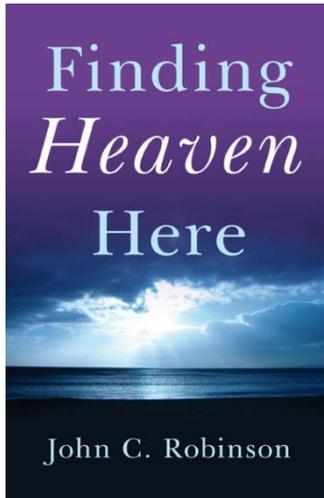


## BOOK REVIEW



John C Robinson

*Finding Heaven Here* ↗

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*Reviewed by Ulrich Mohrhoff*

“This world is not the antechamber: it is the palace itself.” Saints and mystics from every religion and every era have borne witness to this fact, expressed here in the words of Rabbi Faitel Levin. They further agree that the only way to make it from the antechamber into the palace is through a change of consciousness.

John C. Robinson is a retired clinical psychologist. He spent nine years in college and graduate school studying the nature, causes, and treatment of psychological disorders and three decades working in the profession. Like most people, he had come to think of consciousness as arising from biological functions associated with the brain and, therefore, belonging to the individual. Then, one evening in midlife, he read an account of a mystical experience in William Stace’s *Mysticism and Philosophy*, which ended with the words: “a man who is not content with what is simply does not know what is.”

Barely able to contain his excitement, he reread the entire account several times — and eventually went on to collect hundreds of similar descriptions from friends, clients and the spiritual literature. Many gems from his collection are scattered throughout *Finding Heaven Here*.

The world’s voluminous spiritual literature bursts with mystics, scholars and everyday folks asserting not only that Heaven can be found but that it can be found right here. These are not a wacky bunch of true believers; they represent a cross-section of people from around the world with different backgrounds and diverse religious traditions.

The requisite change of consciousness is, first of all, a reversal. The idea that a separate individual consciousness is associated with each brain gives way to the realization that

consciousness is all-encompassing: “Suddenly I experienced consciousness everywhere. It was not in me; I was in it.”

This reversal makes it possible to dissociate consciousness from its content, which in turn makes it possible to discover its intrinsic nature of self-existent bliss. A transfer of identity is the next natural consequence of this experience: ceasing to be a body in possession of a consciousness, one identifies with the consciousness. The consciousness whose intrinsic nature is bliss becomes one’s very being. “To my amazement, just as Hindu and Buddhist mystics foretold, in that pure experience of being I found the origin of bliss.”

Robinson has experienced the Vedantic truth of a nameless and unnamable ultimate Reality, which relates to the world in four ways: as a being that constitutes it, *sat*, as a consciousness that contains it, *chit*, as a force that shapes it, *tapas*, and as an infinite bliss that infinitely experiences and expresses itself in it, *ananda*.

Following the world’s mystic traditions, Robinson refers to this Reality as God, but also often simply as Divinity or Presence. “For me, these terms are equivalent and interchangeable and refer not to an idea or belief but to the infinitely loving consciousness encountered in first-hand mystical experiences.”

In this experience there is no place for a separate I. The I that is seeking God is God. What saves those who glimpse this truth from a Nietzschean hubris is the price one has to pay for the finding:

This work in our souls cannot be accomplished by cleverness, intelligence, or any subtlety of mind, but only by completely abandoning ourselves to the divine action, becoming like metal poured into a mold, or a canvas waiting for the brush, or marble under the sculptor’s hands. — Jean-Pierre de Caussade

To understand the steps involved in finding heaven here, it helps to have a notion of how heaven got lost in the first place. Robinson explains this by means of a creative retelling of the Judeo-Christian story of the Fall.

In the beginning, only Divinity existed as a realm unto itself: pure consciousness and [infinite?] potentiality. Wishing to know itself in a new way, the Divine burst forth in a fiery expansion of light and matter evolving the entire cosmos from its own essence. The Divine became the Universe and, in an act of infinite love and generosity, gave birth to a holy place called Earth.

