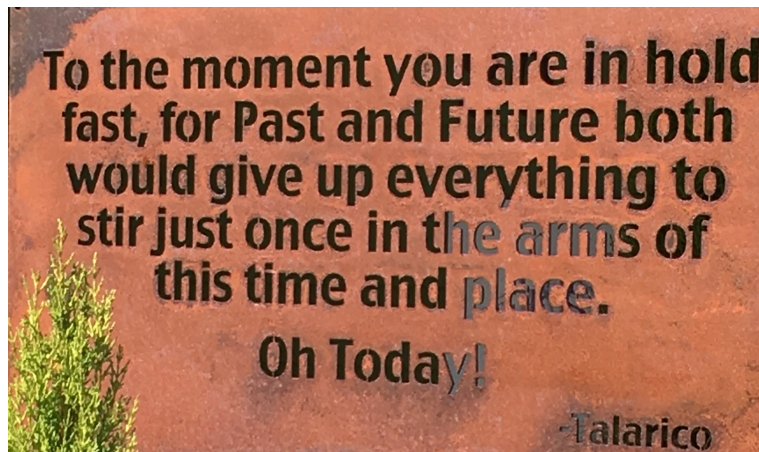


FOURTEEN ESSAYS
ON VARIOUS ASPECTS OF THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE
IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

WRITINGS ON
self-worth
personal barriers
spring
internal struggles with good and evil
diversity of religious experiences
our interdependency despite our differences
barriers to belief
reality versus mystery when it comes to the divine
the human family threatened
a death wish antidote
intimacy
technology's objectification of humans
calling things what they are
running away from the best-yet real fairy tale



IN THE END IT'S ALL ABOUT TODAY

ESSAY 1: On Self Worth

On the Origin and Nature of Self-Worth

On a purely natural level, our worth as human beings comes from nothing more and nothing less than the fact that we exist. On a purely natural level, existence alone establishes our worth and is the bedrock on which it rests.

And that worth is inestimable; its value is great beyond measure.

For one cannot be integral part of a cosmos which is manifestly of supreme grandeur and at the same time be worth anything less than it is—much the same as the tiniest speck of new life can be of no less value than the mother in whose sanctuary it dwells.

Yet we are integral part of the cosmos! And this supreme grandeur can be verified by anyone and is made manifest to anyone who takes the time to observe and ponder our planet and the expanse of creation that lies in the endless vastness around it.

Considering ourselves specifically in the context of the whole of creation, the entire universe
—all planets and distant-most galaxies and all created matter—

in this context,
surrounded by the stupefying magnificence of this reality,
our very existence is the single most undeniable testimony to our worth.

No further justification or explanation need be given, either to verify or authenticate our worth.

We neither can nor need do anything to obtain such a prize, and it cannot be earned.

We need do nothing to hold on to it, for it cannot be lost.

And no one and nothing can take it away, not in life, not in death.

The gift is ours by birthright and is forever.

(excerpted from Essay 14)

ESSAY 2: On Personal Barriers

Hurdles

When I think of the barriers or limitations in my life and the process I have used in dealing with many of them, I think of runners in a hurdles' competition. A rather natural image, I suppose.

The way I see it, the hurdles that we deal with in our lives are a sort of journey in and of themselves. Overcoming (or jumping) them leads us somewhere we have not been before. And often, in retrospect, we realize that we have ended up somewhere we did not intend to go but needed to.

I don't like hurdles. Yet I know they will often lead to more happiness and a stronger character if I will squarely face the pain and inconvenience that seem so often to accompany them, if I accept their challenges and make good effort in meeting them. And we often can grow even if all we do is *try* to deal with the hurdles, regardless of the outcome.

Actually, I suppose that hurdles are, in the end, a gift. They must be a gift. Otherwise why would I so often find myself changed for the better because of them?

Saul of Tarsus said something whose meaning remained a complete mystery to me for most of my life, until this writing. I could make no sense of his words. Zilch. He said that in weakness power reaches perfection.

By reflecting on hurdles I may have gained an insight into Saul's mysterious words. Reflecting has helped me to see that the hurdles themselves and the internal struggles they cause represent that "weakness" to which the quote refers.

And *overcoming* the hurdles is that "power reaching perfection." For it is in overcoming various hurdles in life that the strength of one's spirit and character can become so much greater and more powerful than it was before—that the power of one's own inner strength can reach what Saul calls "perfection." In other words, the perfect embodiment of power.

ESSAY 3: On Spring

The Thing About Spring

In advertising-driven America, if a product is not labeled "new and improved" each time you go to purchase it, if it has not been changed since the last time you bought it, then the unspoken message is that it is inferior to the product that claims to be new and improved. While it is true enough that life is change, yet so pervasive in our culture is this message about the importance of continual change that it can be easy for many of us to apply it to our very selves and our lives.

To remain the same, to stay as we are, to be for each other today as we were yesterday and will be tomorrow—frequently these become orphaned undesirables which easily and thoughtlessly get rejected, minimized, or ignored. Without knowing how or even *that* it happened, many of us come to believe that we ourselves are undesirable unless we too are continually "new and improved," continually changing—often for the sake of change alone or show alone rather than anything else. So we run around in near frenzy to buy a new this or change an old that, to grab on to some new fad or drop another, afraid that otherwise we might get left behind somehow or left out altogether.

While it is true enough that life is change . . .

. . . then spring comes along. Wonderful, wonderful spring! And though it too changes, imperceptibly through evolution . . .

. . . yet then spring comes along. And we are amazed. We lose our breath before it. In awe, we stand and gaze at it for hours. We move, charmed, amidst its every fragrance. In the flow of its energy every part of us can feel renewed. We find joy year after year in the same beautiful flowers, the same marvelous fragrances, the same life-force, and the same feelings about them all. We celebrate them and are grateful to them and for them.

Spring comes back to us each year virtually the same as it was the year before and the year before that. It is faithful each year to the one and only and same song that it sings to us each year. And do we tire of the same shades of color as the year before? We do not. And do we tire of the same scents of daphne, lilac, and hyacinth as the year before? We do not!

. . . simply being for each other who we are, what we are, as we are, new day after new day, year after year . . . How in the world did something as simple and natural as being just ourselves take the long dark detour into the labyrinth of unfamiliar ways?

ESSAY 4: On Our Internal Struggles With Good and Evil

The Light and Dark of Us

Such heavy reading did I find Hughes' *A Popular History of the Catholic Church* that only with sheer discipline and determination have I managed to finish it. Aside from its complicated endless treasury of names, dates, and events which left me quite overwhelmed, I think the impression that struck me the most consistently throughout was how the forces of good and the forces of evil can work side by side within the same entity, whether the Church, an individual, or a moment in history—

the chiaroscuro of human existence:

The Church vomiting forth the Inquisition while in the same breath giving us Thomas and Dominic and Francis.

The intertwining good and evil, sound judgement and disastrous folly in an individual like Leo X.

France, 1789-1799, struggling fiercely to overcome political and social injustice and at the same time mercilessly slaughtering the French Church.

Now I see much more clearly how all of life seems to be caught up in the same contradiction that somehow I had come to think was peculiar to me alone.

ESSAY 5: On Diverse Experiences of Religion

Parable of the Seed

Part I

"A farmer went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up.

Other seed fell on rocky ground where it had little soil. It sprang up at once because the soil was not deep. Then when the sun rose, it was scorched and it withered for lack of roots.

Some seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it produced no grain.

And some seed, finally, fell on rich soil and produced fruit. It came up and grew and yielded thirty, sixty, and even a hundred times as much as had been planted.'

Having spoken this parable, he added: 'Let whoever has ears to hear this, hear!'"

Gospel of Mark 4:3-9

Part II

A trip to Lloyd Center in Portland, Oregon, is not complete without spending a few minutes on the upper mall leaning over the rail to observe the ice rink and skaters below. No matter how many times I stand there looking, the thought that comes to me is always the same: "Spirituality, God, religion, the Church. Each of us experiences these differently."

Out there in the middle, far away from the side rail, are the strong ones. Effortlessly they flow through arabesques of mind and heart. They understand the transparent interconnections through which they pass. The gift and the dance are theirs. Their hope is real; it lives. Only rarely do they fall.

Then there are those who are rather like them, who are also out there in the middle but who fall much more often. Their resiliency is their strength. Quickly they are up on their feet again, and quickly their journey resumes.

Others move along at a much slower pace. Cautious and with little deviation in their patterns, they lack full participation. Their resistance in learning new steps and their subtle and erosive fear of life leave them stagnant for the most part and somewhat bored and boring. They are the most numerous of the skaters.

Next are those who fall because they look only behind or at their feet and not toward what lies ahead. They can make it up on their feet again, but only with help and complaining, and always slowly.

Then come the ones who, after an unpleasant incident or two, leave the rink altogether. Dissatisfied with the quality of the ice or with the teachers, with the management of the rink or with the rules, discouraged by the falls, and tired of waiting for distant promises, they depart.

And over there along the fringes, almost unnoticed, are those who skate the sides. Slow step by slow step they cling to the railing at every point. Forced at times to take the ever so smallest step on their own, many of them slide right out one of the many exits that now and then break up the rail.

Finally the spectators come into view. They are the ones who look on. Of these, only some are actually curious and ponder the meaning of the journey they are watching others take. Though they look, most do not see; pondering, most do not grasp. They may or may not move beyond the doubts or distractions, fears or pride or hurt that keep them from joining in, that keep them motionless, and leave them vulnerable to the chill of the ice that threatens tirelessly to come over them.

ESSAY 6: On Our Interdependency Despite Our Differences

The Waters of the Womb

"What can the outer edges of the garment say to the part that covers the breast?"

For one year this question came back to me again and again. It would return with always the exact same wording, which at the time seemed no more than a mysterious combination of parts of speech. I never wrote out the words so as not to forget them, and I never forgot them. I had no idea where they came from or what they might mean. Their persistent recurrence convinced me that if I stayed long enough with the challenge of what they might mean I might discover an answer to the question.

At the time, I was living in the bondage of what I will call a deep personal secret: I am gay. A secret that to many today would not be considered worth guarding. But to me, in those times, it was a secret to guard at all costs. For me, dealing with that bondage had for most of my life resulted in strong feelings of marginality. Feelings that I did not belong and might not even be an actual part of life. It had caused me often to feel I was living on the *fringes* of life, not in the *heart* of life. While I was definitely *existing* in the mainstream, I was, by contrast, *living* on its fringes.

"What can the outer edges of the garment say to the part that covers the breast?"

The question it turns out had to do with what I, who was living on the fringes, might have to say to those who were living in freedom, to those who did not have to live in the isolated, silent world that I had lived in up to that point but who could instead express their full personhood in the open.

To put this another way, the question had to do with what the least choice part of societal living (the "outer edges of the garment" in the question) might have to say to the most choice part (the part of the garment that covers the breast or central or choice portion).

The question ultimately had to do with what the less fortunate people in society might have to say about their relationship to the *more* fortunate people in it. No matter if those less fortunate are gay or poor or with handicap or uneducated or of a different race or culturally rejected, or any other.

The first realization I had in answering the question was that no one is the value they are *because of* what they have or do or say (i.e. where their place is on the garment of life). Rather, their full value lies in and is derived from their very existence alone and nothing more under the sun. Existence alone—even more than the tenor of an individual's character and beliefs—is the primary and primeval foundation upon which their value rests. This means, of course, that each person's worth is equal to the worth

of every other person. Not similar worth, but equal worth. And not just intellectual assent to that worth, but active support of it in every phase of human activity.

The second realization I had was that we do not live in isolation from each other but live instead in a cooperative struggle on the great venture called life. Any thread at my edge of the garment of life, if pulled, will most certainly have an effect one way or another, sooner or later, on the remaining parts of the garment. That is to say, on *you*.

We all are one, in sum. The waters of the womb are one. We are all hopelessly interconnected and inter-dependent, like it or not, desire it or not, nurture it or not, curse it or not. And perhaps the most essential key to our salvation—any way you care to define salvation, in religious terms or not, and whether referring to an individual or a society or the human species—perhaps the most essential key to our salvation lies in remembering and living only this.

