

04 Some Issues 1

My basic stance always is Jesus' message mixed with realism and with Western values about freedom, citizenship, and science. If religion was so simple, this book would not be needed. Real questions arise. Many real questions are asked first by children, go unanswered, and then get lost in life's rush: "Can God make a rock so heavy he can't lift it?" "Can God do bad things?" It is worth asking again every once in a while. The point of asking here is to get past the questions in an adult way, use common sense, and get on to better issues. This chapter and the next pose some questions so we can sort things out to focus on what is important.

People pestered the Buddha about heaven, hell, next lives, karma, power, food, having energy, losing weight, looking good, being cool, being a "gangsta", love, winning the lotto, erectile dysfunction, vaginal dryness, etc. He refused to answer because those issues blocked the main task, which was to wake up, see how the world works, stop clinging, and stop suffering. Some questions can help with the main task, but, even then, mostly we ask them to get past them. "Getting past them" does not mean dismissing them as we do for a small child but letting them trigger our sense of wonder and using them to think.

PART 1: Childhood Questions

God, Goodness, and More than Morality.

Are God and good the same or do they differ? Is goodness good because it is good in itself or is it good because God has a list of good things? Is goodness good only because God said so? Does goodness have logic? Does all goodness have something in common or do we merely have a list that we learned in childhood? Does God have to conform to the logic of morality? Can goodness judge itself? Could God have had Jesus teach a different message? Would something now good, such as the Golden Rule, be bad if God said so? Could the Golden Rule be bad on another world? Would something now bad, such as eating children, be good if God said so? Is God intrinsically, only, and always good? Could God will bad? Does God allow bad? Could God approve what is bad in the service of greater good? If God told us to do something bad, should we do it? Can goodness judge God? You can ask the same questions about Dharma and Tao.

I find it hard to think God and goodness are not the same. Yet God seems other than, and bigger than, my simplistic morality. God is bigger than the message of Jesus, so acting well is not all that the world is about, and acting well is not enough. Then what? Job, C.S. Lewis (in "Till We Have Faces"), Mahayana Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, and most mysticism, just fall back on the inscrutable grandeur of a God beyond morality. Why not just accept what the world has to bring even if some of it is bad?

I have no response to any difference between God and good. I would not do something bad because God told me to. I would not do something bad because some human told me it is God's will. "God's will" is never a valid reason to do anything bad.

It is hard to follow a way of life that accepts both the bad and the good equally. It is hard to be neutral. Not even philosophies that say they do this really do it. It is hard to go along with badness. We want to fight badness. We do not like when people gain from badness. If we stop fighting badness, badness will win: Edmund Burke: "All it takes for the victory of evil is that good people do nothing". To fall back on the grandeur of a God beyond good and evil is like letting evil run wild; it is not to act godlike. God can turn much badness into goodness. Still, we don't like depending on God to do that for us and depending on God to turn the tide of goodness over badness. That idea sounds like an excuse for badness.

So we seek simple moral ways to live. In doing so, we might as well blend simple morality with the best religion.

It does not matter if our dislike of badness has a basis in our evolution; it is still there; it is as likely true as not; it works in us; we have to act on it; and we have to figure out what it means.

If we live by principles, we might as well have a good moral set of ideas that support the principles. The teaching of Jesus is the best place to start. No matter where you go from there, you need to keep Jesus' morality as a reference base. Even people who break rules on purpose keep his morality as a stable reference to know what they are reacting against.

Moralities imply religions even if moralities do not specify religions exactly. The morality of Jesus implies a religion based on one very smart good God. Even though Jesus was idealistic, and even if he wrongly expected a Kingdom of God, the religion that Jesus held seems reasonable and correct. If we accept the moral principles of Jesus it is reasonable to accept his ideas about one very smart good God. I am glad the morality of Jesus and the religion of one good God go together. I don't see any other religion that works as well with Jesus' morality.

More on Goodness and Badness.

My naive simplistic ideas about goodness cannot be the whole story. A lot in life has little to do with good or bad, such as cooking, going to work every day, art, science, sunsets, comets, elephants, rain, snow, and allergies. Life is as much about those as about moral stands. Nature has badness in it, as when spider babies eat their own siblings. The capacity for morality evolved through self-interest, selfishness, competition, and even unfair competition. Morality arose indirectly because people in our evolutionary past worked for their families, friends, and group mates rather than directly for goodness. Morality evolved partly as a response to amorality and immorality, and it could not have evolved unless animals and people acted badly often enough. Good intentions often cause more harm than good in the end: "the road to hell is paved with good intentions". People often achieve more goodness when they act out of love for family, friends, and group than when they act directly for goodness; appeals to family, friends, and group are more likely to get people to act well than direct appeals to goodness. People acting in self-interest still often lead to more good than people who aim to do good, as in examples from economics when bakers, car makers, and the Los Angeles Lakers, all seeking profit, give people usefulness (utility), and usually give more usefulness than a moralist preacher or PC person. By the time humans figured out that they needed to take care of the planet, and how to take of the planet, it was too late already. It seems God tolerates badness on the way to creating goodness, and-or God must go through badness on the way to making goodness.

First, although the world is bigger than my naïve moral ideas, still I can't have better principles on which to act. I have to use my naïve morality as the basic guideline, even when I allow for practicality. At the same time, I have to be humble. I have to avoid zealotry. I keep my eyes open to learn about what is in the world along with my simple morality.

Second, acting morally and being a good person does not stop me from doing the other interesting things in life. You don't have to be moralistic all the time. Most of the time, you can enjoy life without worrying about moral fallout. If you do worry about morality all the time, then something is wrong, and you need to re-assess. Proper morality should encourage people to create, do science, smell roses, admire sunsets, ride a motorcycle, eat, and enjoy life. In the long run, much more than morality, badness is likely to get in the way of life.

Third, we have to avoid the mistaken, misleading, bad stance that good and bad are metaphysical twins that need each other. We don't need badness to make life more interesting. Nature, accident, and the legitimate struggles of life provide enough problems that require goodness so that we don't have to add badness to get goodness. Storms, disease, car accidents, failure in business, and disappointment in love and family all provide enough need for goodness so we don't have to go looking for badness to round out goodness. Bad people do enough bad things on their own without encouragement or rationalization. We do appreciate goodness more after fighting badness but that does not mean we need great evil to have true goodness. It does not mean we need badness to fight with so we can have any goodness at all. It does not mean the more badness we have, the more goodness we have too. We cannot seek goodness through badness. Badness is not a positive thing in itself like the wind or like goodness. We do not act like God when we act badly. We do not gain more freedom, and we do not act like God, when we break rules for fun and when we do what we want.

Fourth, the fact that the world is bigger than simplistic moralizing does not mean: simple moral relativism is true; sophisticated moral relativism is true; all judgments are relative; all principled judgments are false; all judgments are both true and false; and we can do whatever we want if we find an excuse. Right and wrong still are, and are still important. We have to use judgment. Judging means right and wrong still are relevant; it means there is something to judge. Of course, we should be cautious about using absolutes and about thinking we are right all the time. All this is hard, but it is what has to be.

Fifth, badness can be fun sometimes, more fun than goodness. Goodness can be boring. Badness can alleviate the boredom of goodness. Not facing up to this simple truth leads people into badness. It is like telling people that all drugs are all bad all the time; then, when people try a drug that really isn't very bad such as "pot", they lose their judgment and get into drugs that really are bad such as "meth". When people hear that badness is hurtful all the time, and then find it isn't, they fall into the reverse mistake and romanticize badness. The truth leads to better judgment than do simple platitudes. Although badness is fun at times, badness still is not a good idea, and badness still does not add enough to goodness to make badness worthwhile. I return to the topic in several later places in the book, in particular in the chapters on Romanticism and on decency.

I can imagine great badness, greater than anything most people have met, greater than a child getting cancer. The Stalinist terror and the "Borg" on the TV show "Star Trek TNG" are mild examples. I do not

describe such badness. I doubt such badness consistently leads to greater goodness. Some badness is so bad that we can't respond with more goodness, and the badness would crush us. Some badness would take away our humanity. Luckily, we don't face such badness yet. Hopefully, we will avoid it in the future. We should think now so that we don't face it in the future.

The badness we do face does stimulate a lot of goodness in us without also crushing us. Badness does crush some people, but, really, not many. Most of us get by. I don't know if God planned the world so as to force us to face just the right kinds of badness, in just the right amounts, so as to stimulate the greatest goodness in us, without often crushing us. Gottfried Leibnitz suggested this idea; he said we live in "the best of all possible worlds". Voltaire, made great fun of it in the wonderful short book "Candide". I don't know how to measure goodness and badness, and how to assess this idea. I doubt this idea is true. I side with Voltaire. Things turned out as they did in this world, and most of us can stand most of what we have to stand, but not all of us can stand all of what we have to. Some of us get unlucky; that is part of the reality of life; see below. I do not speculate more on this question.

Some religions, such as some Taoism, Buddhism, and Hinduism, urge people to go beyond conventional morality. Sometimes they seem to scoff at all morality. They do not really. They take for granted deep basic morality such as sympathy and empathy. They dislike zealotry and dislike people falling back on merely external rules when people should use judgment and intuition. They do not prefer bad to good. They do not say people are realer, more spiritual, successful, or godlike when people act badly than when people act well. They do not say people are freer when people act badly or break rules. They make clear that going against deep morality is another mistake and another bondage to external artificial principles. I largely agree with the Taoist view of morality but I still emphasize correct principles and I still adhere to my naïve morality.

The idea that we should work hard to make the world better can be an irrational obsession. It has fueled both selfless hard work and zealotry. It can support both satisfaction and guilt. It has led people both to clear minds and to confusion. In the West, and among Christians, too often it is an obsession that leads people to impose their ideas of goodness and order; and, when they do not succeed as they had hoped, to feel oppressive guilt. People outside the West and Christianity often see the idea as an annoying cult-like obsession, and see Western do-gooders as interfering screw-up busy-bodies who serve their own desperate need for justification more than true good. Wishing to make the world better is more a way of getting along personally, a game, than actually doing good in the world. While the bad parts of the obsession are true, the good parts of the dedication are true as well, and I think the good outweighs the bad. All I can advise is that we keep aware of the bad parts, clear our heads as much as possible, and actually try to do some good. Seek to do good rather than to feel better and feel justified.

The Problem of Evil.

We can tolerate a little badness such as getting a cold before a big date. We can tolerate a little evil such as getting cheated on by a girlfriend or boyfriend as long as we don't have children together. We can't tolerate, or understand, some evil, and why there is so much evil. Why should a child get sold into sex slavery? Why do so many people and business firms want state support? Why does God tolerate hard evil or so much evil? Does God actually promote some evil? Even if God uses the evil to make greater

good, how can God promote evil? This chapter does not look at badness and evil. See a later chapter. There are no definitive answers.