Creation thus became a second divine realm — a manifestation of Divinity.

Among all the creatures that evolved from the Divine, one developed the unique capacity to think abstractly, to form concepts about the world and even to reflect on its own existence and relationship to the sacred. This creature was a part of Divinity becoming conscious of itself and of the Universe — a wondrous epiphany.

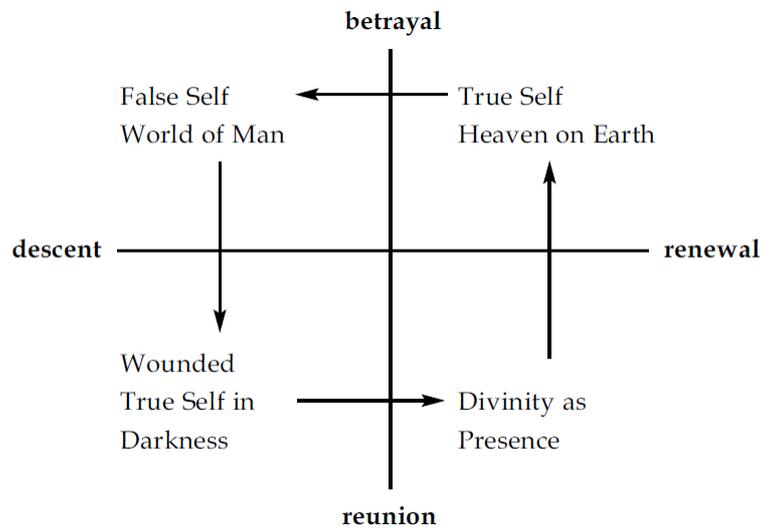
Thus, the human species came into being. In time, the human capacity for thought produced many marvelous inventions, including religion, agriculture, literature, architecture, science, engineering, medicine, and technology — a divinely inspired explosion of human creativity. At the same time, however, something strange began to happen: Human beings became so fascinated with their concepts about the world that they began to mistake their concepts for the world itself. In other words, people increa-

singly saw only what they thought. Soon names, ideas, beliefs, and stories constructed a third and separate mental realm – the World of Man, and the sacred ground of Creation gradually disappeared from consciousness. Worse, entranced by the power of concepts, people began to view the natural world as simply a source of wealth or raw materials, a place to be conquered, controlled, used, and discarded.

In this third realm the concept of the separate self or ego took center stage:

soon everyone worried about the worth, goodness, beauty, power, wealth, and importance of the personal self. Living in the complicated World of Man, people increasingly betrayed and then forgot their divine nature and homeland, and this forgetting created a fourth and final realm: Darkness. It became a murky hidden space filled with the pain, anger and grief accumulated by each new generation of children told to deny their divinity. ...people erroneously imagined that both the Creator and the sacred world had relocated somewhere else, far away, in a place they called Heaven...

The final aspect of Darkness, described by an anonymous 14th century English mystic as a “Cloud of Unknowing,” consists of a mental space completely empty of thought, beliefs, ideas, knowledge, plans, identity, goals, or even hope.



Let’s recap. The first realm – Divinity – is pure consciousness and (infinite?) potentiality. The second realm is Heaven on Earth – the manifestation of Divinity, where the Creator has become the Creation. The third realm – the World of Man – consists of human beliefs that are superimposed upon the Creation –concepts about the world that are mistaken for the world. This realm gives rise to the fourth, Darkness, when Divinity – the sacred and unitary ground of Creation – disappears, and division reigns unchallenged. These four realms make up what Robinson calls Heaven’s Compass.

Heaven’s Compass can be used as a tool for spiritual growth. In this capacity Robinson refers to it as the Cycle of Spiritual Experience. Its four stages are: betrayal, descent, reunion, and renewal (ascent).

Betrayal — the Fall by many a mythical account — is Robinson’s term for that which causes the soul to leave Heaven on Earth and enter the World of Man.

