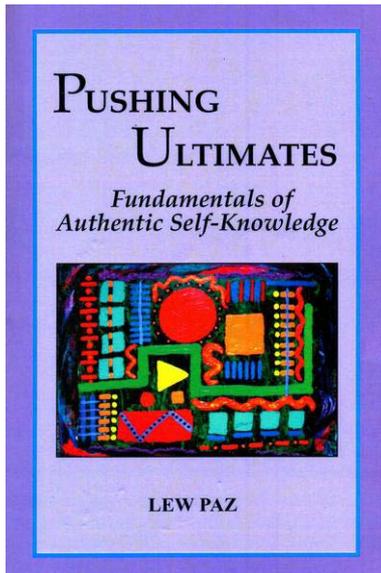


BOOK EXCERPT



*Pushing Ultimates:
Fundamentals of Authentic Self-Knowledge* ↗

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Chapter 11: UltraOrdinary Situation

As a man is, so he sees.

— William Blake¹

Come forth as what thou art.

— Pindar

As science probes further into the unknown, it seems its continual expansion in depth and scope and complexity is endless. And yet, as elucidated in various works, such as John Horgan's *The End of Science*,² there are definite limits to the empirical process, as far as ultimate answers go. Thus, as always, we must direct our search for deeper meanings into such perennial areas of thought as mysticism, metaphysics, and philosophy.

The essential meaning of philosophy is the love of truth and wisdom, and although it has undergone a process involving construction of varied schools of thought, and has

¹ William Blake, in a letter to the Rev. Dr. Trusler.

² John Horgan, *The End of Science: Facing the Limits of Knowledge in the Twilight of the Scientific Age*, Addison-Wesley 1996.

been viewed as overwhelmed and buried by science, the words of Etienne Gilson should be kept in mind: “*Philosophy always buries its undertakers.*”³ In other words, sound intelligent philosophical exploration of reality will bury conceptual systems confined to inflexible logic and sterile intellectual analysis, such as materialism, reductionism, functionalism, computationalism, quantumism, as well as any religion, cult, or spiritual movement built upon credulity. It will also expose and surpass schools of thought considered to be philosophy, but are nothing more than an airy mimicry riddled with intellectual hairsplitting and unnecessary scholarly abstruseness. The scholarly volumes of exposition concerning such subject matter as defining the difference between Continental philosophy and Anglo-American analytical philosophy, resemble the work of ingeniously skilled masons who have built elaborate brick towers only to imprison themselves. Academic philosophers all too often become entangled in the very processes meant to free the mind. What does it matter if we know Sartre’s style of profound synthesis is basically “centrifugal,” whereas Merleau-Ponty’s is “centripetal.” It doesn’t matter at all. Yet I’ve come across scholars who have written entire volumes of such intellectual exorbitance. Castaneda’s Don Juan spoke about Wittgenstein tying the noose of analytical exposition so tight, he strangled his own potential for deeper explorations.⁴ This could also be said of the average academic philosopher. Robert Avens touches on this in his book, *The New Gnosis*:

Thinking in the Western philosophical tradition is for the most part identified with reasoning and argumentative rigor. Doing philosophy, especially among the logical analysts, means to be engaged in a competition between arguments. In this capacity thinking is usually distinguished from what is assumed to be its less respectable, if not irresponsible alternatives: mysticism, art, myth-making, poetry. To Heidegger, philosophy, based on this type of confrontationalist thinking, though useful and necessary in many respects, is rooted in “the technical interpretation of thinking.” ... It recognizes no goal or meaning that is not grounded in rational certainty, and its modus operandi is what Heidegger calls “calculative thinking” — a thinking that plans and investigates, computes and never stops, never collects itself. Today it expresses itself in the frenzy of technological mastery and in the will to power involving man in the circle of its own projected world.⁵

To an extensive degree privileged professionals of academia have undertaken philosophy strictly as an academic pursuit, caught up in their thinking function with little interactive play from their emotional, feeling and intuitive attributes, and none from exploration of their inner being. Volumes written by scholars on every subject — morality, reason, truth — involving complex debates of past and current doctrines, yet substantially lacking in psychological depth and experiential awareness of the world at large, have abetted the domination of scientism, positivism, and thus materialism.

William Kluback stated, “*Philosophy belongs to the spirit ... and is inspired by that longing to*

³ Etienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, C. Scribner’s Sons 1937.