Other Religions.

I never felt I had to hold all the ideas in any one religion, had to hold any one religion to the exclusion of all others, and had to deny all the ideas in all religions other than “my” religion. Always it was a matter of ideas. We keep good ideas while dumping bad ideas. We do not desperately hold one religion and all its points regardless of value while excluding all other religions and all their points regardless of value. Childhood Christianity “took” in me but my version never excluded ideas from other religions. I never felt wrong about learning from other religions. I got joy from it. I never learned to exclude and condemn. One religion does not necessarily exclude ideas from others. We do not exclude religions, we exclude bad ideas, and we do that from all religions. I could feel this way and still not feel I was “straying from God” or lapsing into the idolatry that the Tanakh (Old Testament) condemns.

I saw that not all ideas in all religions were equally valid or could be. Religions contradict. All religions have some bad ideas, and all religions are bad when they assume their own superiority without good reasons.

PART 2: Lingering Theological Issues

Jesus’ Secret Successes.

Standard Christianity argues that Jesus succeeded in saving people simply by being born on Earth as a man, being crucified, and being resurrected. For two thousand years, Christian theologians have tried to explain how that works. They failed. We need to look at Jesus in other ways. In their view, their failure does not mean the idea is false, it only means we mere humans don’t understand. We might not have to understand the idea for it to work; we only have to believe. I leave that issue aside.

Even if Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection can save people, it is not likely they can save people if people simply believe but are not also good. According to the New Testament, demons know Jesus is God and has saved the world but it does them no good because they will not submit and do good. If people are good according to the message of Jesus, then it is not clear that they also have to believe in the magic of standard Christian dogma. The magic impresses on us how much God loves us. If we can see that anyway, then we might not need the magic.

“To carry on Jesus’ message, it is likely that people had to believe Jesus was God and had to believe in the magical ability of the incarnation, death, and resurrection. Jesus’ message did go on. It is hard to believe God would deceive us about the magic of Jesus just so we would carry the message. So, it makes sense that the magic of Jesus is true. To avoid deceiving us, God allowed that Jesus was God, and God sent himself as Jesus here to Earth. That way, we can avoid the idea that God deceived us or allowed us to be deceived. Thus the magic of Jesus is real and it worked.” While appealing, I doubt this argument is true. It makes more sense that God did let us deceive ourselves because that is the only way we stupid silly humans would promote the message of Jesus hard enough and long enough for it to stick. Even if the above argument is true, as long as I follow the message, I don’t have to worry about it

because God will not judge me mostly according to whether I believe in Jesus' magic, and so I do not to accept the argument above.

Jesus wanted to set up the ideal Kingdom of God but apparently failed. This apparent failure also bothers theologians, and they have found ways to say Jesus really succeeded in setting up a kingdom although it appears he failed.

Rather than a Kingdom of God like what Jesus had in mind, Christian theologians argue that the Kingdom is the Church, at least until Jesus comes again. If you join the Church, believe, and act well, then you are in the Kingdom of God. If you don't join the Church, then you are not in the Kingdom even if you act well and, apparently, even if you believe in the magic of Jesus. There is something about the magic of Jesus that requires a Christian church. I have nothing against churches of any religion; they do more good than bad; they can do a lot of good; most people are happier if they belong to some religious group; and I hope everybody finds the right church for them. But, like many Western Americans, I don't think it is necessary.

What if the Kingdom of God is not a Kingdom as the Jews thought but a Kingdom based on attitude? What if the Kingdom of God is inside you, as a passage in the New Testament says? This is not a bad idea. It impressed me when I was young. It is important to have the right attitude and the right relation with God. Even if the rest of the world goes bad, if you have the right attitude, and the right relation with God, then you are alright.

I do not dispute the importance of a good attitude but I don't think that is only what Jesus had in mind or primarily what he had in mind. Jesus really did want the Kingdom of God as foretold by the prophets, and as modified by his ideas about good behavior and citizenship. He did not have in mind only a kingdom of individuals with the right attitude, not even in the same Church. He did not have in mind a therapy group. He wanted us to act well and to set up communities based on decency and decent acts.

Suppose a few people do have the right attitude but the world goes bad anyway. Tyranny runs the world, nature decays, and the world looks like a garbage pit. Then, having the right attitude will be an enormous comfort but it will be a hollow victory. It will not be success as Jesus hoped. If that is all we can get, then we should take it; but don't mistake it for the Kingdom of God as what Jesus hoped and as what we might have achieved. The Church cannot make up for that failure.

Suppose the world does go right, and it goes right largely because of Jesus' message. Whether people become Christians or not, people in general adopt the institutions begun in the West as a result of Jesus' message, build working democracies, and save the environment. Is this not the Kingdom of God, or at least a decent substitute? In this case, didn't Jesus succeed anyway? I don't argue for or against this idea of Jesus' secret success. If it works, I will simply enjoy it.

Purity of Motive: Good for Goodness' Sake.

The old Christmas song "Santa Claus is Comin' to Town" says (quoting from memory):

"You better watch out, you better not pout
You better not shout, you better not cry

I'm tellin' you why
Santa Claus is comin' to town...
He sees you when you're sleeping
He knows when you're awake
He knows when you've been bad or good
So be good for goodness' sake"

The omniscience of Santa Claus is the omniscience that priests give to God, parents borrow, and parents use to scare children into behaving.

The last line is ironic. If you act out of fear, and hope for a reward, you don't act for goodness' sake. If you do something good because you want a reward, is it still good? Do you still deserve the reward? Should you still get the reward? If you act well because you want to come off well when you meet God, does that work? If you act well because you want to go to heaven, do you still deserve to go? Can you just act well without also thinking about it? Can you act well without any reason, not even for the sake of acting well? If you act well for the sake of acting well rather than just acting well without any reason, is that still acting well? There are no simple answers. This is what I have in mind when I say that we need to use ideologies without being bound by them. Remember this dilemma for the later chapter on codes, Taoism, and Zen.

Total purity of motive rarely exists in humans. We are morally mixed. Morality arose out of self-interest and nearly always served self-interest. We still act out of a mixture of genuine morality and self-interest. Morality and self-interest coincide nearly all the time - "honesty is the best policy" - so usually we don't have to worry too much about the mix. Trying to separate them would be like trying to take the wet out of water. We do not necessarily fault people for imperfect purity. Nobody faults a firefighter, police officer, or soldier for drawing a salary.

The real question here is not purity of motive but using morality primarily as a tool while expecting to get away with it. To act on mixed motives is only human. A little moral manipulation is only human. A lot of moral manipulation is bad even if moral manipulation is still only human. People used moral manipulation while human nature evolved, and it goes along with having an evolved sense of morality. It is part of our human nature. Our ancestors also got caught doing it, and then catchers were usually more adept than the deceivers. So now usually we can tell when somebody is being too manipulative, and, if the issue is important, we call them on it. We assess the best we can.

In theory, God can tell the exact mixture of pure morality, self-interest, and manipulation. I don't know if he really can or if he even bothers. I doubt God demands total purity. God has his own criteria. I don't know how God assess these situations but I don't worry about it.

Bad Feelings.

Not needing purity of motive includes not needing purity of emotions. Nobody has only sweet kind good emotions. Nobody but bizarre saints always forgive from the bottoms of their hearts. People who seem to have only pure good hearts usually are lying. People who really do have pure good hearts are hard to be around. We all have mixed emotions. We all want to mangle somebody sometimes. We all carry a

grudge for a while. Sometimes we derive strength from our “bad” emotions. We channel that power to act better or to avoid acting badly. We can turn bad emotions to good use without becoming insipid and boring, and without using our apparent kindness as a secret cover for passive aggression.

In a famous “Star Trek” episode, Captain Kirk splits into a “good” Kirk and a “bad” Kirk. The good Kirk is indecisive and ineffective. The bad Kirk is decisively selfish. When the two combine, the real Kirk is decisive and effective about acting well. That does not make the real Kirk an insipid boring guy. In the TV series “Burn Notice”, when he was young, the hero, Mike, was beaten by his alcoholic father. In one episode, Mike discovers that, all his life, without knowing it, he had used the anger at his father to get him through hardships, and he had used the memory of his father’s treatment of his brother and mother not to do the same. He had used the memory of one time when he did hurt some innocent people never to do it again. The fact that good motives dominated bad emotions did not make Mike a nice sweet insipid boring guy either before he consciously knew how his mind works or after.

God knows how we evolved and what makes us tick. God feels anger and wrath himself. He seems able to channel his anger mostly toward long-range good outcomes, and so he must take our mixed emotions into account when assessing us.

Free Will.

I have no solution to the question of free will. Because people worry about it, I take it up again in a later chapter. For now: The question of free will is like the question of purity. We have neither totally free will in all situations nor are we always totally determined like a simple machine. We have situational free will. We are free enough for most situations, and free enough for most situations that come up for this book.

Contrary to ideal free will, sometimes our will is not free; that is what “duress” means. Only a fool thinks you can be free while someone squeezes your fingers with pliers or holds a cigarette to your child’s eye. On the one hand, according to biology, even when we think our will is free, we might still be machines operating under a delusion of freedom. The delusion evolved to help us succeed. When we give in to the manipulations of loved ones, we still call it free will. On the other hand, people freely act against their own success: people walk into burning buildings to save strangers, give up a throne for love and for the good of the country, and support an aged sickly dying parent. Children have their own minds and try hard to assert their freedom. Between mechanical slavery versus the perfect freedom of martyr’s fancy, we have workaday free will. How free our will is, varies by situation. When not fooled by ideology, we are skilled at assessing how free a person might be in particular situations. For law, politics, social relations, personal relations, and religion, all to work properly, we have to assume our will is largely free in those situations where we expect it to be free enough. That seems to be true.

You Don’t Have to be Perfect.

Just as you need not have total purity of motive and totally free will, so you don’t have to be perfect in act and thought. Nobody is perfect, so if God demands perfection, we are all doomed. I don’t know how flawed you can be and still be decent. I don’t know if good trades off with bad. I don’t know if trying extra hard to make a better world can balance a nagging flaw such as addiction to Internet shopping or Internet porn. Some flaws are serious, and cannot be overlooked by other people regardless of what God thinks;

see below. I don't know if God is kinder to people who are better than average or show unusual talent. From what I have seen, those are the people who least expect favors. All religions say their founders approached, or reached, perfection. That is silly. Not Abraham, Moses, the Buddha, Jesus, Mohammad, Confucius, or Chuang Tzu were perfect, not even as a prophet - let alone if we add their character flaws. I don't point out their flaws to prove my point.

Everybody Is Not the Same.