[T]he World of Man makes up a vast intellectual lens concealing Heaven on Earth. Its concepts, stories and beliefs tell us who we are, what we should do, think and be, how the world works.... It represents an entirely manmade construction.... It operates through the laws, values and social norms governing our beliefs and behavior.

To return to Heaven on Earth, the soul must let go of all mental constructions and all separating identifications. Heaven’s Compass suggests that this necessitates the soul’s descent into Darkness. To rediscover Heaven on Earth, it must rediscover Divinity, and for this it must pass through the Cloud of Unknowing, that universal solvent of mental constructions.

The experience of Divinity is the ultimate source of healing and transformation. To facilitate this experience, Robinson invites his readers to an exercise that “brings you into the mystical consciousness of Presence, opens a dialogue with God and then returns you to everyday consciousness.” He calls it “Experiencing the Presence.”

Experiencing the Presence guides you through a series of consciousness-transforming “Keys” that we will use over and over again in later chapters. I call them keys, because used correctly they will eventually unlock for you the perceptual gates to the garden of mystical consciousness — Heaven on Earth.

The first Key is to stop thinking.

The second Key is to heighten your awareness.

The third Key is to focus this thought-free heightened awareness on the world around you.

The fourth Key

is to “*Come Into The Presence Through Your Own Presence*,” that is, through pure consciousness. While still focusing on a specific perception (for example, your hand or clothing), tune into your own presence, that is, the experience of your own consciousness. In other words, become conscious of consciousness itself, aware of the experience of awareness.

...you already know how to focus on thoughts or sensations, this Key asks you to focus on the consciousness in which they arise, a space which may be sensed as emptiness or silence. Sense this empty consciousness as clearly and distinctly as you can. Then, in this wide-awake stillness, see if you can notice one more amazing thing: Notice that consciousness exists everywhere. It is not in you; you are in it. Sense space itself as conscious, aware and alive. You have arrived in the Presence.

The “I” thought (“I think,” “I want,” “I am”) always arises in consciousness; thus, it creates the illusion that consciousness belongs to you. The first three Keys effectively silence thinking in general, and the “I” thought in particular, which sets the stage for this shift in consciousness. When thoughts disappear, concepts like self disappear as well, hence no one remains to own this consciousness. When we stop thinking in terms of “I” and experience our consciousness as part of a greater consciousness that is everywhere and in everything, we realize the Presence itself represents the actual source of all consciousness.

The next part of the exercise consists in addressing the Presence.

...in this renewed experience of Presence, silently whisper “God” (or whatever name you prefer) with the longing you feel, the deep desire to experience Divinity. Then, notice what happens. The Hindu poet Kabir says, “It is the intensity of the longing that does all the work.” Let there be intensity to your longing, but stay in the sensory mode. Notice the sensory changes you experience as you repeat the divine name.... Once the dialogue begins, it will feel like a back-and-forth conversation with someone else that just keeps happening. It will feel animated, alive and often surprising.

Needless to say, one has to be on one’s guard:

As the conversation unfolds, be sure responses from the Presence come from its consciousness and not from your pre-determined point of view, which will feel like you’re just having an increasingly frustrating or boring conversation with yourself....

One might wonder how a dialogue process is possible when the first Key instructs one to Stop Thinking. To alley this apparent paradox, Robinson distinguishes between two uses of thought: impersonal analysis and emotional communication.

The first use involves highly intellectual, goal-directed and rather abstract thought processes. It might be called “head-thinking” and works best in understanding material things and complex ideas. The second type uses thought to give expression to personal feelings and truths. It flows from the heart and speaks sincerely about meaningful subjects. With “heart-thinking,” we say our truth simply, with feeling and without endless repetition. We need to stop head-thinking to quiet the mind and open to Presence. We use simple and feeling-oriented heart-thoughts next to communicate with the Presence.

Having learned to sense the Presence, the reader is invited to embark on a series of exercises intended to transform personal beliefs and problems into experiences of Heaven on Earth.