⁴ Carlos Castaneda quoting Don Juan in an interview with Sam Keen, “Seeing Castaneda,” *Psychology Today* 1972.

⁵ Robert Avens, *The New Gnosis: Heidegger, Hillman, and Angels*, Spring Publications 1984.

see beyond our sight, to think beyond our thinking.”⁶ And Heidegger said, “It is the very nature of philosophy never to make things easier but only more difficult.”⁷ Not difficult because of some high flown analytical manipulation of abstract concepts, but to make it difficult to cling to belief systems and structures of thought that keep the mind enchained to dogma and delusion. Because philosophy is an open-ended process, no fixed point should ever be reached where one claims, “I am an existentialist,” or “idealist,” etc. Philosophy belongs to the household of religion, but with the windows and doors open.

Mortimer Adler has written, “The better our understanding of ideas, especially great ideas, the better we understand reality because of the light they throw on it.”⁸ The intensity of the great ideas of philosophy remains viable because they reveal reality and mystery to be essentially synonymous. Reality is palpable mystery. Because we have named and labeled everything our perception encompasses does not make reality less mysterious. It is getting at this essential nature of things beyond names and labels, as close as humanly possible, that is the activity of philosophy. It doesn’t matter what the classical perception of philosophy is, or the history it has been confined to. What matters is how one goes about “philosophizing,” so that it is directly effective in the unfolding of self-knowledge. As Gabriel Marcel said,

Philosophy is not building further structure upon the established foundation of traditional premises, but an adventure of creative exploration, ever opening, ever expanding.⁹

Philosophy pursued in this manner combines both the love of truth and the acceptance of paradox. According to Heidegger, philosophical discourse is to open up and take true measure of existence. To do this, philosophical exposition must be rooted in transpersonal experience, which it lost contact with during centuries when Christian scholars and theologians strived to construct a rational system based on the merging of Aristotelian concepts with religious dogma. This loss of contact with transcendent experience was amplified during the rise of scientism and positivism, à la the Vienna Circle.

Philosophical exposition is sterile if not underlined by exploration of the deeper dimensions of the psyche, entailing confrontation with significant archetypes and trans-egoic states of consciousness. Lacking this, a person may succumb to agreeing with A. N. Whitehead’s remark: “The purpose of philosophy is to rationalize mysticism.”¹⁰ Such rationalizing has been a significant deficiency of modern philosophy, especially when we consider the limitations of reason. As Verhoeven puts it, “reasoning is

⁶ William Kluback, *Sri Aurobindo Ghose: the Dweller in the Land of Silence*, P. Lang 2001.

⁷ Martin Heidegger, *What is Philosophy?*, tr. with intro. by William Kluback and Jean T. Wilde, Twayne Publishing 1958.

⁸ Mortimer Adler, in *A Modern Introduction to Philosophy: Readings from Classical and Contemporary Sources*, edited by Paul Edwards and Arthur Pap, Free Press 1957.

⁹ *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel*, Kenneth Gallagher, Fordham University Press 1975 [c. 1962].

¹⁰ A.N. Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*.

thought without wonder” ... and “wonder is central to philosophy.”¹¹ Reason should not be adverse to revealing its own flaws and shortcomings. Intelligent reasoning can expose its own limits, substantiating that what lies beyond reason may be comprehended with intuitive and visionary facets of consciousness. Mysticism, as various sages have demonstrated, can be brought into accord with reason. Reason, honed with applied logic, is the filter that keeps mystical thought free of superstition, theosophical fabrication, occult obscurity, and New Age credulity. Though authentic philosophy is rooted in mystical vision, it is also a science of the mind, for it requires — demands — consistent and assiduous self-criticism, harmonized with intellectual and intuitive weighing and measuring of extensive knowledges. Philosophy, and even more so its basic branch, metaphysics, is not something to be pursued by either gullible visionaries incapable of analytical reasoning, or toplofty professors so caught up in analytical intellectualization they’re incapable of mystical vision.