ESSAY 7: On Barriers to Belief

God

Sections:

- Prologue
- God Tries To Get Through To Us In The Physical World (IA)
- God Tries To Get Through To Us In Writing And Art (IB)
- Return Reply (IC)
- Knowledge, Proof, And Belief (II)
- Do Me A Favor/Let's Bargain (III)
- And Miracles? (IV)
- Hear My Prayers Or Else (V)
- Like A Puff Of Smoke Or A Passing Shadow (VI)
- Mors Mortis (VII)
- Back To The Opening (VIII)
- Who's Who, Anyway? (IX)
- Implacable Before The Proposition (X)
- Control (XI)
- Take Another Look At Those Crutches (XII)
- What? I've Been Brainwashed?! (XIII)
- I Can't Believe In A God Who Allows Bad Things To Happen To Good People (XIV)
 - Introduction (XIV.A.)
 - Evidence (XIV.B.)
 - Final Remark (XIV.C.)
- Acceptance Of The Mystery? (You're Kidding Of Course!) (Yes?) (XV)
- A Matter Partially Of Evolution? (XVI)
- But I Don't Want To Live A Restricted Life (XVII)
- I Can't Believe In A God Who Feels Impersonal, Distant, Removed From Me (XVIII)
- The Seed (XIVIV)

Prologue

The goal of this reflection is twofold. First, to challenge several common barriers that many people posit as justification for why they do not or can not believe in God. Second, to discuss a few aspects of one's belief or not in the existence of God that are not actually barriers but have long intrigued me and may intrigue you the reader as well. The goal is not to entice one to believe in God.

For the limited purpose of this writing, and in order to advance the narrative, "God" is here defined generally, hesitatingly, admittedly simply, yet hopefully adequately, as the creator-being or creator-spirit responsible for the creation of the universe and all that exists – a supreme being, a higher power, a being superior in all ways to human beings. A being considered commonly by many to be omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, and eternal. A being as in the Abrahamic God of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, or the God of North American First Peoples or of Zoroastrianism or of Sikhism; or concepts of God as found in various African and Eastern religions. A definitive and universally acceptable definition of God is likely impossible to determine, much less to agree upon; it is certainly beyond my humble abilities and should not be considered essential to the arguments regarding God that are offered in the present writing. Another and simpler way of putting all this might be that God in this writing is defined however the reader defines and uses the term "God."

This writing was conceived originally with those individuals in mind who do not or no longer believe in the existence of God, are unsure, or have never really given much thought to the subject, for many due to one or more barriers that they might say prevent them from believing or considering belief. I have identified and will discuss as many of those barriers of which I am currently aware. Over the years, however, my thoughts have evolved to include other than simply barriers regarding the question of whether God exists, and these thoughts are included as well. Even those individuals who have never doubted the existence of God may find the read worthwhile.

Challenging the barriers identified in this writing is an effort to eliminate as many distractions as possible from the truth or not of people's arguments and beliefs against the existence of God, and, in the process, to hopefully facilitate their own analysis of their own processes regarding this. The challenging on my part is also, and to a very real extent, an intellectual pursuit of truth, and, as part of this, a questioning of reasons I have often heard given against belief. Referring back to the opening paragraph, it merits repeating that my goal with this reflection is not to proselytize or otherwise convince people that God exists or to believe in God.

The concept of truth is, I believe, one of the most important inspirations in life. As such, this author spends much time attempting to strip away aspects of just about any argument that, upon close examination, appear false, or useless to the topic and, therefore, only deny, minimize, or distract from truth, and so delay arriving at it or at least getting closer to it.

While my religious tradition is Roman Catholicism, this work is not about Christianity or

the Catholic Church. It is about God, the God of all humanity, not some subset of it. Any apparent bias in favor of a specific religion that makes its way somehow into the narrative, while obviously possible, would be unintentional and without awareness on my part, and, for the sake of truth, it would also be undesirable. I state this at the start, openly and frankly, hoping that in so doing this public disclosure will serve as a personal challenge for me to pursue this part of my life's truth-journey as objectively as I am consciously able. Such a disclosure, however, does not mean that, in order to illustrate a point, a well-known example taken from a specific religion would be inadmissible or would by definition merit being labeled as bias.

In large part this reflection is opinion: my opinion, my take on the subject, the way I see things after many years of pondering life and meaning in relation to the existence of God. And while it claims no special hold on truth, it *is* a sincere and disciplined attempt and commitment to force my thoughts, words, and feelings to be as one, identical, and integrated as possible. More of myself than this I cannot ask.

Finally, the reflection has developed in the company of the *assumption* – not a presumed fact – that God exists, that God created all that is, knows all there is to know, is supremely and uniquely all powerful, that he or she has tried and continues trying to get in touch with us and be in relationship with us, and that many of us resist those efforts or we experience barriers when considering them. It is this resistance and some of these barriers that are the primary exploration herein.

We ask for a sign that God exists, yet no sign given seems to satisfy many of us.

IA. God Tries To Get Through To Us In The Physical World

God tries to self-reveal and get through to us by giving us creation – the universe and everything that exists – a path of communication of intense physicality that we can see and hear, smell, touch, and taste. A path of communication of such complexity, variety, and vastness that no one person can possibly experience all of it, no one grow tired of it, no one fail to find amazement in it even throughout an entire lifetime.

A snow-capped range of mountains seen from close up; a rainbow; the thunder and crash of a huge waterfall hundreds of feet above; the endless number, variety, and complexity of plants and animals and their behaviors; the unimaginable and ineffable vastness of the galaxies and the cosmos; the staggering intricacy and magnificence of our own bodies – cannot all of these be signs sent to us from God that God exists? "Not really," some say. "They are nice but we know how they came to be; we can explain them." Well we certainly cannot explain them *all*. By no means all. Even so, does the fact that we can explain a wonder make it any less of a wonder or sign from God? What credible form of logic would exclude understanding from support of the proposition that creation is a sign that God is trying to communicate with us?

We have come to know and praise such artistic giants as Michelangelo, Mozart, Picasso *just through their works alone*, independently and separately from anything they ever communicated verbally or in writing. Can we not in the same way come to know God through *God's* works and praise him or her for them?

Some say the closest they ever come to God is in nature and that they love this experience – while hiking in the wild; walking along a beach to the sounds of crashing waves; standing atop a mountain with a view of the world below. Do they consider – *and pursue the consideration*: what if the situation gets even better? What if nature is only the beginning, the introduction, just the entrance door, the threshold, the first step, the ever-available backdrop against which even more ways that God might be trying to self-reveal to us are waiting to be discovered?

We are offered quite an ensemble of signs in the physical world that one could argue point to the existence of a supreme being. In addition, we are given minds that are able to ponder the signs, appreciate most of them, understand much of them. What to do about it?

IB. God Tries To Get Through To Us In Writing And Art

God sends God's written words to us – another form of self-revelation, another way to be aware of and engage in relationship. The Bible, Koran, Bhagavad Gita, Talmud, and Tripitaka are a few well-known and larger-scale examples.

God has communicated and continues to communicate to all peoples of all faith traditions (as well as no faith traditions) at all times throughout human history, including even now. To each and every person. These communications, which are innumerable, arrive to us through individuals from other time periods and various belief traditions and no belief traditions, through authors of world-famous and not so famous literature, and other good men and women, all of whose writings support one aspect or another of God's attempts to communicate with us, to get in touch, to make us think. These writings span from prehistoric cave drawings to the beginning of written records to this very day. And they can be forms of communication from God even in those cases in which the authors had no conscious intent or desire of being a channel for this, or in cases in which they might even abhor or reject such a thought. This is my sense of it, my take on it.

Many of us say that those words were written by only human beings like us, mere mortals, and so remain as coming from humans only, not from a God who communicates through us humans. Or, depending on specific writings or on our abilities at the time, we say they are difficult to understand, impossible to understand, or boring. Yet how often do we fail to realize or note how little time we actually spend *trying* to understand their meaning? And perhaps worse, how often do we fail to translate the words into contexts that are relevant to us and for our times – contexts that can bridge the gaps between difficult-to-understand ancient texts or foreign languages and the meaning of our lives today?

In addition to the literary arts, art of all types can be a way that God communicates with us. Painting, for example, or drawing, sculpture, architecture, music, film, photography, theater, dance, and so on.

Again, so it seems to me.

IC. Return Reply

We can respond or not to the two forms of communication from God suggested in Sections IA. and IB. We can respond in ways that build up or tear down life and people, that ennoble or discount life and people. The possibilities for positive responses from us make themselves known in innumerable forms of affirming expression:

- by helping others;
- in our attitudes, beliefs, and laws;
- by good thoughts or by prayers;
- in our efforts to end discrimination, hatred, and intolerance;
- in freedom and anti-war movements, and social justice activities;
- in life-affirming advances in medicine, research, and technology;
- in the faith practices, rituals, and liturgies of the world's many religions;
- in poetry, plays, ballets, paintings, singing, festivals, movies, books;
- in inventions that contribute to the dignity and well-being of the individual.

These are only some of the many ways in which we humans are capable of demonstrating our capacity to respond in positive ways to God's communications with us.

II. Knowledge, Proof, And Belief

"You don't *know* whether God exists," you might say to me, "And you don't *know* whether this or that event in history really took place," I might say to you in reply. But "You can't *prove* that God exists," you might continue, "And you can't disprove it, nor can you *prove* that that event from the past actually occurred." "You just *believe* that God exists," you respond finally, to which I reply "And you just *believe* that that historical reference you mentioned is a fact."

How do we "*know*" that this or that historical event really took place if we weren't there? Do we know just because someone *said* so? Do we know just because the event has been recorded in one or more long-established and so-called "authoritative" works, which may, if arguably, give it more credibility? Do we know just because a very large number of people have said so, which many people would say gives weight to our knowledge of events? If the answer to these questions is "yes," then would we not "*know*" in the very same ways that God exists or does not exist?

What does doubting the truth about whether God exists say about the vast amount of information regarding other parts of our lives that we have also only read or heard about – the daily news to cite just one example – but which we accept as true nonetheless and incorporate into the decisions of our lives? Information received both today and from past millennia. Information that is based exclusively on the testimony of

others, whatever the form of that testimony or the number of people offering it. People we don't know, never knew, never met, never saw, never will – people we might not have believed even if we *had* known them. Yet for some reason we seem to have no problem asserting, even confidently, that what *these* people tell and have told us is true.

Do we not in fact know most of what we know only because someone said so, whether this was handed down hundreds or thousands of years ago by means of cave paintings or other primitive communications; or handed down by oral tradition or in writing; or whether it was communicated just a few minutes ago via radio, television, e-mail, newspaper, movie, social networking or some other aspect of the Internet?

And let us hope that that which we claim to know and believe does not turn out to be the result of information that has been manipulated, information that has been cleverly or without scruples edited or altered in an attempt to control or influence what we think. Have the online posts, the videos, photos, oral and written historical accounts that we have been exposed to been manipulated or stated in favor of a particular prejudice?

And while on the subject, why do we believe that this or that person loves us? Because he or she says so and is believable? Nothing more? Because they write it to us in a convincing letter? Nothing more? Because they buy us gifts or do us favors or have supported us when we have needed them? Nothing more? "*Because*" they are our spouse or partner, mother or father, and so *of course* love us? Nothing more? Because "I just know, trust me"? Nothing more? Because of some combination of all of these? *And-nothing-more*? These are neither proofs nor science in and of themselves. And if one says that this line of reasoning is absurd, what proof can be offered to the contrary – meaning proof that is *proof*? However, such statements *are* at least very strong *beliefs*, which many or most of us would quite possibly be willing to defend to the death, and without which we would neither feel happy or complete as human beings. It may be a scary thought, yet be true, that in the end our *beliefs* concerning just about anything and everything that is not hard science carry more weight than our so-called knowledge and proofs regarding them.

What have the writings and oral traditions about God *not* done to convince many of us of their veracity and authenticity that the *other* communicators of human events *have* done, such that we would believe the latter but not the former, even though both cases equally have not been possible for us to verify personally?