Applying Heaven’s Compass to everyday problems produces fascinating and rewarding discoveries. Indeed, you may eventually realize that problems don’t really need to be “solved” but instead dissolve like smoke into air in the experience of Divinity and Heaven on Earth. Plus, each time you dissolve a problem and glimpse Heaven on Earth in its place, you further “cleanse the doors of perception” and enter an entirely new kind of life.

Robinson knows well enough that his allegories — Heaven’s Compass and the Cycle of Spiritual Experience — belong, like all stories, to the World of Man. Thanks to postmodernism, however, we now know that no story can claim to be the one true story. We know that stories can be prisons, but they can also open doors. They can be powerful myths, and myths, the great mythologist Joseph Campbell wrote, “are clues to the spiritual potentialities of the human life.” I can testify to the power of at least one of the myths that Robinson has chosen to retell. This comes from the Pueblo Indians living near Santa Fe, New Mexico, and “explains” why coyotes bay at the moon.

Soon after the Great Spirit made this world, one night he was sitting alone gazing up into the dark and empty sky, which contained no moon, stars or light of any kind. He saw nothing but pitch-black nothingness. After a long while, the Great Spirit looked for Po-Say-Wa, the coyote, whose name means “one who hangs his head.” Po-Say-Wa quickly responded — you don’t ignore the Great Spirit. The Great Spirit presented him with a large leather bag tied tightly with sinew, and said, “You must take this bag, and follow the trail that winds through the mountains and deserts. Open the bag only when you get

to the end of the journey, not before. Your travels may be long and hard, but you are not to stop until you reach your destination.”

The fact that the Great Spirit had picked him for such a great assignment surprised Po-Say-Wa. He was, after all, not highly regarded by the other creatures of the world. Perhaps it was because he sneaked around scavenging for food and taking anything he could find — sometimes even taking it from others. Thrilled by this great honor, Po-Say-Wa began his journey — head up, feeling important and determined.

Days and nights, nights and days, Po-Say-Wa journeyed onward, and the trail was indeed long and hard. He crossed steep rocky cliffs, dry and barren deserts. As time went by, Po-Say-Wa began to lose both his sense of pride and his resolve. One evening, as the sky grew dark and hunger crowded out ambition, Po-Say-Wa began to chew absent-mindedly on the sinew securing the bag. It was delicious! Hungry for more, he kept on chewing. As darkness fell, he realized he had eaten all the sinew.

Suddenly, the leather bag burst open. “Oh what have I done?” he cried. Then, to Po-Say-Wa’s astonishment, out from the bag flew clouds of glittering mica. Just as quickly, the mica’s glowing flakes floated into the night sky, spreading out to become a canopy of sparkling stars. And then a huge ball of mica rose from the bag, taking its place in the sky as the moon. “Oh, my God,” whispered Po-Say-Wa in awe and fear.

As Po-Say-Wa looked up at the sky, he only could think of how he had failed the Great Spirit by opening the bag before reaching the trail’s end. The night grew cold, and Po-Say-Wa shivered in despair. Finally, full of shame and disappointment, he raised his head and let out a sorrowful cry to the on-looking heavens. The Pueblo Indians say this is why coyotes walk with their tails dragging and heads hung low. When they see the moon gazing down on them with its accusing look, they cry out in shame and sorrow.

This story suggests that Divinity entrusts each of us, no matter how lowly or unimportant we seem, with something infinitely precious to deliver on our long and winding life journey. Like Po-Say-Wa, we each carry a precious treasure filled with gifts that are meant to enrich the world. Like Po-Say-Wa, we are ensnared by our self-concept with its inborn rights and sacred duties. Starved for true nourishment, we eventually grow weary of this self-concept and start gnawing at it. Even as we discover the treasure hidden in ourselves, we judge this signal event in terms of our grandiose external mission in the World of Man. We contribute to the beauty of Heaven on Earth and think of it as a failure.