Consider, out of 180 academic “philosophers” having educational positions in Germany during the Third Reich, half became members of the Nazi party. Of course, like the glass seen as either half full or half empty, so can this statistic be perceived, for 50% had the courage not to join the Nazi party. But however you see this, it validates that erudite philosophizing doesn’t necessarily imply wisdom, or even astute reasoning. Despite the brilliancy of Heidegger’s works (much of which I have integrated into my own *weltanschauung*, and which I will use throughout this book), he was a vain and pompous man, believing himself to be some kind of a philosophical avatar, and he was also a Nazi. He attained profound knowledge, yet lacked significant attributes of self-knowledge, which is an essential requirement for every genuine philosopher who is more attuned to ceaselessly renewing him/herself than competing for academic prestige. The potential for prestigious power Heidegger’s academic position and the political situation offered was a temptation he was too inwardly weak to refuse. His lack of awareness of his Mr. Hyde shadow traits amplified his intellectual hubris and undermined his potential for Sophianic wisdom. Still, his work is not to be sanctimoniously tossed aside, for in fundamental ways it transcends his personal failings and political viewpoints. You can glean meaningful knowledge from certain people without succumbing to their failings. You can also learn from their failings as much as from their nuggets of profound insight. If you are climbing the very rugged incline of a great mountain and an old Nazi who climbed there previously carved a few very good handholds in the rock, you would be a fool not to use those handholds because of moralistic considerations. And yet you must be aware of what missteps he took that eventually led to his downfall. With such in-depth scrutiny, all knowledges gleaned will be imbued with the power of substantiated truth. One pursues philosophy as a *Jana yoga* discipline enhanced with poetic perception, eventually going beyond philosophical inquiry when the egoic aspect of the quest dissolves from extensive immersion in the essence of Being. This is what the quest is about — gradual immersion into Being.

Does much of this seem perplexing? Of course. The discerning Spanish philosopher, Ortega y Gasset, wrote that a life fully lived means accepting a sense of constant

¹¹ Cornelius Verhoeven, *The Philosophy of Wonder*, Macmillan 1972.

perplexity.¹² He said the symbol for perplexity is the crossroads, for vibrant individuation repeatedly places us at the crossroads of significant decision, where we are exquisitely free to make fateful choices. Perplexity goes with the territory, for it is the mulch of self-knowledge. Perplexity is a hue of the color of wonder. Better to be constantly perplexed concerning profound reflections than to remain comfortably static with the false confidence of collective opinions, safe in some religious or political cul-de-sac or tightly constructed philosophical stance, shutting down the potential to ever experience the magnificent fullness of your being. Yet perplexity too must be refined. Perplexity should not partake of befuddlement. Refining perplexity is a function of “negative capability” — having aplomb amid the wild terrifying wonder of it all.

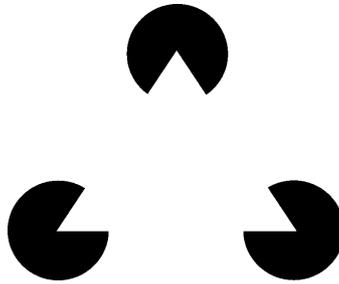
Mortimer Adler wrote that to be human is to be endowed with the proclivity to philosophize. But, though most of us are born with various degrees of potential to grow psychologically, spiritually, and philosophically, the world has a way of hypnotizing us with its entrancing banalities, or crushing us under mundane circumstances of economic survival, depriving us of time and opportunity, sapping our will to grow. The quest for genuine self-knowledge begins when we challenge such obstacles, intuiting there must be more depth and scope to the world than we have been taught. Amid the global circumstances circa 2005–2050 on planet Earth, only a relatively small number of human beings will be graced to find themselves morally and spiritually responsible to commit themselves to this quest. For this commitment will require eclectic integration into your life of the way of the alchemist, scientist, shaman, yogi, witch, philosopher, sage, and medicine man, to a width, depth, degree that suits your own individual uniqueness of intention and capability. Such authentic cultivation of self-knowledge is similar to the way a sculpture is carved from granite, with years of dedicated and consistent work. Blood, sweat, tears, fear, laughter, are definite attributes of self-discovery, but most important is patience and a sense of humor, especially being able to laugh at the occasional absurdity of your own plight.

