forward' some goodwill, and take precautionary actions to ensure that our legacy is a more positive one than is implied by our current trajectory!

Let these ideas crystallize in our imaginations. One of my pet theories is that once a large number of people see more clearly and develop comprehensive understandings of big issues, the vast majority of American people will join together to force their representatives to change course and give top priority to policies that are honestly consistent with the greater good. This awakening will be a great step toward a salient common good goal of preventing wealthy people and amoral corporate entities and their lobbyists from exerting domineering and determinative sway in all of the consequential decisions being made in Congress and the White House, and in state legislatures and Governor's mansions -- and in the federal judiciary.

Rejoice in the world, for every one of us transubstantiates food into energy, and we can choose to channel this energy into enthusiasm, appreciation, laughter, love, community, friendship, productivity and salutary social action, rather than into myopic greed, jealousy, feelings of grievance, hatred or other destructive behaviors.

I seek the truth, elusive though it may be
 Explain it to me once again, slowly, honestly, plausibly
 And elaborate as you see fit, for I am patient and willing to believe
 Tell it to me as it is -- accurately, relevantly and not merely glibly.

The evolution of Creation myths has a rich and fascinating history
 A marvelous reflection of the increasing sophistication of human conceptions
 From Babylonian Marduk, Hindu Brahma, Egyptian Ra, and Greek Zeus to modern God
 And on to scientific perspectives, revelations and other various prophetic perceptions.

Thanks for reading!

Truly yours,

Dr. Tiffany B. Twain

December 21, 2022 (initially written before Easter Sunday in April 2010 with substantial editing and updates periodically, including many in April 2016, March 2020 and July 2021.)

----- The End -----