Po-Say-Wa represents that part of us that doesn’t yet comprehend and celebrate the value of dismantling the inflated self-concept — who we think we are or should be — and that doesn’t yet realize that this allows us to express our divine self instead. If he could relinquish the negative beliefs that caused him to feel lowly in the first place, Po-Say-Wa would realize quickly the glorious role he played in the building of Heaven on Earth.

Robinson holds that those who practice the exercises in his book are likely to find their lives changing in significant ways.

As we learn to sense the Presence ever more fully, we discover a timeless consciousness filled with peace, tenderness and love. This realm could also be called the “land of pure joy,” because of the feelings it evokes. Time spent in the Presence dissolves worried thoughts and fantasies, as well as the problems they create. Melting into the Divine, we take on its generous, silent, and infinitely loving nature, and all we do flows from this

greater Self — our truest nature, the divine consciousness secreted inside our own consciousness....

Living in the Presence with no self-concept to fix, prove or defend, your old problems of identity, worth and purpose fade away.... People, animals and things become increasingly beautiful, and you find yourself endlessly delighted and amazed by the unfathomable mystery of the world.... For you, the world has transformed into a wonderland of physical and emotional delight.... With consciousness less and less identified with concepts of body, self and survival, your fear of dying diminishes greatly.

Death itself is an illusion that we need to surrender in order to be able to see the true width, breadth, and depth of Heaven on Earth.

This earth and all that is in it, and the whole cosmic order to which it belongs, has to undergo a transformation; it has to become a “new heaven and a new earth.” ... This is the ultimate goal of human history and of the created universe. — Bede Griffiths

What about all those terrible things — genocide, starvation, mass destruction, cruelty, hatred, greed?

To find Heaven, we must understand that we create the ugliness around us with our stories, beliefs and actions. We see what we think and imagine, projecting our ideas and fantasies onto the world like a movie, and then we react to this movie in ways that cause more suffering, injustice, hatred, and violence. For example, seeing “terrorists” instead of wounded, suffering and humiliated people, we tell stories encouraging violence over reconciliation. The radiant divine world lies hidden beneath these stories waiting for us to wake up from our collective nightmare and see it.

One of the shortcomings of this deeply inspiring and insightful book is that it does not make it sufficiently clear how a “mere” change of consciousness can transform “[t]his earth and all that is in it, and the whole cosmic order to which it belongs.” How, for instance, will seeing “wounded, suffering and humiliated people” instead of terrorists and telling stories encouraging reconciliation over violence usher in an age of universal peace and harmony? I do not doubt that something like this is possible and will eventually happen, but making it intelligible calls for a richer, a more powerful narrative. Missing from Robinson’s account are two key concepts — *supermind* and *involution* (to use Sri Aurobindo’s terminology).

Supermind is the creative power by which Divinity manifests the world — both out of itself qua all-constituting substance and within itself qua all-containing consciousness. What makes this particular manifestation of Divinity special — we have no reason to suppose that it is the only one — is its evolutionary nature, and evolution presupposes involution. Robinson offers no *divine* reason for the Descent that features in his story. Yet I expect as much from a Creation wrought by Divinity. I find a *divine* reason for the whole mess of creation in the cycle of involution and evolution that is part of Sri Aurobindo’s narrative:

Once in the immortal boundlessness of Self,  
In a vast of Truth and Consciousness and Light  
The soul looked out from its felicity.  
It felt the Spirit’s interminable bliss,  
It knew itself deathless, timeless, spaceless, one,