Through disciplines such as yoga, fasting, and meditation, or through the meticulous careful use of psychedelics, visions may be had along the way, and quite grand indeed. But it is just as significant to cultivate insights revealing the possibility that what you know of yourself, the entire conceptual structure of your self-image, including religious belief, sense of patriotism, ideas about the world at large, is most likely built to a consequential degree of falsehood and delusion. Authentic inner strength comes from facing such intimate revelations and overcoming fear of being left vulnerable. The inability to handle fear is a basic psychological deterrent to proficient spiritual growth. Although it may seem facing and ridding yourself of religious and political misconceptions, and other acculturated duplicities which hamper fecund psychological growth, is less of a challenge than facing external terrors, it is often these internal confrontations that give rise to the greatest fears. This is what underlies the rigidity of religious and political belief systems which are built and believed in as bulwarks against such fear. Facing, challenging, striving to understand and overcome all forms of

¹² Jose Ortega y Gasset, concerning perplexity, *Man and Crisis*, tr. Mildred Adams, Norton 1958.

fear enriches your spiritual being. Significant philosophical and mystical systems place great import on containment of fear, of converting panic into intensity of insight. In the teachings of martial arts, fear is transformed into a dynamic energy component. In Tantric discipline, overcoming ideas of terror is known as “chod,” where the practitioner seeks out fearful situations to challenge him/herself. We cannot vanquish fear, but we can come to understand and transform it into an instrument of spiritual enrichment.

In addition to our tendency to become incapacitated by fear, another entrenched psychological weakness is our vulnerability to a variety of illusions, both internal and external, significant and insignificant. The most obvious way our mind can be fooled is by optical illusions. Take a simple optical illusion where you see a triangle that does not actually exist.



This illustration actually contains only three black discs with pie-slice notches. Cover one of the discs and the illusory triangle disappears. It was never there. It isn't there now, even though you definitely see it.

From just this simple example you can grasp how tricky our optical-sensory system can be. Existence is a poly-disperse dance betwixt appearance and reality. The actual size of the moon is tremendously different than the golf ball sized globe we nightly take for granted as we see it seeming to cross the sky. In reality, the moon doesn't cross the sky. The earth spins, creating the illusion. But optical illusions, in and of themselves, are soon detected, and we are not likely to be tricked by the same one twice. It is the intangible deceptions of the mind we must be attentive to, for these can engulf an individual, causing him/her to lead a life of undetected falsehood and impeded spirituality. This is especially true when it comes to illusions and delusions created by acculturated influences, such as biased religious, ethnic and political attitudes. I recall a scientific experiment where groups of young soldiers who had been drilled for weeks to unquestioningly respect their superior officers, were lined up in front of a kind of “Ames Room,” which is a small room built specifically to optically distort how the objects inside are perceived. This particular room was constructed to distort the appearance of any face looking in through a window across the room. When the young soldiers looked into the room at the faces of their peers in the far window, the room did just what it was designed to do — it distorted their features, like in a fun house mirror. But when an officer put his head through the far window, the young soldiers were so trained to see perfection in this figure of authority, their minds simply could not perceive the officer's features as distorted. The officer looked perfectly normal to

these young soldiers. This reveals how we unquestioningly respond to images of authority and is an example of how powerful the influences of acculturation, rooted in custom and tradition and reinforced by education, can be.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with respect for authority, *if* it is worthy of respect. But we should never give respect blindly. We must always question authority. The ruthless dictator Adolph Hitler's psychological condition was a complex merging of psychopathic intelligence with Machiavellian cunning, amplified and energized with drug induced psychic powers. On becoming the supreme authority of Germany in 1933, he used the influence of his authoritarian image to convince people the lies he told were truth. Like the young soldiers in the special room who could not see any distortion in their officer's face, most Germans blinded by patriotic zeal could not see the evil lurking behind Hitler's speeches of national glory. They were duped by a psychological illusion. Hitler was a magician at developing a system of propaganda to create the illusion of supreme authority. Today, all over the earth, dictators, religious and cult leaders, and just run-of-the-mill politicians, some who become Presidents and Vice-Presidents (with help from their "public relations" friends), use knowledge of human emotional response to patriotism and religion to manipulate the multitudes, leading them to believe falsehoods are true and illusions are real. This is why it is very important to grasp how the human mind can be played by external influences like a puppet on strings. If we do not develop an in-depth understanding of our world, of our minds, of our very selves, we remain vulnerable to such manipulation. Without substantial self-knowledge, we remain ignorant of the dangerous power of persuasive illusion and self-deception. Everyone is capable of being duped, and of duping themselves.