And if *belief alone* satisfies our desire to know or even to prove that this or that person loves us, or that this or that historical event actually took place, then why can't that same belief-principle be applied (or why isn't it applied) equally to the existence of God?

Have science and reason been allowed perhaps to hijack faith and belief from the human journey by convincing us to define all that we are and all that we know in terms

of the physical and sensory world exclusively? Have science and reason themselves, despite the vastness of their self-admitted limitations and frequently revised positions – have science and reason managed to entice us to disconnect our brains from whatever they (science and reason) are not capable of grasping or explaining? At what point did many of us lose track of or abandon the notion that what it means to be human *includes and goes well beyond* just physical evidence?

Finally, if a reality like the cosmos can be a mystery as well, as it surely is, then could not a mystery like God be a reality as well? In other words, if the reality of the universe can lead us or can end up dead-ending us deep within its mystery, as it inevitably seems to, then cannot the mystery of God do the same, leading us into the *reality* of God? And if dogged human exploration through the millennia keeps discovering and sharing more and more about existence and the meaning of life, then why could this same process of exploration, if equally dogged, not lead as well to an increasingly more complete understanding of the existence of God?

III. Do Me A Favor/Let's Bargain

We say to God, "Get me through this bad time and I promise I'll – (do this or that)." Then God does, but we don't. Maybe we remember to thank God, maybe not; remember the deal, maybe not. But if we do remember, do we take the situation further by pondering what the *meaning* of the granting of the favor might be? Or do we conclude it was all just chance, really, rather than a deliberate act by God, and then quickly lose the memory of it as we hurry off to a busy schedule or turn on the TV to watch a much anticipated ball game or soap opera or find some other way to experience the Land of Numb and Forgetfulness? And if we don't get through the bad time, then many will say, "See, God doesn't exist!"

Finally, have you ever wondered how it must feel to be so-called "loved" by someone because of what you (or in this case God) can *do* for them rather than for the value of who you *are* to them? To be "loved" by someone who in effect – knowingly or unknowingly – games you and bargains with you ad nauseam? And worse, by someone who thinks you can't see through it all?

IV. And Miracles?

We read hundreds of accounts of miraculous religious moments or events that people have told us about over the course of human history – people just like us – giving testimony to what they say they experienced, trying to let us know about it because they believed it had worth and might help future generations. But many say their imaginations or fervent beliefs got the better of them. After all, we today might say, they provided no bibliography, no research methodology, no citations, no certifications of veracity – which, by the way, neither are provided commonly by the offerings of television, radio, newspapers, movies, and the Internet, at least not if you take the time and exercise the discipline to very carefully scrutinize their actual words and verify for yourself their so-called or implied details.

V. Hear My Prayers Or Else. . .

God doesn't hear or answer my prayers, so how can I believe in someone like that? *Why* should I believe in God? He or she obviously either is not there or does not care about me.

But how can one possibly know whether or not God hears our prayers? How can we possibly claim to know the mind of an all-mighty, all-knowing God when we don't even and cannot even know the mind of the person sitting next to us? What if God's timing is simply not *our* timing (and who are we to say that it *should* be)? And what if God does give an answer but we simply don't like it and choose not to accept it? While you could say that this kind of reasoning is a sorry excuse for not responding in a favorable way to what you want, what if it isn't? What if instead *your* reaction is the true sorry excuse for not believing? And what would you say to a child who declares that you do not love him or her because you have not given them what they want?

Why would we – a rather powerless and fragilely arranged collection of dust, a mere puff of smoke or passing shadow in the scheme of things – why would we attempt to put to the test *God*, the supposed Prime Mover of all that is, telling God in effect, “Get down on your knees and *prove* that you love me, and do so according to my criteria or else I won't believe in you? Is not this strategy basically some sort of manipulative ploy to get what one wants? Do not children do the same with their parents, and adults with other adults?

VI. Like A Puff Of Smoke Or A Passing Shadow

So many of us basically minimize or doubt or nullify virtually every sign we have ever been given that God might exist and that those signs might be offering meaning and consequences that seek to involve us in relationship with that God. Like a puff of smoke or a passing shadow, the possibilities often seem to dissipate all too soon.

At the same time many of us seem to experience no difficulty asking for another sign (and even another). Why? Just in case?

VII. Mors Mortis

Why does it often seem to take a near-death experience or a health crisis before many of us think about God and last things and the most important things to us in life? Could it be that, because we keep so busy and distracted, momentous events like these may often seem to be actually *required* in order for us to take the time and achieve the calmness of mind and spirit that are necessary in order to focus adequately on re-evaluating and re-prioritizing that which is most important to us?

VIII. Back To The Opening

Even when we consider again the opening assumption in Section IA that God is trying to self-reveal to us via the physical universe, with its billions and billions of galaxies and stars that are billions and billions of miles away, above us, below us – surrounding us as a womb surrounds its precious life within – cradling us, filling us with an awe like no other awe, showing us unparalleled splendor and unfathomable power – to even *this*

many still respond, "Not enough! Sorry! Another sign please!"

IX. Who's Who, Anyway?

To those of us who get frustrated in our attempts to understand or to get inside the mind of God, Augustine of Hippo (354-430 A.D.) put it best perhaps when he said, "If you understood God, it would not be God." If God does exist, it cannot be much of an intellectual stretch to imagine the impossibility of knowing God's thoughts and will or why God does what he or she does. For if the thoughts and will of God, presumably the most supreme being of all beings, were knowable by us, which one of us then – God or we – would be supreme? Which the real God?

And since just about any reasonable concept of God would, by force of reason, need to include that God is omniscient while we ourselves gain knowledge as individuals, and collectively as a species, only as we journey through life and grow by means of our experiences, thoughts, and the lessons of history, then it seems likely we may never know why God does what God does.

X. Implacable Before The Proposition

Why are we so difficult to please? What can we reasonably expect when it comes to knowing whether God exists?

Even if God were to make a special apparition, standing before us as plainly as we could ever want, and say, "Hello! It's me. God," then take us by the hand and say, "Let's walk a bit," would we not almost immediately start having doubts about what we were experiencing? Would we not later convince ourselves or let ourselves be convinced by others that we had been only dreaming or letting our imagination get away from us? Would we not surrender to the gradual erosion of details of our memory and conclude that what we had experienced must have been something other than what we thought initially?

If we say God should come to us looking like God, what exactly would we be expecting? What if God, in fact, looks like a mountain or a waterfall or like one of us or an invisible spirit? What if he looks like one of your friends or someone you don't care much for? What then?

God can't win, it would seem.

XI. Control

Is it possible that for some of us the apparent inability to be satisfied with arguments that God exists is simply an unconscious way of expressing our near-insatiable need to be in control of our lives and of the lives of others? After all, given our free will is it not we who call the shots with respect to accepting or declining any invitation that might be sent our way from God? The decision is ours alone, not that of God who appears to be powerless in the matter.

Or is that apparent inability due to arrogance? To pride? To fear of a power that is

greater than we are? To fear of being vulnerable and powerless again – one more loathsome time – as we so clearly were in childhood for example or at many other moments in our lives?

All told, will that inability to be vulnerable and defer to a power or an authority higher or greater than ourselves turn out to be the ultimate loss for many "Me First" attitudes in the world? Attitudes which time and again seem to fail to consider the broader picture of the meaning of existence? Attitudes of self-absorption and self-consumption in the body and in material goods which for many people have blocked, clouded, or numbed the ability to see and ponder beyond the present moment?

And should God, the preeminent force according to the definitions of quite likely most of us, should God jump to attention to the proof-demands of each one of the billions of humans who have every existed? Are we today, for example, asking for seven billion versions of him, one per current inhabitant, and rejecting any version that is not "satisfaction guaranteed" or "new and improved" according to seven billion definitions of it? Can we realistically expect a Creator to allow *us*, the Created, to put him or her on some sort of leash, or be made to dangle as a marionette awaiting its operator's next hand movement? Would this be a God? Or would it be just another one of *us*, just one more trophy to add to our collection of conquests, just another control issue to bring up in our next therapy session?

XII. Take Another Look At Those Crutches

Some say that belief in God is merely a crutch, something we do not appear able or willing to live without. Something without which we could not get through our lives happily or feeling satisfied or fulfilled. One implication of this would seem to be that somehow such people are weak, not strong enough to live without this crutch, not strong enough to live life without belief in God.

But what does this say about what are obviously crutches in other areas of our lives: crutches or aids like eyeglasses, hearing aids, medications, wheelchairs, walkers, canes, and similar? And if one believes that life would not be as much worth living without these and other crutches or aids, and if such is acceptable, then how, honestly, could one's belief in God be viewed any differently?

Ridiculous though it might sound initially, do not people *themselves* often serve, in effect, as crutches for us, helping us to journey through our lives, to self-actualize, and to experience as little pain as might otherwise be the case? In the end, is not one of the most important tasks performed by human beings on behalf of other human beings to help "crutch us" through life as it were (referring back to the opening words of Section XII), to help us navigate the journey, achieving or maintaining as much wholeness and dignity as possible – even to help us deal with and get through death itself?

A crutch gets you from one place to another place, physically, mentally, emotionally, or spiritually. From a given state to a state you judge to be better and more desirable.

So what is the big problem even *if* God were a crutch for us?

XIII. What? I've Been Brainwashed?!

Many people say that those who believe in the existence of God do so because they have been brainwashed. But what is brainwashing, anyway?

Most parents care about their children and want to share with them the tools they will need to live happy, safe, productive lives. As a result, in many and widely varied ways, they share their values with their children, instilling in them their own identities, what is important to them, who they are, who they believe themselves to be. They share their work ethic, their sense of responsibility and duty, their patriotism and culture, as well as their considerations regarding the welfare of others. They share their attitudes toward authority, their thoughts on education. They impart training on critical thinking skills and on ways to live morally and ethically. Similarly they share their faith and religious beliefs. In short, they share and attempt to instill *whatever* it is that they believe is important for their children's healthy development, well-being, success in life, and happiness.

When countries, societies, nations, governments, education systems and so on hold themselves morally accountable to making the well-being of their citizens their highest priority and duty, then they also generally share their values, attempting to instill those values in their citizens, for whom they are responsible or regarding aspects of whose lives they have legitimate authority. And they do so in basically the same ways and for basically the same reasons as parents share what parents share. Again, this regards entities that hold themselves morally accountable, for less than this may well be or become forms of brainwashing.

Brainwashing, by contrast, involves essentially the directly or indirectly forced indoctrination of individuals to adopt beliefs and/or ways of acting or thinking that are contrary to what those individuals otherwise would believe or do or think – or that *would be* contrary if they were aware of what is being done to them by those doing the brainwashing. Brainwashing involves a certain deliberate manipulation of individuals by propaganda or threats or punishment or intimidation, or the blocking of incoming information that is contrary to the efforts of those doing the brainwashing. Is what has been stated in the above three paragraphs to be labeled fairly as brainwashing? Common sense would seem to indicate it is not.

The arrival of one's belief in God is in no significant way *more* the result of brainwashing or *less* the result of brainwashing than is any other example of sharing and instillation of values stated in this section.

This may be as good a place as any to add the idea that, as far as we know, God does not and can not force us to believe in or love God. Because of this, it would appear that to some degree God has turned over his or her will to us. To *us*, creatures of the creator. Of what value would it be to us or to God to believe through force, threats, or being scared into it – without a choice? None. Instead, regarding belief in God, we

have been left free to say yes, no, or anything in between and for whatever short or long term we choose.

XIV. I Can't Believe In A God Who Allows Destruction To Happen To People, In A God Who Lets Bad Things Happen To Good People

XIV. A. Introduction

This section argues that the overwhelming cause of the super-grand majority of destructive acts and situations experienced by human beings throughout history has been and still currently is humanity itself rather than any deity or other factor. After using the Internet to locate a considerable quantity and variety of easily accessible and public data in order to examine a sampling of those destructive acts and situations in human history, and after comparing the accessed information across multiple web sites, it would seem irrational not to conclude that we very humans are and have always been our own worst enemy; that we alone have inflicted and continue to inflict the most robust, cruel, and imaginative damage against each other and ourselves.