It saw the Eternal, lived in the Infinite.  
 Then, curious of a shadow thrown by Truth,  
 It strained towards some otherness of self,  
 It was drawn to an unknown Face peering through night.  
 It sensed a negative infinity,  
 A void supernal whose immense excess  
 Imitating God and everlasting Time  
 Offered a ground for Nature's adverse birth  
 And Matter's rigid hard unconsciousness  
 Harboured the brilliance of a transient soul  
 That lights up birth and death and ignorant life...  
 As one drawn by the grandeur of the Void  
 The soul attracted leaned to the Abyss:  
 It longed for the adventure of Ignorance  
 And the marvel and surprise of the Unknown  
 And the endless possibility that lurked  
 In the womb of Chaos and in Nothing's gulf  
 Or looked from the unfathomed eyes of Chance.  
 It tired of its unchanging happiness,  
 It turned away from immortality:  
 It was drawn to hazard's call and danger's charm,  
 It yearned to the pathos of grief, the drama of pain,  
 Perdition's peril, the wounded bare escape,  
 The music of ruin and its glamour and crash,  
 The savour of pity and the gamble of love  
 And passion and the ambiguous face of Fate.  
 A world of hard endeavour and difficult toil,  
 And battle on extinction's perilous verge,  
 A clash of forces, a vast incertitude,  
 The joy of creation out of Nothingness,  
 Strange meetings on the roads of Ignorance  
 And the companionship of half-known souls  
 Or the solitary greatness and lonely force  
 Of a separate being conquering its world,  
 Called it from its too safe eternity.  
 A huge descent began, a giant fall:  
 For what the spirit sees, creates a truth  
 And what the soul imagines is made a world.  
 (Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri* ♣, pp. 454-456)

The experiences of Heaven on Earth that Robinson describes are peak experiences of the mind. Seeing divine perfection in all that is, is within the powers of mental consciousness. Making others see things in the same way is not. The reason this is so is that mind is essentially a divided consciousness. Supermind, on the other hand, can never be divided in its creative self-knowledge. It cannot even accommodate the

distinction between what is and what ought to be. To put it somewhat paradoxically, the supermind only sees what ought to be, and there only is what the supermind sees. A premature unleashing of the supermind cannot therefore be in the cards, for it would break the continuity of Divinity's adventure of evolution. And yet it is the emergence of the supermind that will eventually objectify Heaven on Earth in a way that the mind cannot possibly imagine.

But if we adopt this enabling narrative, then the nature and scope of the benefits adduced by Robinson seem wholly inadequate. We are told, for instance, that

Your everyday activities – time with family, going to work, doing chores, exercising, and paying bills – continue as always; they may even look the same from the outside, but internally you now experience them as part of the mystery, timelessness and perfection of existence. You realize the world doesn't need to be anything different than what it already is in the mystical here and now. Practical elements from the World of Man, such as clocks, currency and language, remain useful tools but no longer dominate your life.

Under "Examples of Transformation Using Heaven's Compass" Robinson lists the following items:

- Making Peace with a Messy Bedroom: A Mother's Journey
- A Teacher Learns About Controlling His Temper in Class
- Reconciling with a Brother
- Healing a Mother Wound
- Making This Book A Success

But these examples are simply not inspiring enough to light the mystic fire in our souls that is needed to establish Heaven on Earth *completely*, by calling down the ultimate transformative power or by releasing it from its involutory prison (two ways of looking at the same consummation). For this we need something more like the following narrative:

And what will be the bliss nature when it manifests in a new supramental race? The fully evolved soul will be one with all beings in the status and dynamic effects of experience of a bliss-consciousness intense and illimitable. And since love is the effective power and soul-symbol of bliss-oneness he will approach and enter into this oneness by the gate of universal love, a sublimation of human love at first, a divine love afterwards, at its summits a thing of beauty, sweetness and splendour now to us inconceivable. He will be one in bliss-consciousness with all the world-play and its powers and happenings and there will be banished for ever the sorrow and fear, the hunger and pain of our poor and darkened mental and vital and physical existence. He will get that power of the bliss-freedom in which all the conflicting principles of our being shall be unified in their absolute values. All evil shall perforce change itself into good; the universal beauty of the All-beautiful will take possession of its fallen kingdoms; every darkness will be converted into a pregnant glory of light and the discords which the mind creates between Truth and Good and Beauty, Power and Love and Knowledge will disappear on the eternal summit, in the infinite extensions where they are always one. (Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga* ♣, pp. 509–510)