We have dealt with our primate ancestry and early hominids whose knowledge of the world was confined to a small orbit of tribal activity. We considered the brain-eye configuration's filtering of a narrow band of visible light from an immense spectrum of frequencies, creating a perception radius conducive to physical survival. Thus we can grasp how humans have become exquisitely attuned to the dynamic network of the physical-terrestrial sphere of being. Even though people may live in a technologically advanced nation like the United States, with all its amenities and orderliness — paved streets, garbage collection, sewer systems, traffic lights, manicured lawns, police, hospitals, schools, 9 to 5 routine — intent in their involvement with family, career, entertainment, they are, like their ancestors, oriented strictly to the immediate social-physical environment. This attunement has brought about an inflexible social-nationalistic orientation, with religion as a kind of cultural extension, an organized traditional acknowledgment of a higher-deeper dimension of being confined to simplified anthropomorphic imagery which in no way disturbs the societal ambit of political-economic endeavors. Since this is so, the seeker must strive to keep in mind that the entire universe of terrestrial cosmic phenomena, is a vast veil over an immense complexity of forces-solar, cellular, molecular, atomic, quantum, psychic, spiritual — which are manifestations of, interweave with, and create, our every day "normal" reality we so easily take for granted.

In his truly enjoyable book, *The Secret House*, David Bodanis elucidates the wonderland of phenomena hidden beneath our everyday world:

Take a step across your bedroom floor on the way to bed after demurely turning out the top light ... and, unless there have been some shady deals in the zoning department, you are unlikely to fall through the floor. This is because as you apply your weight to your slippers, the floor, apparently passive and immobile beneath you, pushes back up with exactly as much force as you're applying down. This is miraculous. Touch your right toe to the floor in a mock pirouette as you gingerly step from the bathroom towards the bed..., exerting only a few ounces of pressure, and the floor will register that and push up with only a few ounces too; shift into a running scamper so that your full body weight is on that foot, and the floor, right in the same spot, will immediately rearrange itself inside and push up with the equivalent of your full body weight.

Nothing escapes its measure; the swiped scoop of mashed potato, that furtively devoured third helping of cake — the floor detects the weight of it all, and pushes up accordingly. It's important that it does so, for if it missed something you had eaten and pushed up too softly you would gradually start sinking through the floorboards, your slippers puckering out the ceiling below. If the floor over-estimated what you had eaten, then it would push up with more force than your body weight could overcome, and you would be propelled up like a trampolinist.

The floor knows all this because when you step on it you tell it how much you weigh. The more you've eaten the more you crush the molecules in the floor beneath your eager slippers. This is the key. Crushed floor molecules push back. Each individual molecule in the segment of the floor directly beneath your foot rebounds up to counterbalance the crushing. They can't push back very hard, each molecule being limited to a very small fraction of an ounce of rebound oomph because of its diminutive size, but as there are very many molecules in the floor the net result can be considerable. The more crush, the more they push back, so equalizing your weight — exactly. In a floor made of iron or concrete the push-back of the crushed floor molecules would be near instantaneous, which is why such surfaces feel hard underfoot. In wooden floors the crushed molecules respond with only a little more delay, and that's why such floors have a slight give but otherwise feel hard and solid when you jauntily skip across them.¹³

We tread through an extraordinary realm we are hardly aware of, moving through the illusion of solidity when in actuality we move through vast forces of phantomlike phenomena every moment. What we perceive is so much more than what we have adapted ourselves to believe it is. The poet William Blake saw our situation with clear poetic vision, and his words have been quoted many times: "*If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite,*" and, "*The eye of man a little narrow orb, clos'd and dark.*"¹⁴ But it is not the "eye," in and of itself, that is the culprit. The eye, as our organ of sight, is intimately interwoven with the brain-mind configuration, which for tens of thousands of years has been intrinsically influenced by language, thus thought, all at play in perennial feedback loop complexity — perception igniting thought, thought enhancing perception, etc. As Judith Hooper and Dick Teresi

¹³ David Bodanis, *The Secret House: 24 Hours in the Strange and Unexplained World in Which We Spend Our Nights and Days*, Simon and Schuster 1986.