American society makes excuses for bad, foolish, and inept people. To see them falsely, as saints-in-the-making, clouds our judgment. It makes us over-value stupidity and indecency. It makes us under-value decent, smart, and adept people. Making excuses warps religion, politics, and society. Because society has distorted this question, I take it up in a later chapter on decency. For now:

To say everybody is not just as good as everybody else goes against current American "PC" culture in which everybody is as good as everybody else, we all get rewards, everybody is a winner, nobody is a loser, and everybody does as well as everybody else. This American delusion is simply not true. Enough good movies have been made poking fun at it so we would know it is not true if we were not clouded by silly ideology.

We are all equal under the law, and should be equal under the law. That is much different than saying we are all equally adept at everything, equally good, and equally valuable.

Although we are not equal in worldly abilities and worldly affairs, we might all be just as good in the eyes of God. We are all human, and all valuable to God. Differences in natural abilities do not impress God much. Except for some mentally ill people and people under duress, we all can choose to be decent or bad. We are all about equally worth "saving". We are all about equally "saveable".

That is true, but, even so, now we have to accept something Americans reject: There really are bad people, louts, and assholes. Some people are dirty, loud, stink, are selfish, liars, thieves, obnoxious, irresponsible, uncooperative, troublesome, and cheaters. None of the usual excuses are acceptable for them, such as a hard life, romantic rebellion, or being in an oppressed minority.

Although, on one level, in potential, people are similar in the eyes of God, on the level of choosing to be good and acting well, or choosing to be bad and acting badly, people clearly differ in the eyes of God. If you are a bad person, God does not see you the same as good people. God does not see you as you wish to see yourself. God does not see you as you fool yourself into seeing. God does not see you as your dog wishes to see you. God might see that, inside, you had the potential to be good. But God also pays attention to what you actually choose and what you actually do. When you choose to be bad, and you act badly, then you are not the same person as the potentially good person. You really are what you really are. Eventually you are what you do. God sees that. He sees your outside as well as your inside. He does not see you in the same way as he sees a flawed person really trying hard to be good.

For mere humans here on this world, it does not matter much how God sees bad people. What matters is how bad people act and the results on good people. Just because we all had about equal potential in the eyes of God does not mean we can treat each other exactly the same. We have to respect differences in

ability, effort, outcome, responsibility, decency, and badness. We have to beware of bad people. We cannot treat assholes as saints just because God knows they had a good person buried in them and they might change their hearts. We can start by doing as Jesus said. We can give people the benefit of the doubt until they prove otherwise; we can follow the Golden Rule. We can try to look on people as God sees them until they make us change our minds and force us to protect ourselves.

Saved and Wasted.

By “saved” I do not mean the Christian idea of “saved” or the Hindu-Buddhist idea of “enlightened”; by “wasted” I do not mean “damned” or “not enlightened”.

The following idea was one of the highest hurdles I had to jump in growing up. On the one hand, some people see the message of Jesus, and try to live it. They succeed spiritually even if they don't save the world. They are “saved”. On the other hand, some people really do fail. They are wasted people. I have seen too many bad people now to think all people will die as good people, in this lifetime or any number of lifetimes. I would like to think everybody gets saved eventually but I don't. Some people are wasted.

You do not have to be smart to be saved. You don't have to understand all the ideas in this book. You can be a simple decent person by nature with little understanding of dogma, and be saved. All you have to do is act according to Jesus' message as best you can. Being saved does not mean you go to heaven automatically. Being saved has no gain other than that you will have a comfortable talk with God when you die.

You are not wasted because your life has failed, you did not succeed in your business or profession, your marriage failed, your kids are jerks, you never lived up to your promise, your friends dumped you, people used you, you are sick, you are addicted, or you can't find a job. You are not wasted because you are homeless, eat at soup kitchens, or buy all your stuff at thrift stores. You are not wasted because you take the bus. You just have a hard life.

You are wasted because you have a bad attitude, act badly, and choose to act badly. You can rationalize all you want, but, if you have a bad attitude and-or act badly, you are wasted.

In between saved and wasted is a large middle ground. Most people think they fall in the middle ground but are sure God will cut them a big break when they die. God is a pretty good guy but still I doubt he will treat normal wishy-washy self-centered people as well as he treats simple decent people and people who get it. But I don't know for sure.

Along the same lines, another high hurdle I had in growing up was accepting that some cultures-social-groups are better and some are worse. Some cultures-social-groups have a good useful attitude while some have a bad hurtful attitude. Wasted people tend to come from groups with bad attitudes although they can come from any group. This topic is contentious and anti-politically-correct. Rather than go into it here, I go into it in bits and pieces throughout the book.

No Magic or Superstition but Still Morality and One Supernatural Being.

I hold to morality. I want to believe in God but I want as little superstition and magic as possible, including no Devil, few miracles, no magic of Jesus' incarnation, death, and resurrection, and no ghosts, vampires, demons, spirits, mediums, or magic intuition. Yet God is supernatural. It seems a fine line between God the supernatural versus magical claptrap.

Admirable Christians such as C.S. Lewis believed in Christian magic and openly called it magic without shame. Great theologians such as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas offered strong logical arguments for the reality of Christian magic. I likely could screw myself up to believe some of the Christian magic such as the resurrection but I don't need to and don't want to.

If I believe in Christian magic, then I have to believe in most of the magic of all the other major religions including Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism. There are few good reasons for believing in the magic of one while denying the magic of others. I doubt even Thomas Aquinas really pulls that off. I don't want to believe in that much magic. It is too much overload.

If I believe in Christian magic and some of the magic of other religions, then I have to argue over "regular" magic and superstition such as ghosts, spirits, animal spirit companions, witches, demons, the Devil, etc. I have to bicker about sensible magic and silly magic. I want to avoid that entirely. The best way to avoid it entirely is to avoid the magic even in mainstream major religions.

The benefit of belief in God and the message of Jesus can be had without the downside of dealing with magic and superstition. I can hold the line at "one supernatural with one good God and his prophets, including especially Jesus", without having to accept magic and superstition; so I do.

Acting Well Regardless of God.

Here it is worth repeating: On the one hand, we meet God when we die, and we act well partly so we can come out well when we face God. On the other hand, we should do well whether we face God or not. God does not require purity of motive. God does not require us to act well only purely because we act well and not because we want to look good when we meet him. Still, God prefers we act well because we act well. God wants us to do the right things for the right reasons. God does not want us to be terrified of him or to act on the basis of terror. This situation does not feel like a contradiction to me. This feeling of acting well for its own sake yet still respecting God is similar to the feeling of Taoist and Zen adepts who just act without thinking too much yet always also follow the Tao or the Dharma.

Acting Well; God seems Redundant.

If we want to get rid of as much magic and superstition as we can, and if we act well because we act well and not out of fear of God, then the idea of God seems like too much. We don't need God. If you get morality, then you don't need God, Tao, or Dharma. You can get rid of magic and the supernatural yet keep morality. Atheists stress this point. I don't argue here; see the chapter on atheism where I explain why keeping the idea of God makes sense. Again, I do not feel this situation as a contradiction. We can draw the line between magic and superstition on the one hand versus God and morality on the other. We don't have to draw the line with magic, superstition, and God on one hand versus morality on the other hand.

Accepting morality, God, a sense of imagination, and a sense of wonder, does not mean I have to accept magic and superstition. Being rational and reasonable does not mean I have to get rid of morality, God, wonder, or imagination. I can even accept magic in fiction, which I do wholeheartedly. I do not believe in ghosts, witches, wizards, demons, or any other superstition "for real". I think respecting morality opens the door inevitably to thinking about God. If we want morality, then we have to think about God even if we don't accept God, and we have to accept the right of other people to believe in God. That is why we can put morality and God together while leaving out magic and superstition.

God's Will.

When somebody claims to know God's Will, yet his-her idea of God's Will goes against common sense, morality, simple decency, or science, or when doing God's will hurts another group, then that person very likely is wrong and does not know God's Will. Terrorists do not know God's Will. At this time in history, no one religion knows God's Will better than any other. Not Jews, Christians, Muslims, nor Hindus know God's Will better than the others; adept Buddhists and Taoists would not argue in these terms. People claim to know God's Will as a way to get other people to do what they want. People claim to know God's Will as a way to promote their own agenda.

There is a place for God's Will. It is easy enough for people to say God's Will and morality always are the same and that the combination is obvious; but reality says otherwise. Too often, morality is not clear. Morality has contradictions, as the debates over torturing terrorists for information make obvious. The world is bigger than my simplistic morality, all simplistic morality, and even bigger than all complicated sophisticated morality. Even though morality is not always clear, and morality does not cover all points in contention, we still need to decide issues, sometimes right away. Then people appeal to God's help and God's Will. When God's Will decides an issue so we can move on, and God's Will leads to more good than harm, then fine. In fact, then maybe what happened really is God's Will and is not just a ploy by somebody seeking his-her own benefit. When God told Moses to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt toward Israel, maybe that really was God's Will and not just Moses seeking power, glory, and to prove himself to his father-in-law. Maybe Americans did God's Will in American Civil Rights legislation of the 1960s and 1970s. Maybe your mother is expressing God's Will when she tells you not to smoke crack cocaine or have premarital sex.

We can't decide when a decision-under-uncertainty is human will or God's Will expressed by a human agent. I advise not to think of it as God's Will but still to pray for guidance.

When a decision leads us into trouble then it is a good idea to stop thinking of it as God's Will. God might once have willed us to ban alcohol but now I am pretty sure he changed his mind. God might once have willed America to be the police officer of the world but I doubt he thinks that now. I doubt God really Wills us to repress homosexuals and not let them marry. Maybe once upon a time God willed us to enact laws for Affirmative Action but I am beginning to feel God has since changed his mind. When people continue to claim to know God's Will despite common sense, they are wrong.

God's Will, Holy Texts, and Agendas.

Here are more issues worth repeating, and to which I return in later chapters:

First, people cite holy texts as a source for God's Will when they want to invoke God's Will to promote their own agendas. This tactic could be valid only if the text really did express God's Will and only God's will, the text was absolutely clear, the text was always consistent and never contradictory, the text covered all relevant issues, and people could not interpret the text in different ways. Of course, none of the points are true. Not only are holy texts self-contradictory, the texts of major religions contradict each other. There is great danger in citing the Tanakh, Talmud(s), New Testament, Apocrypha, works of the Holy Fathers, Koran, Hadith, Sutras, Tao Te Ching, Analects, commentaries on Confucius, Marx, Lenin, Mao, Ho Chi Minh, and Ronald Reagan's life story, as God's Will.

People pick-and-choose passages they want, ignore passages that might go against what they want, and interpret the passages they do want so as to serve their own agendas. It is not possible that God's Will could be behind all the agendas that have been offered as an expression of God's Will. While God's Will might support some points of some agendas some of the time, it is unlikely that God's Will supports all points of even any one agenda. Being really really really really sure deep in your heart of hearts that God is on your side and you are doing God's Will is not a valid argument, and you are likely wrong.