We.

Not any God. Not nature. Not the universe. Not life. Not happenstance. Not other.

We.

To those who will surely say that an overabundance of examples has been presented in this section, including too much detail, I respond that the examples and the detail given are necessary:

- (1) necessary in order to demonstrate the excessive abundance of destructive acts ideated and executed by human beings against human beings throughout recorded history;
- (2) necessary in order to demonstrate the high frequency and egregious destructiveness of those acts;
- (3) necessary because it is indispensable that we squarely face such truths about ourselves not only toward the end of abandoning as myth the old argument that blames a cruel God for our own cruelly destructive acts, but also and *more importantly* toward the end of understanding and admitting, at last, that we have all the required power (if not the will) to end the myth;
- (4) necessary because the barrier stated in the title and first paragraph of this section is one of the most common barriers we hear of as to why a person can't believe in God or decides not to. Despite that it is a barrier whose basis in fact appears negligible upon close examination – negligible certainly when compared with the cruelty of the human species toward its own members; and
- (5) necessary because this barrier is likely the most difficult and painful one for us to study, for it not only requires a serious examination and confrontation of our minds,

hearts, and souls in order to determine the causes and extent of our own destructiveness as human beings, but requires also an equally serious decision regarding what we will choose to *do* about what we discover in the process.

Let us not be deceived into thinking that we can simply discard as exaggerations the examples given below, for those examples not only are neither exaggerations nor an exhaustive listing, but, as implied above, they are quite easy to verify by simple use of Internet searches alone. Those who dare to try it for themselves will have their fill! Our search for additional examples is only as unlimited as we have the patience to pursue and the stomach to endure.

Furthermore, it is not honest to point the finger only at others when it comes to destructive actions against other individuals, or to consider the destructiveness of such actions mainly on the basis of how large scale, repulsive, or far reaching they may be. For most if not all of us, in our own unique ways, perform destructive acts at many times in our lives, and many among us do so frequently. Perhaps we act thus only to the extent that we feel safe, or with the confidence that we will not be found out, or that we are acting within legal (distinct from moral) laws, or acting without grossly crossing beyond cultural norms, and so on. But something as simple as knowingly talking down to one's kids or discouraging them or diminishing their self-esteem is in fact a destructive act and one that can have a negative effect on them for life. Sharing with others a confidence that you have promised to keep to yourself, or that you know better than to share, can be a destructive act. Slandering a friend or colleague by deliberately sharing information about them that you know is false or misleading, or you know *may* be, is a destructive act. Examples of smaller scale destruction abound in life and can destroy silently, insidiously, and permanently no matter how minor they may seem. For more on the subject, check out your local and national news stories on likely any and every day of the week and virtually all day long.

One cannot say logically, credibly, or with evidence that the destructive acts caused by natural disasters (hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, etc.), or, more importantly, caused by ourselves (murder, theft, cheating, lying, deceiving, war, domestic violence, sex abuse, verbal and emotional abuse, child abuse, alcohol and drug addiction, jealousy, drug trafficking, bullying, revenge, lust, slander, greed, human trafficking, envy, child slavery, sloth, rape, etc.) – one cannot say logically, credibly, or with evidence that God wills these things into existence, wants these things to continue, or forces us to commit them against each other.

And, exclusive of natural disasters, if we humans are the ones ideating, perpetrating, and perpetuating these evils against one another – which will be demonstrated in the remainder of this section – why would we turn around and ask why God does not stop them? The fact is that the ability to stop these human-generated destructive actions lies within our own complete power. No God caused or causes them; we did and we do.

Whether regarding the imagination that goes into the cruelty, or the successful

implementation of that cruelty, it is not difficult to conclude that God might well take lessons from *us* concerning cruelty since it appears that we are far and away this planet's master teachers of it, and its most accomplished and undeniable champions.

While it may be tempting to blame God for the cruelty in the world, doing so would seem to be more than anything else a distraction away from holding ourselves accountable for our own choices and actions. Blaming God would seem to be a way to escape taking a long, hard, honest look inside ourselves and our society. It would seem a cowardly, easy, empty excuse for continuing the violence that since the beginning of human existence we have brought against each other; brought against the "fairy tale of all fairy tales" that is our uniquely special planet Earth; and indeed, as a result, brought against the entire created universe. And all with the most incredible ingenuity, tirelessness, and brutal force!

This section is not an attempt to defend God, for if God does exist he or she surely can take care of self. Rather it is an attempt to help us face and acknowledge squarely the primary cause of evil and destruction in the world: homo sapiens.

If we were to tally on one balance sheet all the bad things that happen to people which are provably caused by us, wholly or in part, and on a second balance sheet those bad things that we believe are caused or willed by God, the content of the latter sheet, by comparison with the former, would surely be basically insignificant.

The remainder of Section XIV is an effort to present reasonable evidence that challenges and substantially refutes the idea that it is primarily God rather than human beings who allows bad things to happen to people.

XIV. B. Evidence

Appearing below are three types of destruction that I believe are the most significant to discuss in this Section XIV. The listings within each type are in complete random order. They are a selected sampling from among a virtually infinite number of possibilities and so are by no means exhaustive. The research was done using Wikipedia and a large variety of other free and readily available online links and resources. Thus, if desired, the reader should be able to easily verify and establish independently the veracity of any listing.

XIV. B.1. Destruction caused by human beings and the choices we make.

The statistics reported here are approximate because invariably they differed from source to source. The figures selected are *the very lowest* of each range located, and the plus signs following them have been used to remind the reader of this. Precise and universally agreed upon figures regarding destruction by human beings do not appear to be obtainable, nor is this level of precision and agreement important for the purposes of this section.

It merits stressing that where death figures are stated they regard the dead only and do

not include those incalculable many other individual human beings who have been seriously injured and otherwise negatively affected for life: an eye or arm or leg missing; permanent emotional damage; severed or damaged spinal cord and resulting paralysis; brain damage; Post-traumatic Stress Disorder and other trauma; psychological illnesses, the separation for unbearably long periods or for life of mothers, fathers, children, grandparents, brothers, sisters, friends; suicide; acting out against others; geographical displacement or relocation away from all that was once familiar; loss of homes, livelihoods, ways of life and – of equal importance – loss of hope and self-esteem themselves.

- Stalin's Soviet Ukraine genocide/man-made famine, 1932-33: 1,800,000+ dead
- Greek genocide against Christian Ottoman Greeks, 1914-22: 450,000+ dead
- Cambodian genocide, 1975-79: 1,700,000+ dead
- Rwandan genocide, 1994: 500,000+ dead
- Armenian genocide, 1915-22: 800,000+ dead
- Iraq war led by the US, 2003-2016 (ongoing to date): 200,000+ dead
- World War I, 1914-18 : 17 million+ dead (20 million+ wounded)
- World War II (arguably the greatest catastrophe by human beings against human beings in the history of the human race), 1939-45 : 60,000,000+ dead
- Bosnian genocide, 1992-95: 96,000+ dead
- Duterte Philippine killings of known and suspected drug dealers/users, 2016 (ongoing to date): 5,000+ dead
- organized crime, white-collar crime, financial crimes, political crimes, war crimes – all together involving assault, murder, money laundering, embezzlement, counterfeiting, tax evasion, fraud, copyright and intellectual property infringement, etc. All of these have a negative impact on the lives, attitudes, and hopes of innocent individuals and groups.
- arms trafficking and sales of nuclear materials to rogue-states
- identity theft, computer viruses, worms, ransomware, spyware, adware, spam, malvertising, botnets, not to mention direct cyber warfare that has the potential even to disable components of a country's major infrastructure and democratic systems
- fake news and other types of lies and deliberate misinformation
- the many colonial empires in modern times (Spanish, Portuguese, French, Dutch, British, Russian, Ottoman, Austrian, American, Japanese, Italian, Belgian, etc.) and the resulting subjugation, displacement, slavery, and murder of peoples who were already legitimately living in the conquered lands. These were empires born mainly to satisfy greed for natural resources, material goods, foreign corporate interests, cheap labor, and lust for power.
- oppressive authoritarian regimes specifically supported by the US: for example in Nicaragua (the Contras), Egypt (Mubarak), Uzbekistan (Karimov), Democratic Republic of Congo (Mubutu), South Africa (apartheid), Philippines (Marcos), Panama (Noriega), Chile (Pinochet), Brazil (Médici)
- oppressive authoritarian regimes generally, in which exist various combinations of absence of free elections; of elections that are rigged or won by means of violence or force; of repression; of unconstrained power; of those who are in power not being accountable to the people; of enforcement of public conformity; of a tightly controlled

military for the purpose of controlling political opponents; of prevention or hindering of intellectual freedom, of demonstrations and other public acts of disagreeing with those in power; of little or no influence over decisions by the governing power; of non-existent or weak independent judicial systems. Some examples of these regimes are North Korea, Syria, Cuba, China, Yemen, Russia, Ethiopia, Laos, Bahrain, Tajikistan, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Sudan, Libya, Central African Republic, Somalia, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, Saudi Arabia, Turkmenistan, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, South Sudan; past regimes in Franco's Spain, Hitler's Germany, Mussolini's Italy

- Assyrian genocide (extermination of Assyrian population by the Ottoman Empire), 1915-23: 275,000+ dead

- Dzungar genocide, 1755-1758 (extermination of the Buddhist Dzungar people by the Chinese dynasty): 480,000+ dead

- Extensive sexual abuse of children in the Roman Catholic Church involving thousands of victims over a period of decades, including cover-ups and failures of Church hierarchy in dealing effectively with the problem

- Holocaust by Nazi Germany, 1939-45: approximately 17 million dead, among which Poles, Russians, Ukrainians, Serbs, Romani, Spanish Republicans, people with disabilities, people of Asian and African descent, gays and lesbians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Roman Catholics, others, *and* 6,000,000 Jews (total of 23 million people)

- Holodomor man-made famine by Soviets against Ukrainians, 1932-33: 4,000,000+ dead

- Bangladesh genocide, 1971: 300,000+ dead, and 200,000+ Bangladeshi women raped

- Syrian Civil War, 2011- March 2018 (ongoing): 350,000+ dead; 6,000,000+ internally displaced; 5,000,000+ refugees to other countries

- Mongol Empire conquests (Genghis Khan & others), 1206-1368: 30,000,000+ dead

- "Comfort Women" from Korea, China, Philippines, & other countries forced into prostitution/sexual slavery by the Japanese military during World War II: 200,000+ women & girls

- Darfur genocide, 2003-2017: 200,000+ dead and 2,700,000+ displaced

- Zulu Kingdom exterminations, 1810-28: 1,000,000+ dead

- Congo Free State atrocities (Belgian colony), 1885-1908: 3,000,000+ dead

- Indonesian Genocide, 1965-66: 500,000+ dead

- Thirty Years War in Europe, 1618-1648: 7,000,000+ dead

- Spanish colonization of the Americas, 400+ years: 8,000,000+ dead

- Roman Catholic Inquisitions, 13th-19th centuries: 8,000+ dead not including countless tortured

- American Civil War, 1861-65: 785,000+ dead

- Kidnapping of Blacks from Africa for slavery in America and the New World, 15th-19th centuries: 10,000,000+ kidnapped

- U.S. Indian Removal Act, 1830-42, resulting in forced expulsions of Native Americans from their homelands to the western part of the country: 59,000+ moved

- current (2017) significant U.S. discrimination against Native Americans & Blacks in housing, education, incarceration, employment

- German Empire genocide in Namibia of Herero, Nama, and San people, 1904-07: 60,000+ dead