¹⁴ William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.

clarify:

But it isn't just the receptors in our skin and nostrils, the rods and cones in our retina, the minute cilia in our ears, that restrict Mind at Large to a utilitarian trickle. What matters more is how we *interpret* and edit the incoming messages. Human gray matter, after all, is 90 percent interpretation equipment, 90 percent storyteller.¹⁵

No matter how marvelous the entire sensory apparatus of our physical being, if we do not cultivate an expansion of our own perceptual abilities, we will remain confined to perception through a "*narrow orb, clos'd and dark.*" To awaken to greater expansiveness of being, of experiencing existence to the fullness of our capability, is what genuine spiritual enlightenment is all about.

Thus here we are, ensconced in the perplexity and paradox of the dance betwixt appearance and reality, as both passive receivers of "information" from light emissions, and simultaneously active creator-storytellers of the surrounding world by way of acculturated projection and metaphoric coordination. The ultra complexity of perceptual and cognitive faculties has yet to be substantially pinned down by empirical investigations. There is always "something other" involved. Jurij Moskvitin, one of the most intelligent meta-physicalists on the contemporary scene, touches on this astonishing psychic-quantum frolic between "subjective" and "objective" elements of our existence, in the following:

The world as it appears to us is made up exclusively of sensorial impressions and their combinations, and is therefore determined and limited by the form and the range of the organs of perception. Whatever we experience of a world external to ourselves is nothing but the release by external impulses of *something* that is in ourselves. We do not perceive an object external to ourselves but *something* in ourselves which has been called up by impulses from that object and which presumably corresponds to it — colors, sounds, smells and sensations are in us, and by projecting them onto the unknowable world around us we build it up like a mosaic from elements in ourselves.¹⁶

Within this intriguing statement dwells the perplexing wonder of our predicament. We should give priority significance to this "something" in ourselves, for it has intimately familiar qualities to that inner potential the Hindu luminary Aurobindo calls the soul. We are, as the ancient Greek sage Sophocles exclaimed, truly "uncanny beings," existing within an equally uncanny universe of objects seemingly external we can tangibly weigh and measure, yet the very nature of this external world is dependent on significant elements of internal cognition. Our brain/egoic-mind creates the entire universe by transforming and interpreting frequency patterns "coming" from the all-encompassing "external" world. That which is observed is an intimate aspect of the observer. As Lawrence LeShan and Henry Margenau put it in their work, *Einstein's Space, Van Gogh's Sky*,

What we can observe of reality is our own organization of it. Reality is a compound like water, with consciousness one of the elements. But we can never hope to know what the compound would be without consciousness. If we were to say, "We now have an idea as

¹⁵ Hooper and Teresi, *The Three-Pound Universe*, Macmillan 1986.

¹⁶ Jurij Moskvitin, *Essay on the Origin of Thought*, Ohio University Press 1974.

to what reality is before consciousness was added. Let us check and see if our idea is correct," the second sentence would have no meaning. We cannot even conceive of a way to make this check.... No longer do we view consciousness as a late arrival on the scene. Consciousness is the scene.¹⁷

Arthur Zajonc put it this way:

We need to soften the notion of ourselves as equipped with fixed vidicon-like eyes and static computer-like brains to produce the equivalent of consciousness. The blossoms of perception unfold out of a far richer and self-reflexive union of mental and natural lights.¹⁸

Yes, there is something neo-Berkeleyian to the New Age view that the mind entirely creates objective reality, that the world is only what we perceive as we perceive it — but that's not quite so, or rather, it would be better to speak of a sort of paradoxical both/and. Dinosaur footprints and other fossils verify the world, cosmic-terrestrial "concrete reality" where evolution occurs, the entire magnificent flow of all and everything, was going on long before the first primate, let alone the first human, was born, and as even ordinary informed intelligence can deduce, will continue long after all of us are gone. That this "concrete reality" is proven to be something entirely other than we perceive it to be, does not invalidate its existence. If a tree falls in the forest with no human beings around, all the nearby creatures of the forest, squirrels, foxes, bears, wolves, birds, will jump, startled at the sound. Before Columbus "discovered" the New World, no one from the "Old World" of Europe knew it was there, yet Native "Americans" had been doing their cultural thing for thousands of years with no concern for any European wondering whether they were there or not. And though Europe did not exist for the Native Americans, it too was there, in all its tumult and extravagance. Because things are "out of sight and out of mind," does not mean they are out of existence.