Second, people misuse God's Will to support their own agendas. In assessing agendas, why not leave God's Will out of the picture entirely, and focus only on the agenda? Rather than argue whether or not it is God's Will that gay people can marry or not, why not just leave out God's Will and focus on the issue? In a perfectly rational world where issues could be decided entirely on the merits, we could do that. The world is not like that. The world is too uncertain, indeterminate, unclear, and confusing. People have to fall back on arbitrary but necessary choices. People have to take shots in the dark and then chase the prey as if they really hit the prey. People have to fall back on religion. When people fall back on religion, they leave the door open to using texts and using God's Will to promote agendas. We just have to live with this problem too and have to cope with it when it comes up.

When facing a question of God's Will, it is still a good idea to look at the agenda first. What do people on any side of an agenda stand to gain or lose, in terms of wealth, power, sex, family, society, satisfaction, or justification? Who benefits? Who loses? Are people loud about an issue? Does the agenda point to motives? Are motives godlike or anti-godlike? Even if the actual point seems to have a basis in a holy text, such as opposition to gay marriage, is the overall direction not godlike?

Even though people use bad allusions to God's Will to support an agenda, and even though the agenda might come out of bad motives, their bad motives do not necessarily make the goals bad. Even though people use good allusions to God's Will to support an agenda, and even though the agenda comes out of good motives, their use do not necessarily make the goals good. We still have to decide on the basis of merits, with some small mixture of our own feeling for God's Will. People on both sides of the abortion issue argue out of bad faith, and misquote God's Will, but that does not mean both sides must be wrong, and we can ignore the issue. We have to decide the issue, and we have to decide on the best criteria, including, for some people, reference to a holy text to discern God's Will. People on both sides of gay marriage and immigration problems argue in bad faith, and misuse the Bible to support bad faith. They also argue in good faith and correctly use the Bible to support their ideas. Neither strategy means there are no real issues and we do not have to decide. We have to decide based on the best criteria, including,

for some people, reference to a holy text. We should reduce references to holy texts and to God's Will to the least possible. We should rely on morality, greater social good, social justice, and economic reality, as much as possible. In modern pluralistic democracies, sometimes we do manage to achieve this.

Small and Big.

The paradox of acting well whether we meet God or not is like another contradictory feeling that, I hope, we all get many times in life and that changes us: (1) we are only a small part of something much bigger (2) but we count anyway, we are important anyway, and all life is important anyway. We know "the world goes on within us and without us" (George Harrison). We know the world would go on if we vanished. Even if we do something big such as think up Relativity, still we know someone else would have done it if we had not done it. At the same time, we all know we matter anyway even if all we ever do is make a kid breakfast, kiss a spouse, climb out of our deep dark depression, or help someone down in his-her luck. The lilies and the sparrows matter even if all they ever do is drink rain and peck seeds. We can take satisfaction in our deeds yet we cannot think too much of ourselves. I cannot explain this apparent-but-not-real contradiction any better than I can explain doing well whether you meet God or not. It is one of the deepest and most important insights about life. It goes along with the idea that God made everything and cares about everything he made.

It Doesn't Matter if It Matters.

Sometimes we feel it doesn't matter if it matters. It doesn't matter if we are important to God or not. We are as we are, and we have to do what we do whether it matters or not. "I know what I have to do and I will do it whether it matters in some cosmic scheme or not". In a good light, this idea leads to the response of "Stop thinking so much. Just do. Just be." In a good light, this is the same as doing the right things for the right reasons and doing the right thing because it is the right thing not because you want to "get in good with God" when you die. This is the same feeling as the combination of we are not very important but still God cares. Maybe it is a purer way of having the same feeling, and maybe it is just a quicker way of having the same feeling. If this is how you get the idea, then get it this way. This way of getting the idea is important in Taoism and Zen.

Feeling "it doesn't matter if it matters" is not the same as "it doesn't matter at all". If you say it does not matter all then you have made up your mind about whether it matters, and it doesn't. Feeling "it doesn't matter if it matters" is not the same as "I have to do whatever I do even if that is bad". It is not the same as "I have to do whatever I do whether it is good or bad or neither". It is not an excuse for being selfish or indulgently hypocritically coercively "selfless". It is not an excuse for acting bad. Even if it doesn't matter if it matters, you still have to be decent. This is another way the feeling of big and small connects with the idea that we still have to be good people whether we face God or not. If you understand all this, fine. If not, then don't worry about it.

Great Compassion; Joy and Melancholy.

All religions, yes, even Islam, teach people to feel great compassion for all other people, even people not in the same religion. Thinkers in all the religions have extended the feeling to animals and nature, even to inanimate nature such as the Earth, stars, and galaxies. It is not just that we are a part of it all, they

are like us, and we are like them; but we should feel love toward them even if we are not alike and not all in the same boat.

Many individuals actually do feel this feeling whether they have heard the teaching or not. This feeling is much like the feeling of the great and small. I think, when people have one of the feelings, they have both the feelings, and do not distinguish them.

I hope everyone individually has this feeling and that it changes him-her. If ever you have this feeling directly you can never again be quite so callous as before, and you might even become a loving person.

Because of its role in all major religions, and the fact that people have the feeling personally, this feeling shows up again in later chapters, especially on Buddhism and Hinduism.

Usually this feeling is a source of great joy but it is also a source of some melancholy. When I have this feeling, it also makes clearer to me how much humans waste their lives and what damage we are doing to nature, the planet, other people, and our selves. When we see the goodness clearer, we also see the badness. Even if seeing the goodness more clearly does not make us see the badness more clearly too, we just always get a slight feeling of sadness that goes along with the joy of compassion. I am not fully why this is so, but it is so, and, if it happens to you, don't worry about it. This companion feeling of a little sadness also plays a role in Buddhism and Hinduism.

Evolved Limits on Big Feelings.

While many of us have the feelings of the "big and small", compassion, the joy of compassion, and the sadness of compassion, few of us can live in those feelings for long. The feelings fade and then we get back to normal life. Usually our lives are somewhat enriched by the feelings but our lives are not usually dramatically altered. For the few people whose lives are dramatically altered, I don't advise dwelling on why you differ, and I advise taking the following comments with a grain of salt.

People who lived long and deeply in feelings of "big and small", great compassion, joy at compassion, or sadness at great compassion, would not have done as well in our evolutionary past as people who lived normal lives in which these feelings did not play a big role. I leave it to you to think why people who lived in these feelings would not do as well. It would not be a disadvantage, and it might be an advantage, to have these feelings once in a while for a short time, or to have these feelings mildly, but not to have them strongly for long periods. So, natural selection would have made sure that, if we had these feelings, we did not dwell in them. If we had these feelings, we would take from them what was likely to help us succeed in our daily lives, such as greater love for family and near community, then let them diminish while we went on with our daily lives. That is where most of us stand.

Given that is the capacity for most of us, it does not mean we should ignore or despise these feelings. We can still cultivate them and take what good we can from them. We should not fear them. That is a pretty good bargain.

I believe natural selection not only placed limits to these feelings but it gave us the propensity for these feelings in the first place. Natural selection both gave us the feelings and made sure that we did not live

in them, for reasons mentioned above. I think natural selection led us to have these feelings in a limited way because these feelings lead us to get along better with our family, friends, and community, and that getting along was an important part of success in our evolutionary past. But I have little evidence for my view, and so I do not pursue it here.

This use of the logic of evolution is an example of how it can help us to understand our selves and how we work, both the positive upwelling and the negative circumscription. It is fun and useful to practice applying it to diverse arenas including religion and morality.

PART 3: Life is Real, and Other Linked Topics

This part of the chapter introduces some ideas that show up again in later chapters. It is useful to have them in the back of your mind as you read on.

Life is Real; This Life is the Only Real Life.

This life is real, not any other life. To live this life is what it means to live a real life. To live this life right here right now is what it means to live a real life. This life is real because it is real right now, not because it is embedded in anything else, such as a series of rebirths, church supervision, giant divine forgiveness, many worlds, or a big game. This life is real because this is the life you have to talk to God about after you die. What you do in this life is what counts, not what you wish you did do or didn't do, or what you might do in another life if God gives you another chance. If you can't get it right in this life, likely you can't get it right in any other life. If you do get it right in this life, right now right here, then you have done all you can do ever anywhere, and you stand a good chance of being able to get it right ever anywhere. To live in any other imagined life, even the life of endless rebirths or the life of God at play, is not to live in this real life and so not to live a real life.

That sounds too serious. The seriousness of life does not mean life is a grind or you have to worry more. It means you can worry less. Just because life is real we should let ourselves play a lot. Life is not simply a big game but it can be like a game if we don't let that metaphor mislead us.

"Right here right now this moment" does not mean you to live frivolously in the moment like a silly "free spirit" or not to plan. Planning for the future is part of living this life right here right now for a normal human. These are really two separate questions. The important issue is your whole one life that you live now before seeing God and all the moments in it when you have to decide what to do, when you have to decide right and wrong.

Success, Failure, and Real Risk.

If we can succeed, then we can also fail. If we could not fail, then we could not succeed. Failure is just as real as success. I do not know why this world has to have failure. I only know as an empirical fact that it does have failure.

Success is worth the risk of failure. Most people succeed if they try. You might not succeed in worldly ways; you might not understand why there is evil; you might not be able to defeat all evil or even a little part of evil; but you can succeed in terms that make sense to you and God.

Just because there is a chance of failure does not mean we should fear trying. We fail just as much if we don't try as if we actually fail. God can forgive an honest failure, even an honest spiritual failure, if we try. "It is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all" and "You cannot win if you do not play" are trite but true.

Success, Failure, and the Spice of Life.

In a classic Twilight Zone episode, a cheap hoodlum dies in a shootout and goes to his just reward in the afterlife. There he meets what seems to be an angel, played by Sebastian Cabot. The angel gives the bad man everything he wants: booze, women, and success in billiards, gambling, and crimes such as robbing banks. The bad man can't lose. At first, the hoodlum thinks he is in heaven, and can't figure out what he did to deserve it. One day the bad man gets screaming angry. He is bored beyond limit. He knows he will win every hand, seduce every woman, and walk away from a shootout unhurt. He wants real action, real danger, to take a real risk. If this is what heaven is like, and he can't have any real risk, then the bad man wants to go to the "other place". Sebastian Cabot changes his oily demeanor, laughs like a demon, and retorts, "You can't go anywhere else. What makes you think this is heaven? This is the other place." Hell is unending boredom. Unending boredom comes from life without real risk. Many modern people know this.