- Native Americans either killed in conflict with U.S forces or who died from various diseases brought to the New World by Europeans and their domesticated animals: 10,000,000+ dead
- segregation and prejudice (past and ongoing) and its negative effects against Blacks in the U.S. in spite of the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation freeing Blacks, in spite of the 1870 15th Amendment to the Constitution giving Blacks the vote, and in spite of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 to overcome legal barriers for Blacks at the state and local levels
- discrimination and cruelty against all manner of those who are not like us: Catholics vs Protestants, Sunnis vs Shias, Israelis vs Palestinians, whites vs non-whites, Northerners vs Southerners (in the US, in Europe, in Italy), Buddhists vs Rohingyas, Tutsis vs Hutus, men vs women, Indians vs Pakistani, white supremacists vs people of color, Christians vs Muslims, Republicans vs Democrats, fundamentalists vs mainstream Christians, political liberals vs political conservatives, LGBTQ vs straight, people with non-visible disabilities vs people with visible disabilities, etc. (the list is virtually endless)
- environmental pollution, including from automobile and airplane exhaust, power plants, coal production, metal refineries, industrial boilers, petroleum oil refineries that produce our gasoline, diesel oil, kerosene, heating oils, lubricating oils, etc.
- human trafficking in the form of sex slavery, child slavery, forced labor, and commercial sexual exploitation – all in all 20,000,000+ children & adult victims globally – not to mention the destruction and trauma involved in all of this, including violence, torture, brainwashing, rape, physical assault, depression, self-hatred, self-destructive behaviors, self-mutilation, Sexually Transmitted Diseases, alcohol and other substance abuse, HIV/AIDS, loss of hope, suicide, etc.
- sexual abuse, domestic violence, emotional abuse, rape, drug trafficking, global terrorism, mass murders
- 1947 partition of India into Pakistan and India as a result of the end of British colonialism there: 1,000,000+ dead
- September 11 attacks in the U.S., 2001: 2,900+ dead
- atomic bombing in World War II, 1945: of Hiroshima 140,000+ dead and Nagasaki 70,000+ dead
- US war in Afghanistan, 2001-2017 (on-going): 50,000+ dead
- nuclear weapons tests and resulting planetary pollution from 1945 to 2016 by Great Britain, United States, Soviet Union, France, China, India, Pakistan, North Korea. These were conducted underground, in the oceans, in the atmosphere, and above the atmosphere. Resulting pollution involved worldwide fallout (radioactive materials) into the global ecosystem and related effects including elevated levels of cancer, malformation of children, birth defects, genetic damage, lower immunity to diseases, etc.
- Kosovo War, 1998-99: 13,000+ dead; 1,200,000+ displaced
- corruption in U.S. federal government and of our elected members in Congress due to poorly restricted and even more poorly enforced lobbying and campaign financing laws, and the damage which that corruption creates both to American morals and ethics as a nation and to the American spirit
- killing in China of practitioners of Falun Gong spiritual practice who have been

imprisoned in order to harvest their organs for international sale and as cadavers for medical science, 1999 to the present 10,000+ killed

- man-made famines in Yemen, Somalia, South Sudan, and Nigeria, 2017: 18 million+ human beings starving to death or at risk of same
- failure to clean up in a timely manner the U.S. Hanford Nuclear (plutonium production) Site on the Columbia River despite the threat of earthquakes, sabotage, and materials deterioration, all of which risk the contamination and devastation of life for several million residents of the Pacific Northwest
- Yemen conflict March 2015 to November 2017 (ongoing): 8,670+ dead
- Myanmar ethnic cleansing of Rohingya Muslim minority, 2017: 6,700+ dead; 615,000+ refugees

Again, the reader is reminded that the figures indicated in Section B.1 are the *lowest* of each range that was researched.

XIV. B.2.a. Destruction caused by disease and illness that results from or is negatively influenced by human activities and the choices we make.

- *Air pollution* from human activities and our choices can and often does cause or negatively influence coronary artery disease, stroke, lung cancer, COPD, asthma, skin and thyroid cancers, birth defects, cognitive disabilities, etc. Human activities, for example, such as factory chimney discharges, vehicular traffic and airplane exhaust, coal mine dust, radioactive waste, nuclear test explosions, bombs. [From US Environmental Protection Agency Web Site, 2/9/2017: "People exposed to toxic air pollutants at sufficient concentrations and durations may have an increased chance of getting cancer or experiencing other serious health effects. These health effects can include damage to the immune system, as well as neurological, reproductive (e.g., reduced fertility), developmental, respiratory and other health problems. In addition to exposure from breathing air toxics, some toxic air pollutants such as mercury can deposit onto soils or surface waters, where they are taken up by plants and ingested by animals and are eventually magnified up through the food chain. Like humans, animals may experience health problems if exposed to sufficient quantities of air toxics over time."]

Since the first nuclear test explosion in 1945, at least eight nations have detonated a total of 2,000+ nuclear test explosions either in the atmosphere resulting in air pollution or in the ocean resulting in water pollution (see entry immediately below).

- *Water pollution* from human activities and our choices can and often does cause or negatively influence dysentery, cholera, Hepatitis A, lead poisoning (from both environmentally contaminated water and water conduit containing lead), illness and death in marine life (our food supply), etc. Human activities, for example, such as oil spills, oil and other discharges from ocean vessels, underwater nuclear detonations, dumping of garbage and commercial chemicals in waterways allowing them to enter the groundwater and other sources of drinking water.

- *Noise pollution* from human activities and our choices can and often does cause or negatively influence hearing loss, stress-related disorders, sleep disruption.

- *Land & soil pollution* from human activities and our choices can and often does cause or negatively influence breathing problems, skin problems, and cancers. Pollution, for example, from acid rain, pesticides, herbicides, fungicides, fertilizers, deforestation, soil erosion, mining, animal waste, garbage in landfills. All of these either make their way eventually into our groundwater or facilitate it.

- *Poor nutrition* and resulting cumulative health risks from consuming prepared convenience foods too frequently and in excessive quantities, almost all of which foods contain some combination of chemical preservatives, chemical stabilizers, chemical food coloring, chemical artificial sweeteners, chemical flavor enhancers all of which can and do cause or negatively influence allergies, hyperactivity, Attention Deficit Syndrome, skin problems. The regularly high or excessive consumption of salt, saturated fat, and sugar in many diets, perhaps most typically in the American diet for example, can lead to increased risks for hypertension, high cholesterol, heart disease, diabetes, cancer, and obesity to name a few.

- *Insufficient physical exercise* and its negative impacts on one's health. Insufficient physical exercise is a key risk factor in the development or exacerbation of many chronic diseases (cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, stroke, diabetes, obesity, blood clots, osteoporosis, cognitive dysfunction, depression and anxiety, falls and bone fractures, colon and breast cancers, physical pain generally, higher mortality rate, etc.)

- *Extended levels of emotional and psychological stress* can have negative impacts on one's mood and personality and contribute to depression, anxiety, cognitive problems, personality changes, behavioral problems, difficulty completing daily activities, difficulty developing and maintaining rewarding interpersonal relationships, difficulty holding a job, etc.

- *Insufficient sleep* can lead to increased risk of occupational and medical errors, bad moods, lack of focus, diabetes, irritability, disruption to the immune system, risk of injury or accidents at home, work, or on the road.

- *Insufficient physical health insurance*, or insurance that is too expensive to afford for what is needed, can and does leave hundreds of millions of people worldwide vulnerable to increased numbers of illnesses and severity of those illnesses, increased unhappiness, loss of hope, and greater risk of death.

- *Insufficient mental health insurance*, or insurance that is too expensive to afford for what is needed, can and does impact negatively on crime, violence, mass shootings, addictions (drug, alcohol, food, gambling, sex, work, etc.), mental illnesses, despair, loss of contributions to society.

- *Insufficient affordable, comprehensive, and effective treatment for alcoholism, illicit drug use, opioid addiction, and abuse of licit drugs*, can and does lead to loss of jobs and income, loss of homes, deterioration and/or loss of family life, erosion of human relationships, seriously poor life-choices and critical thinking skills, and unmerited incarceration of many people.

XIV. B.2.b. Disease and other destructive physical conditions that as far as we know do *not* result from human activities and our choices. This could change, as it has through time, as our knowledge continues to grow. Perhaps these situations are caused by God one could argue. Perhaps instead they are, as with the human species too, simply a natural part of evolution and the free and unrestrained development of the universe. At this time, it appears that we do not know.

Examples are:

- genetic diseases like cystic fibrosis, Down syndrome, hemophilia, Huntington's disease, muscular dystrophy, sickle cell anemia
- non-genetic diseases like congenital heart defects and spina bifida
- diphtheria, mumps, measles, rubella, chickenpox, and polio – but these are all preventable today by known vaccines, if we choose to use them
- malaria (largely preventable however) and cerebral palsy (partly preventable)
- mental illnesses that do not result from human activities and our choices but from genetics and abnormal balance of neurotransmitters. However, what are normally genetics-based mental illnesses can be *triggered* by human-caused psychological and/or environmental factors (see examples in Section XIV. B.2.c below).

XIV. B.2.c. Mental illnesses, however, can also be caused or triggered by psychological trauma resulting from human activities and our choices.

For example: physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, parental neglect, low self-esteem, excessive stress, abuse of alcohol and other chemically addictive substances, family dysfunction, traumatic divorce of parents, abusive foster care, being bullied, and one's belief that one is unloved, unloveable, unwelcome, or irrelevant.

XIV. B.2.d. To be considered in all of this is also the serious and sobering question of what negative consequences occur when *more than one* of the problematic situations presented in Sections XIV. B.2.a. through B.2.c. are experienced by the same individual, or when that individual experiences the *cumulative effect* of these situations over time, including over an entire lifetime (e.g. systemic racism).

XIV. B.3. Natural Disasters

The Earth's natural processes frequently result in destructive events in nature. As far as we know, and as far as science can take us currently, these destructive events are the result of a universe that appears to be free and unencumbered to develop and evolve as such happens. The more science learns about these natural phenomena, the better our understanding will become.

One product of this free development is the formation over time of the inestimable beauty, grandeur, and uniqueness that is our planet Earth, for which we are grateful and without which we would not be as happy. Yet another product of this development is destruction, sometimes catastrophic, with which, it appears, we must learn to live until such time as our knowledge and resulting capacities to deal effectively with it might catch up with our experiences.

One could choose to believe that God controls these events and could stop them if his or her desire were such. But, apparently because God does not control *us*, which we appreciate and likely insist upon and demand, leaving us free to choose as we will and what we will, it would seem reasonable enough to assume that God has done the same with the universe, its development, and its characteristics, including its destructiveness at times.

We are not, however, completely innocent victims or powerless when it comes to preventing natural disasters.

Some of our well documented role in contributing to the natural disasters that result from or are exacerbated by global warming and climate change may not seem really much of a choice at this point in human existence, especially given our dependence on energy and transportation, and given the current state of progress, or lack thereof, regarding alternative energy sources. Practically incalculable is the current role of fossil fuels – coal, oil, and natural gas – in the production of the energy and fuel that drive our world's current everyday wants and needs, including in the manufacturing of plastics, steel, and iron, for cars, trucks, trailers, airplanes, satellites and space exploration, trains, ships, pleasure boats, equipment and tools of every type including medical; construction projects, military development, furniture, toys, electronics, clothing, road surfacing, storage, recreation, and untold numbers of other everyday material goods.

However, other aspects of our contributory role in natural disasters *are* a choice. For example, our frequent resistance to honestly and squarely define and address the difference between *what we want* and *what we need*; our reluctance to take a hard and serious look at the “elephants” that live in the rooms of our personal choices; our very frequent, irresponsible, and unnecessarily excessive acquisition, use, and discarding of the world's goods, much of whose production has contributed to the pollution and destruction of our environment. Our greed appears to be incessant, as does our refusal to admit that we can live without many of the goods and services that we use, *and* still be happy. And still be happy! Perhaps even investing more time in pursuing the non-material depths of the meaning of our humanity. The culture of mass consumerism and waste that surrounds – indeed bombards – us holds a stranglehold grip on us that many have come to think little about seriously, or are entirely unaware of altogether, thanks to a successfully ideated and managed profit-driven capitalist system of consumption that has too often skillfully duped us regarding what it is that we really need.

The temptations inherent in the strategies and tactics of mass consumerism are powerfully alluring, almost beyond belief. They very often cater to some of our deepest insecurities and fears: doubts about our physical appearance, our status, our self-image and self-esteem, and whether we really are a legitimate and valued part of the society and groups around us. And the temptations are powerfully alluring not only for the affluent in our society and the world, but also for the world's poor *if and when* they might have the financial opportunities that would make massive consumerism possible for them. The greed for more is universal and classless.