All the turmoil of wars, poverty, famine, going on beyond the personal perimeter of you and your family and friends, is not of less significance or less real because it is "far away" in other countries, having no immediate effect within your personal ambit. Right now, while you're reading this book, six billion other human beings are busy with their own lives, performing myriad activities all over the earth. Do you know how many six billion is? As we demonstrated in an earlier chapter, it would take you twelve days, counting twenty-four hours a day just to count to one million; it would take you forty-eight years to count to one billion. It is almost impossible to imagine what an immense number of people six billion is. This great swarming mass of humans is a blur in your mind's eye, and in relation to those billions of individuals you are just another microscopic cipher smudge of this great blur. Yet each individual among these six billion "out there" feels as unique and real as you feel yourself to be.

The threat of being an anonymous microscopic blip amid billions of other such blips is one of the essential reasons human beings develop and cling to belief systems that

¹⁷ Lawrence LeShan and Henry Margenau, *Einstein's Space, Van Gogh's Sky*, Macmillan 1983.

¹⁸ Arthur Zajonc, *Catching the Light: the Entwined History of Light and Mind*, Bantam Books 1993.

make them feel they are somehow unique among the multitudes. A sense of belonging to a crowd, cult, corporation, nation, religion, the pursuit of fame and status, keeps the threat of isolated anonymity at bay. The conforming element within political and religious ideologies offers one of the most powerful escapes from this sense of anonymity. Nationalism, thus patriotism, is rooted in belief that the geographic location, as well as the governmental and cultural structure of a person's nation, is superior to other locations and structures around the earth. Thus the people abiding there consider themselves superior to those outside their nation's boundaries. Most forms of religion work in a similar manner, with every denomination or sect within a religion succumbing to this trait, amplifying the sense of uniqueness in each member of the group. Though ordinary common sense informs us such things as geographic location, political ideology, ethnic origin, or religious orientation, do not in any way make people superior, an acculturated mind set ignores and overrules both common sense and intelligent reasoning.

Because of the power mass idolization bestows upon billionaires, movie and TV stars, sports heroes, etc., fame and fortune are even more bewitchingly conducive to the illusion of eliteness. It is exceedingly difficult for a famous celebrity to avoid succumbing to a sense of egoic specialness. Such is why being in the limelight of their culture is so sought after — they are no longer lost in the anonymity of the masses. Fame is very detrimental to the spiritual quest. It hampers even those known as gurus and “spiritual” spokespersons who have risen in stature within the New Age ambit. It is only when you can perceive yourself as just another personality going through the brief jaunt of existence among six billion others, that you may become willing to bow to that which has significance beyond the ego's sphere of reality, and so commit to necessary disciplines, necessary risk, necessary sacrifice of comforting beliefs, thus partaking of the quest to awaken.

Right now, at this very moment, a farmer in Mongolia is weeding his garden, an Eskimo in northern Canada is mending her blanket, a monk in Tibet is saying his prayers, a convict in Norway is dreaming of freedom, a doctor in Scotland is treating her patient, somewhere some poor soul is being tortured, a man in Montana is herding sheep, a woman in South America is knitting a shawl, in a thousand different places, at this very moment, a baby is being born, and in a thousand other places a person is dying. Hundreds of millions of people are working at different jobs, millions are at play, armies are marching, crowds are watching sports, fishermen are fishing, factory workers are laboring, housewives are cooking, lovers are entwined, children are playing — right now, all over the earth, continuously, billions of human beings, this very moment, sleeping, laughing, crying, working, playing, learning, as you are reading these words. The immense and never ending genesis of the world swirls unnoticed around them just as it swirls unnoticed around you. And just as you are barely conscious of these billions of other humans each doing their individual thing, they are unaware that you exist.

In addition to the six billion or more people alive now who are your contemporaries, there have been millions upon millions who lived in the past, existing in hundreds of

magnificent cultures, large and small, that appeared on earth and vanished — the ancient Etruscans, Egyptians, Romans, the nomad tribes of North Africa, the forest and jungle tribes of central Africa and South America, the Mongol tribes of Asia, the Viking seafarers, the German and Celtic tribes, the kingdoms of Europe, Russia, India, China, Japan. Since the dawn of primal self-awareness, humans have come forth into the wonder of the world, lived in their time and place ensconced in their culture's belief systems, then were swept away with the wind, as we will be, followed by billions coming after us to struggle with triumph and failure, eventually to also pass into the unfathomable darkness of death. Look around you while strolling or driving through town. Everyone you see, homeless bum or corporation president, milkman, waitress, politician, thief, doctor, butcher, baker, candlestick maker, you and I and everyone you know and billions of others spread across the earth, all will be dead in just 120 years, all the billions alive at this very moment, newborn or ninety years old. All, including you, will be vanquished from physical existence just twelve decades from now, most much sooner, some tomorrow, others within an hour. And the billions remaining will not notice this gradual disappearance of entire generations, as others fill vacancies left by the departed and continue doing all those things people have done before them. We are being swept along in a great tide of forces and phenomena beyond our ability to grasp.