In one "Star Trek TNG" movie: A filament ("The Nexus") is moving through space. Inside this filament, the world is just as you wish. All the people, animals, and places you ever longed for are there. You succeed at everything. You do not age. You feel fulfilled. You are "wrapped in joy" just as in joyous systems of many lives in Mahayana Buddhism and Hinduism. Captain Kirk was captured by the filament. Decades have passed but, to him, the years seem like days. In the middle of a mission, Captain Picard also gets captured in the filament. Like the man from the Twilight Zone episode, Kirk is bored but doesn't feel it yet. Every time Kirk jumps his horse, he knows he will make it. Every time he needs somebody, that person will be there. His long dead dog even comes back to life. This is not real life, real living. Kirk wants real risk and real danger. Picard talks Kirk into leaving the filament together and helping Picard. As a result of helping on the mission, Kirk dies. Kirk knew he was taking that risk but real life was worth the risk of real death.

In real fairy tales, not sanitized versions, people are really hurt and really killed. That was how children learned lessons about real life then. As in fairy tales, in "Harry Potter", good people really get maimed without being restored "good as new", and good people really die without coming back: the parents of Neville Longbottom, Sirius Black, the Weasley twins, and even the great Dumbledore. Some bad people even decide to do a little good: Draco Malfoy and his mother.

In real life, not literature, people die when they should live, and live when they should die. Soldiers, police officers, and fire fighters, all give their lives to help us. Soldiers give lives, brains, and limbs so we can be free. Parents die in car accidents taking their kids to school. Aid workers get kidnapped by bandits from among the people they are truly helping.

The possibility of failure makes life exciting. We likely need the possibility of real failure to make success worthwhile, to make people try for success, and to make life real. I don't know if this is why God allowed the possibility of failure into the world.

The fact that failure helps make life worthwhile does not mean we can take success for granted. Real failure is real failure. Sometimes you don't "succeed at last". It is not the case that God allows us to fail over and over again until we finally succeed. It is not the case that there are no truly bad people and that everybody is saved in the long run. The fact that failure is real does not mean we should not "try and try". It means trying is really worthwhile.

If you do not succeed by normal worldly standards, if you fail by normal worldly standards, but still feel the truth of Jesus' message, and feel you have succeeded inside, have you really succeeded after all? I think you have. I don't think this attitude is merely a consolation for losers. Not everybody agrees with me. This idea does not mean you don't have to try or that the Kingdom of Heaven is merely an attitude.

The idea that real life entails real risk does not mean you can find real life by putting yourself at risk or by putting yourself in harm's way. Usually, life does that to us without us trying. You can wake yourself up a bit by traveling, going to unusual places, meeting unusual people, and doing unusual things such as bungee jumping. Movies and TV extol this approach to life. But you don't have to do this to feel alive, to be a useful person, and to succeed.

Real failure is not just getting physically hurt or dying. Real failure can also mean getting trapped in bad attitudes such as bitterness or in addiction. Real failure is failure of the soul or the spirit. This failure is far worse than dying physically. For comments on this kind of real failure, see later chapters.

An adept study of real risk and the spice of life is the movie "The Game" starring Michael Douglas and directed by David Fincher. Michael Douglas plays a jaded selfish man who has to get really shaken up to appreciate life.

This movie also shows what it might mean that God has to fool himself (fall asleep) so as to have fun, and that humans are part of the way God fools himself; see below. According to that way of seeing God and us, even if we are not in real jeopardy, we have to fool ourselves into thinking we are in real jeopardy so that we can fully appreciate life. I do not think we merely fool ourselves so that we can get the full value of life; I think we really do take a real risk.

Order, Disorder, Creativity, Good, Bad, and Greater Good.

In literature, movies, and TV, the bad guys want to conquer the world, not just so it is theirs and they can impose their will, but so they can establish order in chaos. They justify what they do by saying they do good in the end through imposing order and any badness that happens along the way does not matter. The fact that this stance is only an excuse is too obvious to stress. Examples appear by the hundreds in TV and the movies, and Dr. Evil, in the "Austin Powers" movies, is a funny parody. God made order out of chaos by defeating chaos when he created the world, as told in Genesis. That does not mean God is a bad guy with a great excuse or bad guys really are like God.

Contrary to conventional pop culture wisdom about only rebels being good guys, most order is good, and we could not live without out order. Our bodies order themselves. Too little order is bad. When parts of the body stop talking to each other and ordering each other, we die, as in old age. Yet too much order, or the wrong kind of order, also is bad, as when bad guys want to take over the world, a rigid teacher stifles creativity, or a bad official abuses the law.

A better order sometimes develops out of disorder, as when life evolves or when a smart person creates a fun game or a smart phone. With too much order, we could not have advances in beauty, interest, and good order. Sometimes a little disorder is the friend of creativity while a lot of order is its enemy. A little disorder sometimes is the friend of even greater better order while a lot of order now is the enemy of even better order later.

We cannot know when an even greater better order will develop out of a little disorder, so Americans tend to tolerate disorder on the chance that something good will arise. At the same time, we should not make the mistake that disorder automatically leads to better greater order; and the more disorder now the better greater the order later. Most disorder is simply bad disorder. Disorder enables selfishness. I have lived where disorder and selfishness prevail, and they are simply bad.

There is no formula to sort out relations between order, disorder, creativity, good, bad, and even better order and more goodness. You have to pick your tolerable levels of order or disorder, and then take your chances. That resolution might be the meaning of God conquering chaos to instill the right amount of the right kind of order.

Since about 1960, Americans decided always to err on the side of disorder, both because it seems to go along with political freedom and from the dogma that disorder always leads to creativity and benefit and only disorder does so. Disorder has become an American pop culture value. We verge on worshipping disorder as creativity and the only source of creativity; see the chapter on Romanticism. Even the Tea Party was an adventure in creative disorder. The 2016 Trump campaign was a huge worship service to this belief in disorder.

Often Americans are correct to prefer a little disorder to too much order. Yet, too often now, especially since the 1970s and 1980s with the rise of drug culture, gangs, increasing instability in large markets, right wing backlash, ethnic politics, and political demagogues, Americans have been wrong. We don't have the right kind of order and the right amount of the right kind of order; and no level or kind of disorder seems to bring it. There is no consensus as to what kinds of order or disorder, and how much, are the right kinds in the right amounts.

I pick up the theme of order and goodness several times in this book, particular in the next chapter, Issues 2, and in the chapter on common themes in many religions.

Trade-Offs and Finitude.

The world is finite. Paths are finite. We are finite. You can't have it all. So, the world is made of trade-offs. To achieve deep insight, we have to give up some rewards of the ordinary world and we have to

suffer some hardship too. In a famous passage, Jesus told a young man who showed great promise to give away all his possession first, but the young man could not do it. Good Buddhist monks own almost nothing. The head of the Norse god, Odin, had to lose an eye to gain wisdom.

On a lesser scale than giving up worldly success, we have to choose within the world as well. Usually you can't be a great investment banker and a world-class golfer as well. Usually you can't be the best musician in the world and the best race car driver too.

What we give up is always a lot bigger than what we actually take up. This does not mean we lose more than we gain because, if we didn't focus on one thing, we wouldn't get anything at all. We can't have the whole world, so we don't really give up the whole world when we take up one particular thing that gives us some satisfaction. We give up a few other particular things. The world does have a lot to offer, a lot of joy, and it can seem a waste to give up so much just so we can have the joy in a little part. "So many women, so little time"; or, "So many men, so little time". If we could have many lives, then we could enjoy it all; but I don't believe we do. I don't know if God can have all the joy, either directly or by experiencing it through us as individuals. I don't know why the world is like this.

We should focus on the fact that there is so much possible joy for everybody, and that we can get a big chunk of joy by giving up trying to have it all. We should not focus on the fact that we can't have all of it. Imagine a chocolate cake the size of Dallas Cowboy's stadium. We could only eat a big piece of it. We could not eat it all. We should be happy that other people can eat other pieces of it. We should be happy for what we do get, not what we don't get. If we tried to eat the whole thing, we'd get sick.

Limited, Sticky, Deceptive, and Good.

Most activities are "sticky". Once you begin, even if you did not intend to commit, you get "sucked in". Once you have been "tainted" by an activity, it is hard to ever get free of what the activity has done to you. Once you start an online video game, it is hard to stop, and you are forever marked even if later you quit. Once you start following American football or European soccer ("football"), it is hard to stop, and forever you show the marks of a fan. Once you start wearing make-up, you have to, and your face never looks the same without it again. Once you start playing golf, you start arranging your life around it. Once you start that ridiculous night-time soap opera, you just have to know what happens next. Once you learn the joys of volunteering, you know it is part of you.

You become what you do, what you stick to. Once you start acting like an adult, you are. Once you start selling insurance, you become a salesperson. Once you help people, you are never the same.

Relationships are sticky. Children are sticky. They forever change us. They make us, and make us who we are. Once you begin teaching, farming, or selling stocks, that is what you do. The first martial art that a person learns tends to be the one he-she sticks with whether the best or not.

Stickiness is a big part of what makes the world risky and valuable at the same time. We take a risk when we start getting interested in something. It could be not worth the time, it could be bad itself, it could be bad for us even if it is good for somebody else. On the other hand, it could be very good for us. We have to do something, so we might as well try that.

Stickiness is not necessarily bad. Stickiness leads us to the particular activities that together help make the feeling that life is good. Stickiness gives us experiences that we use to assess life. The Hindu word “yoga” is cognate with English “yoke”. Contrary to modern yoga fads, early Hindus saw yoga as a limiting discipline that sucked you in, committed you, and channeled you. Channeling was worthwhile because yoga was good in itself and yoga could open a road to higher goals. The Buddha had to go through austerities first to get to Enlightenment. For people not suited to the monk’s life, going to work, acting adult, getting married, and raising a family, all are just fine.

Getting stuck in an activity can be bad if you want to reach higher goals and the activity blocks you from seeking them. The activity in itself does not have to be bad; it only has to block you from better. The better the activity-in-itself, the stickier it is, the more readily it sucks you in, and the more it blocks you from something better. That’s what family often does. The Buddha had to give up family, wealth, power, security, and success as an ascetic so as to awaken. I have seen people get stuck in forms of yoga and spiritual activities that were good enough in themselves but a trap when done wrongly. I have seen people stuck in dogmatic religion. I do not have general advice for how to get out of an activity once you are stuck in it and you know you want out. I do not know if we can still feel the satisfaction of life-as-a-whole if we have been stuck in activities and know we have been stuck.

Many satisfactions of a normal life can serve as blocks. In the novel “The Last Temptation of Christ” by Nikos Kazantzakis, Jesus had to give up many other things. We tend to think the most tempting thing that Jesus gave up was great worldly power. In fact, it was a successful family life with a large family, the kind of success that our evolutionary history leads us to seek.

Higher Level Reflexive Stickiness.