These temptations, however, are by no means impossible to resist. Many of the goods that we buy, use (or not), and then discard are our choices to buy in the first place. And how long we use them is also a choice, as is whether we make good faith efforts to have them repaired for our continued use, whether we replace them unnecessarily, whether we recycle them (which is not a justification for having them in the first place), or whether we offer them for use by others. The more goods we produce the more of our resources we burden; the more goods we throw away the more of the environment we burden; and both actions negatively impact the planet and humanity alike. If we are gut-level honest, I suspect we will admit that most of our choices regarding goods, services, energy, etc. actually regard wants, not true needs.

Although natural disasters such as floods, hurricanes, sea rises, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, tsunamis, avalanches, and desertification can happen on their own without human cause, they also can be and are significantly and negatively influenced by us humans and many of our choices, often resulting in upsetting the Earth's natural balance regarding the carbon cycle.

For example:

- The human contribution to rising sea levels is related to our burning of fossil fuels and subsequent increases in greenhouse gases. This same human causal factor is having an influence on the frequency and severity of hurricanes and their destructiveness.
- Human activity appears to be responsible for those earthquakes that result from the disposal of wastewater related to hydraulic fracturing (fracking). Fracking is known also to have contaminated groundwater and surface water; to have resulted in the escape of harmful methane gas and other pollutants into the atmosphere; to have chemically polluted the soil from the drilling, etc.
- The human contribution to desertification includes our deforestation activities, overgrazing the land, redirecting waterways, and the increased covering of the land with roads, buildings, and megacities.
- When we eliminate or degrade wetland habitats through urban sprawl, roads, buildings, parking lots, megacities, shopping malls, or industrial pollution, the result can involve a decline in waterfowl numbers; an increase in animal species deformities; an increase in contamination of water by inappropriate agricultural drainage pollutants in stormwater runoff and by leaching from landfills; increased flooding; loss of once productive land, etc. A major negative result is reduced absorption of greenhouse gases due to fewer trees and other similarly acting vegetation.
- When we produce more greenhouse gases than nature can absorb, some areas that

humans inhabit receive more rain than they can cope with while others receive less rain than they need. Both results are problematic for each respective group: potential death, disease, homelessness, loss of economic resources, etc.

XIV. C. Final Remark

As stated at the start of this Section XIV, the primary cause of the super-grand majority of destructive acts and situations experienced by human beings throughout history has been and still is humanity itself rather than any deity or other factor. I believe I have shown this to be the case. We have it in our complete power to end the majority of the worst of all destruction on the planet, whether against our fellow human beings or the planet itself. The destruction we cause is the product of our choices gone awry. Choices.

Humankind has always lived in a time and a place of opposites, of polarity, of good/evil, love/hate, sadness/joy, building up/tearing down, male/female, strong/weak, dictatorships/democracies, yes/no, either/or, hot/cold, sickness/wellness, pride/humility, war/peace, cowardice/bravery, truth/lies, disease/health, life/death. Endless the list. The negative components of the pairs of these opposites – especially the more destructive ones in the case of Section XIV – do seem to be an integral part of life and what it means to exist at all. No one escapes life's pains and no one escapes its joys. Life is full of both awful and awe-filled moments. It would seem they come as a pair and are an inseparably integral part of existence, however paradoxical and painful that may be and however desperately we might wish it otherwise.

The struggle between good and evil behavior in our lives (1) is present in the psyches of all of us, (2) is present at the same time within each of us, and (3) is present without end. The inclinations within us to perform actions that affirm, encourage, and sustain life, and to perform actions that erode, diminish, and tear life down – these both exist within us always and simultaneously, and we often turn from one of them to the other within the short span of only a few minutes. Each end of the polarity tugs at us constantly and vies ceaselessly for our attention and action. Which one wins out is basically, in the end, our call. Again, a choice.

So, quite apart from the separate issue of whether or not God exists,
when you say you can't believe in a God who allows bad things to happen to good
people,
consider that you mis-take the actors in all of this:
It is not a God who allows the majority of bad things in life to happen.
It is you and I.

XV. Acceptance Of The Mystery? (You're Kidding Of Course!) (Yes?)

Although previously stated in the prologue, this seems to be a good place to repeat that my goal with this reflection is not to proselytize or otherwise lure the reader into believing in God. I am simply trying to examine, as objectively as my abilities will allow, various barriers I have heard given in support of lack of belief.

We are fascinated by various mysteries of the non-God variety in many areas of life as we encounter them through reading, studying, lectures, documentaries, etc. For example, where the cosmos comes from, the existence or not of UFOs, how the human brain functions, understanding our emotions, whether there are other forms of life in the universe, what the human spirit is, what love is, why we are such a violent species, where our self-destructive behaviors originate and why they continue. We live and walk effortlessly among these mysteries on a daily basis.

Why do we not resist exploring these mysteries in the same ways we so often seem to resist exploring the mystery of whether God exists? Why are these mysteries seemingly so much easier to accept and live with, even though, potentially, they have less impact on the ultimate meaning of our existence than might the mystery of God?

Is it because these types of mysteries do not challenge us? That is to say, could it be that the psychological side of our fascination with life's non-God mysteries and our ease in accepting them and living with them as mysteries is supported by an underlying sense and confidence, probably unconscious in most of us, that one day we *will* understand them? That it's just a matter of time?

But if this is the case, then could not the same thinking be applied as well to the mystery of God?

What would happen, for example, if we tried applying to the mystery of whether God exists the same acceptance as we experience with many of the other mysteries in our lives? What if the most simple and immediately practical way to deal with our doubts about whether God exists is to abandon altogether the desire and the search for absolute certitude? What if our desire itself for certitude is what is standing in the way and is not necessary? After all is said and done, maybe a reasonable starting place for exploring the existence or not of God would be to give simple belief a try, trusting without reservation, and see how that feels; surrender and just accept simply, for a while at least, and watch what happens.

It is possible that most children have something to say to us about this – that is, the way they place their trust unconditionally in adults, accepting without reservation. "Children do so because they are dependent on us," some might say. "They are not fully developed in thought and have very little choice regarding whether to trust adults."

But is this really the reason children seem to trust and accept without conditions? Could it not be the case as well that children can still sense something that we adults forgot long ago, perhaps in the process of becoming adults? Something which children, without understanding it, are able to respond to by some primal intuition that is still alive and functioning within them – namely the ability to trust without reservation? To repeat from above, could belief that God exists be as simple as just *trusting* that belief without reservation? Sort of similarly as many people who are in a love relationship, for example, trust without reservation that each is loved by the other?

So maybe just giving simple belief a try might be for some a reasonable starting place for dealing with the question of whether God exists. *Embracing* the mystery rather than wrestling it, then watching what happens.

Giving a *fair* try, however, would likely require a *full-hearted* try. A genuine try, with full assent. Not some let's-get-it-over-with-to-prove-a-point try. A try that applies *all* of our honesty and sincerity to the proposition, not just the convenient or "spare-change" part of it.

What if we tried applying all of the time and effort to the endeavor – but *all* of the same time and the same effort – that we apply to other things important to us in life, as when trying to make someone fall in love with us? trying to get a promotion? trying to become rich or famous? trying to look always beautiful or sexy or smart? trying to make a name for ourselves? A genuine, intentional effort.

Further, what would happen if we looked for God, searched for God, as we might look and search for the end-point of all our aspirations? What if we looked for God as for the most important thing we ever sought? What might we find following *that* path? How much more productive might it be regarding belief if we spent time walking *that* road rather than pondering, tallying, cataloging, and focusing on doubts?

XVI. A Matter Partially Of Evolution?

Many issues and situations in our lives are complex, unclear, confusing, mysterious. For example, deep-seated inter-personal conflicts with others, intra-personal conflicts within ourselves, multitudinous enigmatic entanglements existing deep within the human psyche. Many of these issues and situations gain clarity and become increasingly and ever more fully understood *only over time*, as we mature as individuals and as a species, growing and deepening our body of knowledge and experience concerning them. So it may be too that our awareness and understanding of God's presence (or absence) in the world and of God's efforts (or not) to communicate with us may also be growing, evolving, and gaining clarity, only over time, and in basically the same way.

"Cop-out," one might say. Perhaps.

But maybe instead, reality.

XVII. But I Don't Want To Live A Restricted Life

To those who fear that belief in God would mean that one would need to live in a significantly restricted way, unhappily perhaps, in sackcloth and ashes as it were, or live feeling unfulfilled or "less than," one might respond, as it seems to me to be the case, that living a decent, grounded, enjoyable, responsible, rewarding life, rich with meaning and joy is in no way incompatible with believing in God.

Neither should believing in God force one to adopt a specific religion or even *any*

religion. God is God, not a religion.

Nor it seems to me, if religion itself is the concern, must one believe in every single tenet of a religion (as I suspect most do not), especially if according to one's best informed conscience one cannot do so regarding this or that issue. For to go against one's conscience would be an outrageous insult to the soul and to free will, and would contradict and deny one's very personhood and humanity.

And if, in the process of believing in God, one were to find that one must give up murdering, lying, cheating, stealing, adultery; physical, sexual, or emotional abuse of others; or excessive greed for money, power or sex, would this be really such an unbearable loss?

XVIII. I Can't Believe In A God Who Feels Impersonal, Distant, Removed From Me

What if there *is* a God and if the reason God created the cosmos and us was because he or she was lonely and desired company? Yes. Seriously. What if?

What if God did a *Big-Bang-or-other-similar-number* on him- or herself as a way to manage the loneliness by scattering parts of self into every atom of existence, including us, knowing that slowly but surely through the millennia, each in our own way, we might find God in ourselves, in each other, in the staggeringly amazing beauty that surrounds us, and in the – still today – limitless amount of detail and complexity of existence?

What if God determined that we needed the passing millennia of time and resulting slower-maturing discovery of him or her through our physical, intellectual, and spiritual evolution (not God's evolution) as the surest way for us to be able to handle both discovery of and belief in God?

And what if this process simply parallels the same search we are on for truth in other areas of the human experience, where our discovery and understanding of truth is also continually developing and being revised as we mature as a species, though truth itself (as with God) remains unchanging, constant, and does not evolve?

XIV. The Seed

So . . . having come to the end of this reflection regarding several common barriers to belief in the existence of God, what is one left with? Belief? No belief? Half-hearted belief? Some belief in between? Go-away I'm busy belief? Pick-and-choose belief? Give belief a try and see what happens? Many are the possibilities.

But as stated at the beginning, this reflection has not been about convincing the reader to believe in the existence of God; rather to challenge certain common barriers to belief that do not appear to be valid as barriers and, as such, would best be abandoned because they only get in the way of and clutter one's discernment process. In addition, and rather naturally I suppose, the reflection has also been about the pursuit of truth generally.

Just as the tiniest and most fragile of seeds, well nurtured and given sufficient time, can become a garden of great dimensions and value, so it may be for the seed of belief in God that has been, it seems to me, so obviously present within the human family from the beginning of time. I say “obviously,” for the question of whether God exists and what this might mean for us, where we come from and where we are going, has been and still is, if arguably, one of the central questions that has confronted the soul of the human species since the beginning of self-awareness. Indeed, when all is said and done, it is perhaps *the* central question.

And to me that seed seems staunchly planted in some kind of perpetual vigil at the entrance to our souls, waiting patiently and vying quietly for our notice and consideration whether we like it or not, desire it or not, curse it or not, nurture it or not, find it or not.

ESSAY 8: On Reality and Mystery

Reality "*versus*" Mystery, Or Reality "*and*" Mystery?

Oh Paradox Divine!

. . . that such a Reality as the universe could be equally Mystery!

Intertwined, the reality and the mystery of the universe dance across all space and time; into the arms of the other, they give themselves forever. As the two embrace us deep within their awesome splendor, they bridge that which for us has always been the chasm separating Life and Death. As endless galaxies cradle us deep within their star-dappled arms light year upon light year, Death, the ultimate absurdity, grieves the human heart no more; for there center-stage to our death-deliberations comes the universal affirmation that Life and Death are one. In the context of such ineffable majesty as the universe, Life and Death are of equal meaning and value. And both are eternal—for dead or alive, flesh or dried bones, we are eternal because existence in any form is eternal (existence and eternity come to us hand in hand, as a pair, as single gift); though our substance changes form yet it remains, and the spirit through its indomitable permeation of the human experience endures as well.

In this way do we give individual witness forever; thus does our presence abide. And all that was one remains one.

And just as the more we probe the reality of the universe the farther into its mystery we are led, so the more we probe the mystery of God the farther we journey inside the reality of God.

Oh Paradox Divine!

. . . that such a Mystery as God could be equally Reality!

ESSAY 9: On the Human Family Threatened

Overcoming Separation

One of the most powerful forces ever to strike at the human family and separate or risk separating many of its members one from another is the belief or suspicion some of us have that we might not really belong to it, that we might not be bona fide members of it, that full acceptance into Homo sapiens is dependent somehow on having a certain measure of worth, one which we do not have as we are.

We try in various ways to sidetrack this frightening thought, this unwelcome visitor, and, as a result, we come to believe early on that what we do and say and possess and how we appear to others are somehow supposed to earn us that worth, give us that sense of belonging.

But the desire for greater worthiness is insatiable, the worthiness itself cannot be earned, and our efforts to acquire it are futile and compromise our relationships, often to the point of obscuring, eroding, even destroying them. Unwittingly or without much concern, our focus turns slowly away from our relationships, which are the cornerstone itself of human existence.

Toward the great enticers of our time many of us turn: to selfishness, deception, arrogance. A nearly obsessive accumulation of goods, successes, and attentions become our companions. Some of us give up the struggle altogether and withdraw into the haven of isolation, often without conscious awareness we are doing so. Still others of us seek our worth in the serving of others, quasi-frenetically, and likely unsuspecting of more than the obvious outcome of doing good for others. Unaware too of the threats of self-effacement which all too often weave their invisible threads deep within the fabric of our altruism.

As each of these seductions becomes more insidious and sanitized than the one before it—which it will—those cornerstone relationships become increasingly indiscernible parts of the masonry of our existence. The more insistent our efforts to earn the feel of worth (no matter the means), the more accommodating becomes the painful malaise that results, until at last our feelings succumb to vagueness; conscience is mainly stilled or becomes so relative that it ends up flirting with its own self-destruction; and we come to accept the mere shell of the outer self as the essence of inner self.

And the restlessness of the modern age comes upon us.

Two things are needed above all else in order to overcome this struggle to feel we belong.

First, to set free our longing to know each other, which is both innate to us and an extraordinarily strong desire. Set it free truly and completely, without fear or hesitation, as raw and naked as it was when we came forth from the womb.

Second, to reveal ourselves to each other as we are really, with candor and without deception or fear of judgment.

In this way will the desire and the search for greater worth end and all the doubts about belonging, because then these will have been exposed as frauds and roads mis-taken.

And then the separation of human beings will cease. For there in the self-revelation of each of us to the other—in that inner disrobing become mutual—you and I will have taken hold at last of the most solemn reality:

that before each other we stand equal and with each other we are one.

There are no degrees of worth because there are no degrees of worth. There is only complete equality of worth. One person equal to another. Anyone equal to everyone. Whether young or old; rich or poor; male or female or someplace in between; black, white, brown, or other; gay, straight, or otherwise; beautiful or ugly; Muslim, Christian, any other or no religion; famous or unknown; sharp or dull witted; leader or led.

And then
we will have discovered
one of the greatest causes for celebration
to grace the human spirit
since the discovery of creation as
Act of Will.

ESSAY 10: On an Antidote to the Death Wish

The Death Wish

If people experienced more affirmation in their lives, the kind of affirmation that comes from other persons, not from ourselves or from material goods, then I think there would not be half as many problems in the world, half as much pain, half as much bad news, half as much despair, violence, fear, suicide.

For me the death wish regards any and all turnings away from what is good and clear, true and beautiful.

Stealing is a form of the death wish.

Deception is a form of the death wish.

Striking someone is a form of the death wish.

Selfishness is a form of the death wish.

Talking down to your children is a form of the death wish.

Environmental pollution is a form of the death wish.

To name but a few.

The death wish is much more than a wish to be dead.

It is an enormously insidious beast rooted deep within each person.

Its antidote is genuine, authentic affirmation. And affirmation that can come only from other people, not from ourselves (we cannot effectively affirm ourselves).

Affirmation that originates deep within the giver, not from things exterior.

For affirmation in just about any authentic form destroys every manner of death wish that ever escaped from the prisons of the human psyche.

ESSAY 11: On Intimacy

Starter Thoughts on Non-sexual Intimacy for Two

Intimacy is:

- (1) mutual
- (2) self-initiated
- (3) self-disclosure
- (4) on a reasonably frequently recurring basis
- (5) of matter of a substantial nature.

In order for intimacy to be effective:

- (1) Both people need to be open to the willingness to share, not just one of them. It can't always be or basically be only the other person who does the sharing on each occasion.
 - It is not necessary that both parties share during the same occasion in order to call it mutual.
 - However, during an occasion of intimacy, both people do need to be active participants. Actively participating during an occasion includes, and may only involve, intentional, focused listening by the receiving party.
- (2) Most of the time, the person sharing needs to be the initiator of their own sharing, without undesirable prompting, cajoling, or nagging from the other person.
- (3) The sharing needs to include primarily being about one's own person. It is not primarily about the person's partner, children, others, or situations that do not involve the person who is doing the sharing. Intimacy is about other than just a simple conversation or recounting of an interesting story.
- (4) The existence of an intimate relationship that two people hold with each other would seem to necessitate that the frequency of the occasions of intimacy be more than just once in a blue moon, and feel reasonably and satisfyingly frequent to the needs of both parties.
- (5) The matter shared needs to be adequate in personal depth, significance, or vulnerability.

ESSAY 12: On Technology's Objectification of Humans

Technology and the Objectification of the Human Person

Many qualities that set humans apart uniquely from other animals are being eroded more and more by technology, of which we humans ourselves are the makers. Many products of technology that we have developed in order to serve us are actually leading many of us instead into a form of servitude to them. They are leading us into feelings of emptiness, isolation, loneliness, objectification, or some form of these. That which we have made and make in order to enhance the quality of our humanity is slowly but surely devaluing and diminishing the joy of that very humanity. Below are a few simple, common examples.

Technology Example 1: Cars

There are now cars everywhere that hide their drivers and passengers behind black glass. In effect this reduces the occupants visually to being no more than just parts of the cars, just passing objects. It is impossible for the drivers, the passengers, and you to relate person to person. There is not much point in tossing a friendly wave of hello as your neighbor's car goes by, because you don't know who is driving, you don't know if they are looking at you, and you don't really want to feel foolish. No eye contact is possible. No smile. No mutual acknowledgment of the other's existence. Such cars appear to be mainly large and potentially lethal passing objects. And much more concerning than this, the drivers—likely unaware—are contributing to the social isolation of both themselves and the people outside. The more people drive (and many drive a lot), the more time they spend isolated.

Technology Example 2: Myriad Gadgets and Gimmicks

There must be at least hundreds of gadgets and gimmicks that are successful in making the impersonal or unreal appear personal or real to many people. A great many children are allowed to be in front of the TV for hours each day, receiving interaction indirectly from a talking box, while their human care providers are somewhere else doing something else. Video games and other electronic entertainment has us experience human emotion through animated characters or through real characters we have never met and know nothing about, while the persons who can offer us genuine and real affection are in some other place and time. Computer zombies seem only rarely to leave their make-believe worlds for an embrace or a smile that comes from a real person. Spending time with humans and receiving touch from humans get replaced thoughtlessly by the plastic, glass, and metal that stands before them and around them. Preference for soft and warm turns to acceptance of hard and cold. Can these consumers keep straight the difference between genuine and healthy human forms of expression and their opposites? Between what is genuinely human and that which is only human-like?

Technology Example 3: Automated Phone Attendants

Automated phone attendants try their hardest to sound real and friendly and happy

but they are nonexistent humans. They tell you while you wait how important you are to the company you're phoning, but they do everything technologically possible to avoid making actual contact with you.

They read you a list of options you can't keep track of, which grates at your self-esteem and your patience. They offer options you can't hear, and you can't ask them to speak up. If no option accommodates the purpose of your call, you feel frustration and maybe anger. You often are unsure of what to do and are not given sufficient time to think about it. The flexible and the rigid collide. More frustration.

They even tell you what to feel—thanking you for your patience, for example—even though they don't know you are feeling great irritation, frustration, or anger.

They tell you they appreciate your business, but they won't talk to you.

Then they seem to justify all the impersonalization by packaging it all up in the sorry excuse of a wrapping paper they call "for quality assurance purposes."

And if you should actually get a live person at last, after your neck has kinked from holding the phone too long, human qualities might have been so programmed out of them that you can't get them to react at all to your complaints or irritations, which only increases your irritation and anger. They commonly will say nothing or that they're sorry and then go immediately into a cold, non-relational silence. They often display no more feeling than the automated attendant whose place they have just taken; the two are, for all practical purposes, the same.

Technology Example 4: Mass Mailings

Those who develop mass mailings (whether via paper, phone calls, or email) dehumanize by coming up with always more clever manipulations of the English language that deceive you but help them achieve their goal, which involves almost exclusively getting money from you (in the end), getting your vote, or getting your signature. They want you for these, not for who you are.

They deceive you by envelopes that say such things as "Urgent" or "Important Document Enclosed" or "Critical Date-sensitive Material-Open at Once" or "Congratulations, You've Just Won a Prize," and so forth, when, in fact, the matter wasn't urgent, there was no important document enclosed, there was nothing critical, and you didn't win a prize. They play with you like a child plays with a yo-yo. Trusting the integrity of the sender, you open the envelope only to find out you've been duped. And they didn't lie, of course, for the matter was urgent to *them*, the document was important to *them*, the matter was critical to *them*. And the prize? Why . . . it was also for them!—namely, to get you to open the envelope, consider the contents, and hopefully do what they want.

You receive the mailings even though you registered with some "do not send" service to stop them. And you can't easily stop the mailings. If you can find a number to

contact, they commonly inform you that you'll be receiving three more mailings before the process stops, as these mailings have already been set up with their mail service. Only then will you receive no more mailings. And if you're lucky, the mailings won't resume again in six months or a year, otherwise you start the process over (without your permission). This system is basically rigged to tire you out so that in the end (unless you have given up before then) you will once again start receiving the mailings. The burdens and inconveniences involved are yours entirely.

And what about the companies you make purchases from who take the liberty of selling your personal information to other vendors without your permission? They are selling a part of you. They are making money off you. You and your wishes do not matter. It *is* possible you clicked "I agree" at some point without realizing it, while using some app or making an online purchase. But thanks to a multi-paragraph agreement they likely presented to you with very small type and a lot of legalese, the odds are you were not capable of understanding all that you were agreeing to.

Your ability to trust people and companies and systems erodes just a little bit more with each new deception.

Technology Example 5: Internet and Various Social Media

The Internet can drain you completely of energy with its frequently overwhelming number of possibilities, especially if you find navigating through all the unrelated hits difficult to resist, and at-first-apparent possibilities turn out to be dead-ends.

The flood of pop-ups can be an insult to intelligence. Serious articles you are reading and trying to concentrate on are having distracting pop-up ads inserted into them every other paragraph it seems. This is especially irritating when you are already paying a monthly fee for the app and when you realize the company is getting paid for those ads too. They are an example of masterful attempts to control by advertisers in that we must deal with the pop-ups whether we want to or not. You cannot simply just bypass or ignore many of them anymore; often you must move and click your mouse on the "x" in a corner of the ad and very often it has been made difficult to locate. Pop-ups often offer us the height of tastelessness and the epitome of the worst of capitalist greed, with their interminably flashing lights, odd noises to catch our attention, and failure to rise to the creative heights of which the human imagination is possible.