Eventually, avoiding-getting-stuck-to-any-particular-activity-while-seeking-higher-goals itself becomes an activity to which you get stuck, a trap. Seeking the highest goal is an activity in which you can get stuck. Enlightenment itself can be a trap. This is one point of Bruce Lee’s movie “The Iron Flute” (Bruce Lee is visible in the credits only). Eventually you almost have to accept sticking to some particular thing so you don’t get stuck on not getting stuck. Sometimes you have to pick something to get stuck in so that you don’t get stuck in something worse, or don’t get stuck at all. That is why yoga is alright.

Deception, especially self-deception, can make the world stickier but stickiness does not depend on any deception. For example, we can get stuck in business without necessarily being deceived about what it can do for us. Once people are in a path, often they deceive themselves about its importance. In those cases, deception might not cause the original stickiness but it adds considerably to the stickiness that follows. Almost always, we must un-deceive ourselves before we can un-stick ourselves, even if later we re-stick ourselves in a better way. It is very hard to un-deceive yourself and un-stick yourself.

Way of Life.

The particular activities that are most enjoyable often cannot be isolated from a way of living. They are big activities even when they don’t start out as big activities. They become ways of life, or parts of ways of life. People turn knitting into a way of life. Being a Mets fan or Cowboys fan is a way of life. People

turn being a fan of their college sports teams into a way of life. You cannot just do a little business; you become a business person, as many young business people learn to their surprise. You cannot just do a little law, you become a lawyer. When I first went to graduate school, my advisor told me soon I could not imagine doing anything but anthropology and could not imagine being anything but an anthropologist. He was wrong in my case, but, as I looked at people around me, I saw what he meant. Being a gangster is not just beating up a few people, or knocking off a liquor store every week, it is a way of life; that is part of the message in the movies “Goodfellas” and “Casino”. Being a “gang banger” is not just getting tattoos and bullying women, it is a way of life. People in particular criminal paths call them “the life”, in particular prostitutes call prostitution “the life”.

Just as it makes sense to weigh particular activities against other particular activities to wonder if one is best for us, being an actor rather than a race car driver, it makes sense to weigh ways of life to see which might be best for us. This leads people in middle age to wonder about the path not taken, the boy friend or girl friend not married, the school not gone to, the hitch in the military avoided. It is not as easy to compare ways of life as to compare particular activities. It is harder to compare the way of life of a golfer, lawyer, business person, and house person than to compare golf, bowling, fishing, and cooking. This comparison between ways of life is not important in this book, except between religious stances, so I don't go into it here except to say that it is reasonable to wonder. I get at it later. I doubt that we all get the very best way of life that we might have had but I doubt that most of us do much worse in one way than another way, unless we fall into crime, zealotry, or the pursuit of power.

Ways of life are sticky, and, once in them, hard to get out. We cling to them, and rationalize them and our participation in them. People go to the same church all their lives and think that is the best church in the world. Business people can rarely do anything else as a way of life, which channeling is not necessarily bad. Old academics haunt libraries. From the “Godfather” movie series: “Every time I try to get out, it keeps sucking me back in”. This is why parents are so worried about what their children will fall into, and so careful to monitor activities so that children don't fall in with a bad crowd and fall into a bad way of life. Zealotry, especially religious-based zealotry, is one of the worst.

The stickiness of a way of life, and its power over us, is a theme in modern art. A poignant movie about this issue is “Donnie Brasco” in which an undercover police officer becomes one of the bad guys, and loses his family as a result; it featured outstanding performances by Johnny Depp and Al Pacino; and it set the mold for many imitation movies and TV shows. Using memory to get at it, Philip K. Dick often explores this issue, and you can see it in all the movies made based on his works, such as “Total Recall” and “Blade Runner”. During the Cold War, as young Americans, we heard stories about Russian agents who came to America, lived here a long time, and then came over to our side because our way of life was so good and they had grown used to being Americans. The TV show “The Americans” uses the Cold War as its setting. It is not based on this issue alone but brings it up sometimes. In the original Star Trek TV series, sometimes aliens would take human bodies and live among us, often as spies for an invasion. But taking our bodies and living as we do turned them into us, they got to like being human, and got to like other humans, so the invasion never took place. My favorite episode was a case when the aliens were able to move so fast that we could not see them unless they wanted us to see them but they did emit a slight buzz. In the remake of the movie “The Day the Earth Stood Still”, starring Keanu Reeves as Klatoo, a previous alien spy, an old Chinese man, at first hated being sent here in a human body, but then got to love life here and love humans. In the Old Testament (Tanakh), angels were sent to watch us but

they fell in love with our way of life and especially our women. That happens to space aliens too. Some movies explore what happens when this process breaks down, and taking our bodies does not lead to taking our way of life, as in “Species”.

During the real Cold War, it is likely some American agents went to Russia as spies but became so used to being Russian that they went over. We rarely heard about them. The side to which you “go over” does not have to be better than the side that you left. A way of life into which you fall does not have to be a good one. Any way of life into which we fall, we tend to cling to and to rationalize. This is why parents are so cautious. This is why it makes sense to compare ways of life.

Life as a Whole.

Just as it is natural to wonder if the way of life of a business person is better than the way of life of a car mechanic, so it is natural to wonder if life as a whole, all life, not just any particular life, is worthwhile. There are good reasons to suspect life might not be worthwhile. I do not go into the issue here because the question comes up in bits and pieces in several places in the book, especially in the chapter on Theravada Buddhism.

We do not ask to be born. As far as I know, we do not choose life on planet Earth, some alternative life elsewhere, or an alternative to life entirely. We fall into life-as-a-whole here just as we fall into particular ways of life. Just as with any particular way of life within this life-as-a-whole, we find this life-as-a-whole sticky, cling to it, and rationalize it. We rationalize living. We hope life-as-a-whole will give us meaning just as we do with being a lawyer, business person, teacher, parent, or car mechanic.

The stickiness of life, and how we cling to it, makes it hard to assess life as a whole. We tend to assess life itself as worthwhile just as we do any activity that we stick to. Yet, if ever we are disappointed, we tend to “flip” on life and to turn our judgment as much against life, without reason, as earlier we were for it without reason. It is hard to say we should be rational about life as a whole, and judge it without falling into it or sticking to it, so I don’t go into that argument yet here.

Basically, except for a few sad souls, I think life as a whole is worthwhile. Rarely is one particular activity within life enough to make life as a whole worthwhile, such as business, teaching, or even family. Yet life as a whole is still worthwhile even if no one activity makes it so. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Life as a whole is worthwhile even if we make a lot of mistakes – I have made big ones.

As we will see later, evolution (natural selection) very likely led us to stick to activities, to fall into ways of life and stick to them, stick to life, and think of life as very good. People are more successful when they believe in what they do and go into it fully. People are more successful at life when they believe in life. The fact that evolution led us to believe in life, ways of life, and particular activities does not itself mean that activities, ways of life, and life, are worthwhile or not, good or not, silly or not. We have to try to stand outside a little bit to assess, which is just what evolution made it hard to do. Partly that is what this book is about, so I don’t go into the issue in any more detail here.

Life is a Game.

Pseudo-sophisticated people like to say life is a game, by which they mean life is not really real in the way most of us think it is. In my view, life really isn't quite what we think of it and probably isn't as real as we think it is but that doesn't matter. What matters is facing the moral challenges in life no matter how real or unreal it is. The moral challenges are real even if life is not. What matters is getting a lot out of life and contributing to life even if life is not as real as we think it is.

People who say "life is a game" usually don't know what they are talking about. They have read a bit of pop-level non-Western theology, and parrot back a half-insight. There are useful ways to think about life as a game but people who say "life is a game" usually don't have anything that deep in mind. They think life is a "mere" game. They think they are clever because they had a minor insight, want to be recognized for their cleverness, and want to coast on it. They want an excuse not to think hard, not deal with issues, and to do what they want. The idea that life is a game should never be an excuse.

One way to look at life as a game is to think of God asleep and dreaming the world; see below.

If God created this world, then the world is not as serious as God, and not as serious as what happens to us when we face God, so, in that sense, life is a game. Even so, life is not a mere game. God made this world because he wants us to act certain ways in it. Enjoying life, contributing to life, moral action and moral growth are important even if they are played out on a stage less real than God. They are important to God and that makes them as real as they can be. The lessons of sports, of being in the theater, or of being in business, are as real as the game, the current play, or the current deal.

The current popular way of saying "life is a game" is to say that this world is a giant computer simulation run by amazing smart aliens or that life is like a computer game. Even if this is true, what matters are the important goals-and-lessons within the game: enjoying life, contributing to life, moral action, and moral growth. Even if smart aliens did not intend to set up a stage in which we face moral challenges, that is what they did, and that is what we now have a chance to respond to. When we set up games for our children, even if we did not intend, what matters is less the game than what the children learn from the game. That is the real game they are playing even when the apparent game they are playing is dodge ball or hide-and-seek. Saying that we are in a great computer simulation or a great computer game does not get us out of facing issues, thinking, acting well, enjoying life, contributing to life, moral choice, and moral growth.

Sometimes it helps to approach life as if it were a game. If we are always deadly serious, and we see only heaven and hell with nothing between, then we freeze up, screw up, suffer, and make other people suffer too. It is easier to do the right thing if we don't think that the fate of the universe depends on our particular drama. It is easier to follow Jesus if we forget about hell whether there is hell or not. How to draw the line and use the right "game approach" is a subject in itself for later. The movie "The Game" by David Fincher does not make such silly pop psychology mistakes, and provides good insights.

Judgment, Dogma, No Dogma, and Necessary Principles.

The dilemma in this section appears several places in the book. The dilemma is puzzling like doing well for its own sake but also worrying about meeting God. Don't dwell in the dilemma so much that you go

crazy. When this dilemma shows up in particular places in the book, I advise what to do with the dilemma in its particular form there.

On the one hand, even when mostly true, all ideologies also are at least partly false. No matter how well-intended, and no matter how well an ideology might work in a certain scope, all ideologies, when pushed, mislead us, open the door to abuse and manipulation, open the door to unfairness, lead to badness, and become false. Even simple moral rules can be confusing. We need more than one moral rule, and that means rules have to contradict each other sometimes. Examples include American policies to grow the economy and social help programs such as food stamps, welfare, and Affirmative Action. When we use dogma instead of good judgment, we must get into trouble. On the other hand, while we might like to get rid of dogma entirely, as human beings, we need principles. Principles are dogma too. We cannot live without some dogma. You cannot fly a space ship without science and you cannot run a country without laws. You cannot run a religion on the basis of mystic feeling alone.

There is no way around this dilemma, and there is no formula to resolve it either because all formulas are dogmas. We have to find the best principles, and we have to practice judgment on the basis of the best principles. We have to be sensitive to when we can follow established guidelines and when we have to use judgment. We have to not substitute dogma for good judgment in those cases where good judgment is more important.

The idea that we should live without dogma is itself a dogma. It seems to contradict itself. The easy way out of this dilemma is to say “We should live with as little dogma as possible. We have to live with some dogma. The dogma of ‘no dogmas’ is one of the dogmas that we have to live with”. That is a valid way out, but I urge you to do more if you can. Try to live with as few preconceptions as possible but accept that you do have to live with some principles, that is, preconceptions. Practice tearing apart your preconceptions. Try to find the basic ideas that you actually live by even if you are not usually aware of them. This kind of exercise helps to clear the mind, find the best principles, and live correctly on the basis of the best principles once we find them.

The fact that we have to use judgment in addition to principles does not mean that everything is relative and principles have no meaning. The idea of judgment does not undermine principles. Another useful complementary practice is thinking about how we judge by using principles, and why we need principles to make judgments even when our judgments go beyond our principles sometimes.

Waking Up.

Every major religion agrees that ordinary life is not enough. Most people go through life as if they were in a trance or as if dreaming. They focus too much on wealth, power, material stuff, sex, family, success, winning, kicks, sensual pleasure, nation, us versus them, dogma, etc. People do not value love, morality, respect, kindness, help, usefulness, nature, and connections. People are what Buddhists call “asleep”. People need to wake up to something more important and bigger.

Religions differ in how they wake up people and in what they wake people up to. We can know stances and religions well by what they have us wake up to. Islam has people wake up to the idea that there is only one God, what Mohammad said about him is what you have to pay attention to and only what you

have to pay attention to, and God was moral. Standard Christianity has people wake up to the idea that Jesus was God, Jesus saved us through being born, dying, and being reborn, and the church is the Kingdom of God on Earth. Buddhism has us wake up to the idea that good moral action is important but that life, even a good moral life, is not ultimately worthwhile. Mahayana Buddhism and Hinduism have us wake up to the idea that life in a system is joyous even if any particular life is not worthwhile. You get more details in the chapters at the end of the book.

For this book, the standard for what to wake up to is Jesus' message, coupled with practicality, combined with Western values about good government, and set in the context of pluralistic democracy. I don't know how to wake up people to this. Harangue does not work.

Suddenly waking up is like "having a religious experience". People tend to follow the image of the world that they first see when they feel awake. Religious leaders urge people to "wake up", and religious leaders give people an image to have when people feel awake, as a way to guide people or to control people. When the image is accurate, this is not necessarily bad, and can be good. When the image is inaccurate, it can be very bad.

Almost always, waking up comes at a cost. It rarely falls out of the blue. You have to earn it. You have to "pay dues". Sometimes, when it comes, it feels as if it came "out of the blue" but that is only because we laid the basis through hard work. Usually waking up entails making hurtful mistakes, going through pain, and, regrettably, usually you have to hurt other people too. Meditation can help prepare for waking up but I don't think meditation alone can do the job. Pain might be needed to get started but pain alone cannot wake us up; we cannot make ourselves wake up by making ourselves hurt more; we cannot wake up by causing pain to anybody or to the world; all version of this idea are wrong.

Many people have short clear periods of awakening. Some people have long clear periods of awakening. Some very few people are permanently changed, and it lasts a lifetime.

Recall from the chapter on evolution that animals, including people, do not sense the world exactly as it is, and that the "misperception" actually helps in success. Recall that the behavior (minds) of animals, including people, likely is not fully integrated in one "master plan" but that action comes in modules such as flight or fight, sex, food, play, morality, and religion. Even if there is one master plan, the modules still retain much independence. Even if there is one master plan, it is unlikely the master plan is the same as idealized rationality from Western philosophy or idealized "super rationality" from Hinduism or Buddhism. Deception and self-deception are important aspects of how we strategically succeed.

When we wake up, we wake up to some particular ideologies, even if the ideologies are not preconceived and even if we were not focused on those particular ideologies before we awoke. If we do not already have an ideology to explain our waking up to ourselves, we quickly find some or make some up. Even the Buddha woke up to ideologies or made up ideologies to make sense of awakening. All ideologies are incomplete, false, contradictory, and lead to some harm, including the ideology of no ideologies. So, even after we wake up, we are not fully awake in the sense that we are free from error. Even after we wake up, we can still be imperfect, inadequate, make mistakes, and even hurt people. Even after people wake up, they can hold different and contradictory ideologies. I do not know how to reconcile this except to seek the best principles both before and after I wake up.

It is unlikely people can ever fully wake up to be clear about all motives, feelings, thoughts, relations, and the reality of everything in the universe. It is unlikely people can achieve the total clarity that seems implied in some strains of Platonism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam do not require this kind of clarity in waking up. Neither does my idea of waking up. We do not have to fully wake up to succeed as small but important sentient-moral-aesthetic beings. In fact, the search for total waking up is probably another version of being asleep, and is likely to impede a more reachable, more real, and better, mostly-waking-up of the kind that I suggest.

Waking up is like free will and purity of motive. We don't have to wake up to total clarity about everything all the time in order to wake up enough. We can wake up enough. We can stay awake for long enough. Even when we nap again, we can recall what waking up is like when we need to. We can know when we have fallen asleep again and so need to wake up again. We can know when we act well on the basis of ideas learned while awake or when we act poorly out of confusion. We can appreciate the difference between a good image of the world that we follow after we wake up versus a bad version of the world that bad people fool us with, or that we cling to ourselves, when we wake up. We can appreciate that we do need to wake up, we need to work at waking up, and we need to prepare for a good vision of the world for when we do wake up. That is enough.

Common and Particular Themes in Waking Up.

Although waking up varies according to the context (culture, religion), some themes tend to run through waking up. I think that true waking up can be only to good themes such as compassion while waking up to bad themes such as racial purity is false waking up.

Most religions insist that a person be a morally better person as part of waking up. If you don't act better, you have not woken up. Most morality includes what we think of as stereotypically good morality such as the Golden Rule but it can also include particular styles of morality that vary between flavors of waking up and that vary between flavors of religion. Mystics have their own way of waking up that is similar among mystics but not among people in their religion who are not mystics. Zealots have ways of waking up that are similar among zealots in different religions and political views but are different than the other people in their religion or political party.

Each group thinks its particular waking up is the only real waking up, and no other group can possibly have a true waking up even if many of the details are similar. Most religions accept that other religions can wake up to good morality and to a sense of what they consider God, Tao, or the Dharma; but they also insist that other view of God, Tao, or the Dharma is incomplete or wrong, and so the other waking up is not fully real.

In my view, good waking up is having a clear sense of morality, risk, finitude, stickiness, deception, ways of life, how we get channeled, success, failure, order, disorder, creativity, and contradiction. It is sensing the bigness of the world, the smallness of yourself, and seeing that you and other small things matter even though you are small. It is sensing the limitations of ideology and yet the need for ideology. I think it is important to wake up to God or to something like God, but I am not sure how much God insists on

that. I would like people to wake up to the message of Jesus, combined with practicality and Western ideas about citizenship and good government, but I can hardly insist on that.

You can be a good person, and do good things, without ever having a big “wake up” experience. If you keep your basic good principles in mind, no matter how you came to them, then you are doing well.

Having a sense of the “bigger than me”, feeling the big and small, feeling great compassion, feeling the joy of compassion, and feeling the sorry of compassion, are common experiences in waking up in major religions. Usually, though, then those feelings are tied to other feelings and dogmas in the religion, as when Christians tie them to Christ’s passion or Hindus tie them to the playfulness of Krishna or the grim determination of Siva.

It would be helpful if people could learn to separate out what might be common to all forms of waking up, what might be common to some big forms of waking up such as in feeling great compassion by the waking up of mystics and zealots, and what might be shaped by particular traditions such as belonging to the Republican Party or to Theravada Buddhism. For most people, it is not possible to untangle this in themselves or in other people. It is fun to think about. Later I do some untangling for particular traditions such as Buddhism and Hinduism.

We Sleep and Dream.

Before we can wake up we have to be asleep. Sleeping is mistaking bad values, such as selfishness or zealous crusading, for real values, such as compassion. We fall asleep when we are lulled by the press of worldly matters such as business, family, politics, and art; and when we fall into a system that eats the world (see next chapter). We are born partially asleep and with the propensity to fall into deeper sleep. We are born that way because we evolved to be that way because sleeping people succeed better at the ordinary world than do fully awake people. The idea of being spiritually asleep recurs all through the book. The idea fits naturally with systems of many lives, that is, with rebirth and karma.

The idea that we are asleep in this world implies that this world is a dream and implies that this world is not really real. It implies the world is a mere game. A similar but different way to look at it is: This world is really real but our attitude toward it is like sleepers. We simply have the wrong values. When we wake up, the world does not change but our approach to the world changes. Sometimes we see the world so differently that it is like another world altogether but that is due to a change in us rather than in the world. Religious thinkers have both ideas about being asleep and often mix the two ideas together. In later parts of the book where I take up the idea of sleeping and waking, I do not always untangle the two ways.

The idea that we are asleep implies that the world is a mere game, and negates the idea that this world is really real and important. The idea that we are asleep does not have to imply this but it usually does, and that is how I take it mostly here.

God Sleeps and Dreams.

The idea of falling asleep can apply to God. If God knows everything, can foresee the future, and can do anything, then the world can’t be much fun for God for very long. The world would be more fun for much

longer if God could forget he was God for a while and simply play or dream. God would have more fun if he could forget himself as God and fall asleep for a while.

That people are asleep is only an aspect of God sleeping. The world carries on because we are asleep, and the carrying on amuses God in his dreaming. The fact that sleeping (deluded) people mimic the playful dreaming sleep of God does not excuse bad acts by people who have bad values.

The falling asleep of individuals and of God differs in that only God can fully completely put himself to sleep. Only God can make himself fall fully asleep. People are born asleep, or fall asleep, because they are part of the sleeping world that God dreams. People do not have the same power as God over the mind. Although beings other than God cannot make themselves fully forget, that does not mean we are fully awake. Mostly we are ignorant and so mostly we remain asleep. It is not clear if God is the only being who can be fully awake.

It is not clear what it means for God that a few individual people wake up sometimes. Probably it means that God partially wakes up. Because so many other people are still asleep, most of God can stay asleep too and so continue to dream and have fun. God does not need to fully wake up. God can enjoy the best of both worlds. It is not clear what happens to God if everybody wakes up. Probably God fully wakes up, has a good laugh, and then goes back to sleep again to dream another world with other physical laws, other experiences, and other people.

The idea that God is asleep strengthens the idea that the world is a mere game. Even if the world seems serious to use while we are asleep, when we wake up, it seems like a mere game. This is a reason why I do not like the idea of God as dreamer of the world. The world could be serious even if it is a game and even if God dreams it, but most people who think about God dreaming the world and think the world is a game don't take it that way.