Various social media, like Facebook and Twitter for example, seem to be having the effect on far too many users of increasing their short attention span, including increasing their inability or lack of desire (or both) to drill down deeper into an article in order to more fully and accurately understand issues. It is becoming easier and easier to observe people who have difficulty even following three-step instructions.

On the subject of viewing pornographic photos and videos on the Internet, experiencing these satisfies no human desire except one, and that desire is satisfied only vicariously if at all, without genuine feeling, and always incompletely.

The Internet presents us with people often stating as fact what they do not know but only believe to be the case. This results in many readers sharing with others as true what is not backed up by facts. These readers often neglect to drill down in order to examine and scrutinize the origins and verifiability of what they read on the Internet, and instead simply believe it and spread it. Unfortunately, this results also in people coming to believe that truth is, in effect, relative and just anybody's say-so, when in fact truth is real, it is critically important to our survival, it is beautiful, verifiable, and it is the bedrock and base of freedom itself. Many are led to disinterest in, or they abandon entirely, the possibility of knowing the truth of various matters. Many others surrender to indifference and being tossed about on a mighty sea of doubt. When applied to human problems, the consequences of this indifference, doubt, and often lack of hope ultimately, can be tragedy, for all three work against advancement of the common good.

Epilogue:

Many qualities that set human beings apart uniquely from other animals are being eroded more and more by our use of technology. Qualities such as compassion, empathy, and mercy, to name a few. Many products of technology that we have developed in order to serve us are actually leading us instead into a form of servitude to them. Often without much realization, they seem to be leading us into various forms of alienation, emptiness, isolation, loneliness, anger, and self-destructive behaviors. Our difficulties seem to be increasing as well regarding just relating to other individuals on meaningful and satisfying levels. The development and strength of the inner life appears to be taking second place, and a lesser place, to external material mediocrities. Swept up by the tsunamis of the erosive sides of technology, that which we have made in order to *enhance* the quality of our humanity is actually threatening that very humanity with the slow, insidious devaluation and diminution of it.

Not infrequently we make technology for the sake of technology, not for the sake of humankind. Humankind becomes merely the excuse for making the technology. "If it's there let's make it and use it," you hear many people say. But are not we ourselves the ones who end up so often getting used?

And how many people say yes to a particular technology most of all because they do not know how to say no? Are they afraid of feeling embarrassed before others or of being taken for backwards or ignorant if they say no? How many people just simply are afraid not to follow the crowd or do not believe they have the courage to challenge it?

In a very real way technology has become for many of us an idol, a god. An unfeeling, uncaring entity that didn't make us but somehow got us to make *it*. It!

Those characteristics of technology that are damaging to human dignity are fast encroaching on our ability to feel and to know what feelings are; to exchange real feelings; to offer relationship and other interpersonal exchanges that are genuine; and to give genuine affirmation to others—that is to say, affirmation which can only come

from us humans alone. Our willingness to use or put up with the negative sides of technology—of which, again, we are the makers—wreaks havoc on our weaknesses and insecurities. It wreaks havoc on our earnest and legitimate desire to control our environment and realize our destiny. And it leads us to an ever greater participation in the dehumanization and objectification of the human person.

To conclude, it would seem worthwhile at this point to ponder the testimony against a technology gone wild that arrived to us long ago:

"Their makers shall be like them."

(Psalm 135)

ESSAY 13: On Calling Things What They Are

Pâté Land

For years I had heard of pâté: French, fancy, expensive. For people of discriminating taste I guessed. Out of my class I supposed.

Then one day I tasted some and realized it was liver spread. Liver spread! Just some chopped liver with a lot of help added.

And I wondered why we don't just call things what they are.

Pâté.

That's what far too often the world has been for me.

We come into this world as chopped liver, so to speak, and then find ourselves one day or another being cajoled or pushed down the road to pâté land. We start out what we are, as we are—simple, good, beautiful—then strive to become someone else instead because somebody told us to, somehow, somewhere along the way. Somebody in their own way said we weren't good enough the way we were. And though rarely can we recall who said it, or when or how we came to feel this way, we spend half our lives trying to become someone we are not and the other half searching for what we were, before we got lost.

And I forget how impressionable I am. I stand back in awe before the pâté bunch and their pâté lifestyle and all the fancy words and glitter and bubbly chatter-jabber they use to describe people and life and all their various moments—as though all those many and fancy descriptions could really separate their experiences from mine. And I lose heart. I put those folks and their ways and their words on a pedestal, not to be touched, while, throughout, something much greater than all of this manages not to make its way onto the stage:

The realization that, despite how things might be presented,
we are all hopelessly the same, believe it or not.

Changelessly equal, like it or not.

The one who does manual labor, the artist, the office worker, the politician, the garbage hauler, the professional, the beggar, the religious leader, the repair person alike, whatever the category, whoever the individual. Rich, powerful, famous, this truth does not move; poor, powerless, forgotten, it does not change.

Pâté.

How in the world did something as simple and natural as just being who we are, remaining as we were made, take the long dark detour into the labyrinth of unfamiliar ways?

What has led so many of us to abandon ourselves to that which is less meaningful, to that which contributes less dignity to the human person, to that which in the end almost always fails to satisfy?

What has led so many to stop exploring the meaning of their journey? To stop exploring the wisdom and truth that mystery can often supply where reality cannot? To stop exploring how words can fall short, and silence itself can be the wildest place on earth, screaming out understandings of which words have not even dreamt?

How did we find ourselves on the bridge to obscurity and indistinct shadows though we started out such clear and unmistakable wonders to everyone?

And how have so many been led to forget that that which matters most we were designed in the guts of our genes to pursue relentlessly and passionately all the days of our lives?

Pâté.

It's only chopped liver with a lot of help added.
After all.

ESSAY 14: On Running Away From the Best-yet Real Fairy Tale

The Authentic Fairy Tale

Why do we abandon with such haunting frequency this fairytale-reality we call Cosmos, and in particular the Earth, which rests cradled in its embrace? Why so often do we reject it, fail to notice it, or abuse it?

I think abandonment of the cosmos might have more to do with our struggles regarding self-worth, relationship, and courage than with just about anything else.

—On the Origin and Nature of Self-worth—

On a purely natural level, our worth as human beings comes from nothing more and nothing less than the fact that we exist. On a purely natural level, existence alone establishes our worth and is the bedrock on which it rests.

And that worth is inestimable; its value is great beyond measure.

For one cannot be integral part of a cosmos which is manifestly of supreme grandeur and at the same time be worth anything less than it is—much the same as the tiniest speck of new life can be of no less value than the mother in whose sanctuary it dwells.

Yet we are integral part of the cosmos! And this supreme grandeur can be verified by anyone and is made manifest to anyone who takes the time to observe and ponder our planet and the expanse of creation that lies in the endless vastness around it.

Considering ourselves specifically in the context of the whole of creation, the entire universe
—all planets and distant-most galaxies and all created matter—

in this context,
surrounded by the stupefying magnificence of this reality,
our very existence is the single most undeniable testimony to our worth.

No further justification or explanation need be given, either to verify or authenticate our worth.

We neither can nor need do anything to obtain such a prize, and it cannot be earned.

We need do nothing to hold on to it, for it cannot be lost.

And no one and nothing can take it away, not in life, not in death.

The gift is ours by birthright and is forever.

—Struggles with Self-Worth and Relationship—

Now while this being of worth beyond measure is not something that can be earned, many among us cannot comprehend or do not believe in the possibility of possessing a worth which we did not and can not earn. And while neither can this worth of ours be controlled, others of us are unwilling to surrender to or tolerate a self-worth that we cannot control.

We try in various ways to compensate for this frustrating state of affairs by striving for control or power or even oblivion in numberless, varied, and complex ways:

- interminable efforts to accumulate money and goods;
- abuse of others, including of their self-esteem;
- ceaseless searching for notice and praise from others;
- obsession with sex and matters sexual;
- pursuit of distractions and other activities that cause time to pass and move us beyond the present discomfort without having to deal with it for the moment;
- abuse of alcohol and drugs;
- consciously or unconsciously allowing the development of personal problems (even health problems sometimes) that has the effect of drawing our attention away from the real problems of our lives;
- amassment of titles and achievement lists which, in and of themselves, offer no proof whatsoever of worth.

Persisting in these and other types of misdirected efforts, and influenced profoundly by the negative impact they have on ourselves, others, and the planet, we unwittingly catapult any thought of genuine relationship into the darkest depth of inner abyss.

—Struggles with Courage—

And even though, as we face each new challenge in life, we could be drawing great courage from the gift of inestimableness that has been given to us, most of us succumb instead to various forms of fear regarding it:

- fear of not knowing how to receive such a gift;
- fear of the cosmos itself and that it will swallow us up and abandon us to the darkness of the void;
- fear to trust the relationships to which feelings of worth inevitably lead;
- fear that our relationships or the gift of our worth might be only temporary;
- fear of the gnawing feeling of guilt or of uneven accounts that often accompanies a gift received but not earned;
- fear of the lifestyle changes that for most of us would be necessary in order to develop and sustain any credible friendship with the cosmos.

And so,
because we remain in the grip of our fear
or refuse to give up control

or insist on trying to earn our worth,
we become the source itself of our own frustrations and, in effect, end up both
(1) deserting that of which we are most a part: the ever-awesome fusion of reality and
fairy tale that we call Cosmos, and
(2) turning away from our very selves and each other.

This desertion of the cosmos, ourselves, and each other leads day after day to tragedy.
One need only take in but a very small sampling of the daily news to learn of these
unfortunate situations. Murder, fraud, deception, lies, intimidation, wars,
embezzlement, domestic violence, money laundering, tax evasion, child abuse, self
abuse, cyber warfare, slander, oppressive authoritarian regimes, prejudice against
those who are not like us. You get the point. Without much notice or resistance from
us, an insidious web-work of darkness lowers its stranglehold upon the human heart.

Fleeing the cosmos and each other, we jump frantically into the arms of dream-filled
nirvana lands of our own invention.

Toward the great enticers of our time we turn.
Into the open arms of self-destructive behavior we quicken our fall.
On flights of fancy we embark.
To new amusements we run, the latest trend, a fresh addiction, another partner.

And nirvana-fever's fraud infects the planet.

Then,
after awe only short-lived (if it ever really knew life at all),
and deliverance only fleeting (if ever we felt indeed delivered),
that which seemed would be sweet relief betrays its promises.
And we come to graze beside the
Golden Calves of our own imaginings, only to find

NEVER QUITE O GOD!

. . . the fairy tale authentic
 . . . the fairy tale authentic
 . . . the fairy tale authentic:

***Sweet cosmos here and now,
and there within,
amidst the stars,
the who we are,
revealed.***

About the Author

Ron Talarico is a writer based in Portland, Oregon.

Born and raised in Portland, and other than having lived in Italy on three occasions in my twenties and taught in Texas for two years, I have always been satisfied to remain rooted right where I am. Despite the excitement and importance of traveling to places far away and experiencing all manner of new things to learn and do, the journey I most prefer and to which I keep coming back is the one within myself. The endless places of mind and soul that there I find have long upstaged all other contenders for my attention and remained center-stage to my sense of the essential meaning of who I am.

Truth, Beauty, and Today are my greatest encouragements and favorite places to linger. As ideas, they turn me on something crazy. I wish getting to know them better did not require near-equal time trying to escape the barrage of human enticements that would lead me away from them. And though I could never possess these three wonders of inspiration or even be sure I am coming closer to them, yet there they are — Truth, Beauty, Today — omnipresent, indispensable, eternal, irresistible. And if all I ever achieve is knowing I have given my best to the journey to be closer to them, who says I'm not lucky?

Other books by the author available in the Apple Bookstore:

The Mouth Is for Talking

Fire in the Dark, making a difference in the world

God

(And Barriers to Belief)

A Case of Mistaken Identity

(Why You Can't Believe in a God Who Allows Bad Things to Happen to Good People)

Reflections on Life (coming soon)

Website: rontalarico.com

Email: talarico.ron@gmail.com