If you get all these fanciful ideas, then you are closer to awake than the average person but that does not mean you are fully awake. The fact that you might awaken a little or a lot does not say anything about how awake or asleep God is overall. A hit movie based on the possibility of being asleep so as to have fun is "Total Recall" starring Arnold Schwarzenegger. A clever fun use of the idea of being asleep so as to get things done is the movie "Push" starring Dakota Fanning. The movie sequence "The Matrix" plays with the idea of levels of reality and of one level seeming like sleeping to another or one level seeming like a dream to another.

"What are They For?"

We think we understand what we are for and what the people like us are for but we have trouble seeing what some other people are for, especially if they are not like us. In college, I met people who disdained "the masses" and who could not see why their world is burdened with people who cannot understand the finer things in life. People who like sports look down on geeks who like computers or art; women wonder what men are for. It doesn't just work one way. The masses disdain the elites; and artists disdain the intellectuals. We all make lawyer jokes. The most acute form of the problem is with bad people. What are bad people and indecent people for?

Partly this is a non-issue. There is no reason why we need to explain what other people are for as long as other people are not bad. We don't feel a need to explain what robins and comets are for. Think of most other people as like robins and comets. As for bad people, I don't have a good explanation. See the later chapter on the problem of evil.

Being a wasted person, or a bad person, but still contributing in some ways to the world, does not make up for being wasted and for making other people sad.

The Best Me I Can Be.

Not all of us fit religious stereotypes about what a good person is. We need a variety of people to make the world interesting. For more on this issue, see the chapter on "codes" and see Parts 4 and 5 below.

Learning What to Do.

We are born with a modest sense of good, bad, right, and wrong but that is not enough. We need to learn deep feeling for situations, for other people, and what to do. For us to really learn that, we need to get kicked around, usually hard. Yet if we get kicked around hard, we might lose more than we gain. We might turn bad or bitter. We might fail or get lost. These kinds of losses are devastating. How we think about this problem shapes our overall approach to life. I return to this issue in later chapters.

Hardship and Contrary Me.

Hardship is supposed to make people bitter first, then really sweet for ever afterwards. It is supposed to make us value all life and forgive other people readily. This might be what happened to Roy Blatty in the movie "Blade Runner". It did have that effect on me, but not entirely. It made me appreciate all life more. It made me want to help the people who suffered through little fault of their own and it made me want to make up for damage. It did not make me into a universal bleeding heart.

Dealing with hardship also made me more critical. I saw that many people had streaks of badness and selfishness, and were willing to hurt others. Not all people who are lost or broken are innocent victims or heroes who sacrificed for us. I saw clever users and sociopaths. I learned to abhor self-made victims and enablers. I finally saw careerist academics and bureaucrats that use appeals to the public good to get money, reputation, and power. I felt creepy revulsion for people that use PC fear of racism to hide their own indecency and inability, blackmail people of other races, manipulate the system, hurt their own race, and hurt all race relations. I saw when people brought hardship on themselves through selfishness, short sight, and denial of reality. The economic depression in America of 2007, in particular the housing crisis, came from greed by rich people; amazing deliberate ineptness by politicians; and greed by regular old Joe-and-Jane house buyers who thought they deserved much more than they could afford, could get rich on the crest of a craze, and expected the state to bail them out if it went wrong. I want not to help any of these people. I resent that they can use the state to force me to help them. These people should suffer the pain of their own actions. That is part of the big real risk of life. If I were one of these people, I would not want other people to help me because then I would not get better. Not helping people who should not get help is part of the Golden Rule too. We should keep such people from hurting others. We can't help real victims in pain unless we can keep our resources in reserve for the people who need them.

Many Lives.

The issue of many lives pops up often in this book. “Many lives” can mean going from body to body, being reborn in different bodies. It can mean that individual humans are not really distinct but are really parts of a supreme spirit and so are linked, “we are all one”. Often it means a combination of all these elements. Usually it is part of a strong system that eats the world. It doesn’t matter in this book exactly what it means. I do not believe in many lives, and I argue against it. My argument with many lives is not the dominant theme of the book.

On the one hand, life is real, there is only this life, this life is real, and this life is as real as it gets. On the other hand, this life is not as real as we think; there is more than one life; all people have many lives; this life is embedded in a larger realer framework of many lives; this life might be as real as it gets for any one particular life, but because this life is embedded in a larger realer framework, this life is not as real as it gets; the bigger framework is as real as it gets.

When stated theoretically, most people just laugh it off. People are happy to accept that we don’t know all there is about life but they are less happy with the idea that this life is so less-than-real that it does not count seriously. They want this life to count even if it is embedded in something realer. They aim to do the best they can in this life, and then let future lives worry about themselves. A system of many lives plays a role in Hinduism and Buddhism.

I think this life is the only real life that counts. This life is as real as it gets. We do not participate in the supreme spirit and in each other, except in the same way that any things that interact participate in each other such as a squirrel and a pine tree.

Ennui (Boredom) and an Interesting World.

“Ennui” is a French term for deep boredom. When people are not hungry, at war, conniving to get their kids ahead, or fussing with neighbors, most people are deeply bored. I found both Thai peasants bored to craziness, and they loved to have a White person around for fun. Boredom led them to become rabid consumers. The large majority of people now are bored. The fact that evolution has no intrinsic meaning contributes to the feeling of boredom. The fact that evolution gave us a predisposition to find meaning anyway does not seem to help modern people to find meaning and to alleviate boredom.

Recall the “Twilight Zone” episode in which hell is deep boredom. In the TV series “Star Trek TNG”, the “Q” are a race of gods who collectively embody most traits of God (“Elohim”): all-knowing, able to be everywhere at all times, all-powerful, playful, naughty, mischievous, etc. The Q homeland is a dreamlike place that seems like a run-down ghost town from the American Southwestern desert. It is not a lush paradise. It is not interesting. It is like the background for a piece from the Meat Puppets, Friends of Dean Martinez, Iron and Wine, or Calexico. The Q seem bored to death. Maybe the more powerful you are, the more bored. Maybe the Q whiz around the universe meddling with others largely to entertain themselves. It seems the mighty Q envy the limited struggling always engaged inferior interested and interesting Earthlings, and need them.

Most people cannot fight boredom with their own abilities. Most people cannot find meaning without some help. Most people don't find the world intrinsically interesting, don't know how to make the world interesting, and don't know how to get ideas from other people so as to make the world interesting. They make the world interesting by comparative competition (getting ahead of the Joneses), improving their looks, chasing fads, getting intoxicated, having affairs, violence, art, sports, politics, zealotry, religious zealotry, intrigue, naughtiness, sex games, and badness. This result is not as bad as it sounds as long as bored people don't cause harm. Keeping bored people busy rooting for a sports team is more useful, and less likely to cause harm, than if bored people try to make life interesting by interfering in politics. Keeping them busy chasing money can help society as long as they do not also interfere in politics. The problem, of course, is people do try to make the world interesting by interfering – that is the end result of taking intrigue as valuable – and so do cause problems. That is another story. In the long run, it might be up to adept politicians to find ways to channel ennui so most people do good and do little harm, as in the novel "Brave New World" where people play tennis with square balls, have a lot of sex, and watch a lot of movies about bouncy young women being rescued from serial psychopaths.

Some people really do find the world interesting, such as scientists, some artists, and some politicians. Some people can make the world interesting, even for other people. I don't know anybody who can really make the world interesting for other people if the other people did not already find the world interesting somewhat. Mostly, I find the world fascinating. I don't know how to make the world more interesting for other people; I have tried and failed.

People who find the world a little interesting tend to look down on other people who have given up on finding interest. People who find the world a little interesting tend to look down on other people who do not find the world interesting in the same way. Kids look down on parents, and college literature majors look down on business majors. People who find the world only a little interesting usually end up in middle age among the lost bored people that they formerly looked down on.

I don't mind if people fight boredom with some games, alcohol, drugs, and even badness. I have used those pastimes myself, and I am not too much the worse. I mind when people do that a lot, and annoy other people. I mind when people romanticize badness, bad boys, bad girls, rebel lefties, rebel righties, and the underbelly. I mind because it blinds them to the real work that needs to be done, and it adds to problems instead of solving problems. Being a "goody two shoes" can be boring but that does not mean acting well is wrong or boring. It does not mean goodness needs badness. Badness can be fun. But badness is a bad way of life and is not fun in the long run. Badness does hurt you in the long run and it does hurt other people. You really can do better. Wake up to this while you are young enough to craft a positive fun useful life. Wake up to this before you get stuck in stupid badness and refuse to get out of stupid badness because to stop would seem like a betrayal of that way. Grow up on your schedule to make your own good life.

Saying God is asleep is another way of saying that God got so bored that he deliberately fell asleep – forgot himself - so as to better create and to have more fun. I doubt God is bored, created the world to alleviate his intense boredom, and interacts with us mostly to alleviate his intense boredom. God is not the lonely Q and we are not his human "meat puppet" entertainment. God is not head of the "voyeur angels" as in the movie "The Truman Show" starring Jim Carrey; God is not Ed Harris. God might have created the world out of a sense of play rather than a feeling of deep boredom; the two are not the same.

Finding the world interesting through activities such as science, art, meditation, business, home making, the professions, sports, hobbies, etc. is not necessarily the same as falling asleep although it can be a way of falling asleep. It can help you wake up too. It is not necessarily a way of alleviating boredom although it can be that. We have to sort out for ourselves what is falling asleep, a desperate attempt to alleviate boredom, and a genuine interest in the world even if it might lead to spiritual traps such as falling asleep or escape from boredom. This task is not easy to do but it is not that hard.

Which people does God find interesting? I can't speak for God. If I were God, I would cultivate people who find the world interesting and can make it interesting, decent people, people who work hard to make the world better, scientists, and some artists. I don't know what I would do with the people who fall into boredom and who cause annoyance. It is a mistake to look at people who fall into boredom as "damned" and people who find the world interesting as "saved".

I don't know all the relations between bored, interesting, bad, and good. Good people tend to find the world interesting. Most people who find the world interesting are not deliberately bad even if they are not deliberately good. I think most people who find the world interesting are good natured. I know that not all people who find the world interesting, or make it interesting, are good people. Bad people don't usually make the world more interesting than good people do, but bored deluded people mistakenly think so.

You can't force yourself to find the world interesting just so you can look good to God. Why God set up the world so some people find it interesting while others don't, I don't know. It is one of the fascinating things about the world and people.

Boredom, the need to make the world interesting, and the resort to naughtiness, all mesh with ideologies of many lives. The confusion that results around questions of boredom, interest, falling asleep, waking up, goodness, and badness, is a big reason why I dislike systems of many lives. We resort to fantasies of many lives to alleviate boredom. We think that having other lives makes up for the boredom of this life. Rather than fantasize how much more interesting your life is in a system of many lives, you are better off making this life right here right now interesting. If you can make this life interesting, there is a good chance you can make any life interesting. If you can't make this life interesting, there is a good chance you can't make any other lives interesting. We will see these issues again in chapters on Romanticism, Buddhism, and Hinduism.