The dread of egoic annihilation such knowledge evokes is why the majority of people strive to find a niche that will give them a sense of significance, of eliteness, which will stimulate and intensify their illusion of individual centrism. Belonging to a religious denomination or any spiritually oriented organization claiming to be exceptional, creates the egoic illusion of being closer than others to the source of things. Many tend to think "God" especially favors their denomination or sect. But there has never been, nor will there ever be, any "chosen" people, and no one is the "apple of God's eye," including all outstanding historical personalities, televangelists, gurus, etc.

If you can open up to this highlighting of personal insignificance, using this as a stepping off place toward the wonder of existence, a dissolving of all overblown ideas of the ego's significance, along with dispersion of shallow and false values becomes activated. It is then what Gabriel Marcel called ontological humility blooms, which as Ken T. Gallagher clarifies...

...is an existential attitude, a recognition of a depth in being which surpasses and includes us. In a word, it is the profound acknowledgement of finitude. To assent to finitude is not simply to acquiesce in the theoretical limits of the essence of man, for this can be done by an unruffled and self-confident rationalism. To experience finitude in the existential order is to experience the continued duration of a being which is not the master of his own being.¹⁹

To accept the finitude of the ego-persona opens up the potential to experience the infinite of essence.

That we can have a certain degree of command concerning what fate has given us does

¹⁹ *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel*, Kenneth Gallagher, Fordham University Press 1975 [1962].

not mean we can willfully create our own reality. We can to a degree create our careers, our relationships, our social success, the quality of our spiritual quest, but these are encompassed by a reality we do not have any control over. Though we can be captains of this "I's" life goals, it is only to a certain extent, for just as the captain of the Titanic was caught in the play of forces having no concern for the success of his voyage, all our goals, ambitions, plans, can be turned topsy-turvy at any moment, an accident, a tumor or disease, a fatal confrontation with a stranger, or even a drastic change in the political-economic climate. While many go through life, pursue their ambitions, gain success, without a ripple of significant disturbance, others fall prey to a variety of tragedy and trauma. Such is the innate random uncertainty underlying the surge of human existence. New Age beliefs such as karma and past lives, "we create our own reality," and guardian angels that hover over a special few like spiritual bodyguards, are attempts to escape the stark reality of the cosmic-terrestrial lottery of fate. Though, as we shall see, there are quite possibly meta-archetypal beings that dwell in transcendent dimensions we could label "angelic," they have little to do with any medieval religious imagery of a popularized sort, and would more likely be of Rilke's "terrifying angel" quality. Contrary to Einstein's statement, "*God does not play dice with the universe,*" we actually are thrown into existence like dice tossed by the "gods." Einstein's statement stems from his religious upbringing, and his fear of what quantum physics would reveal. And yet it was Einstein who said, "*As far as the laws of mathematics refer to reality, they are not certain, and as far as they are certain, they do not refer to reality.*" Again, when pondering the ultimate elements of our existence, contradiction, perplexity, paradox, go with the territory.

The ancient sage Pliny, speaking of Kairos, the Greek god of luck, said, "*We are so much at the mercy of chance that we have made chance our god.*" Of course, the renowned physicist Max Born stated that an unrestricted belief in chance does not recognize the fact that we dwell amid an array of daily regularities and obvious causes creating consistent effects. He claimed even the unpredictability of the activity of subatomic elements is due to our inability to perceive the complex subtlety of that which causes the activity. On the other hand, he also observed that an unrestricted belief in causality produces the mechanistic view that the world is a huge machine and we but expendable parts. Born maintained that nature is ruled by a subtle blend of the laws of cause-and-effect and the laws of chance, which is a very apt and intriguing perception. Gregory Bateson spoke of nature creating fields of random possibility imbued with exquisitely selective purposiveness. Perhaps factors of purposiveness disperse as the profusion of free play increases chance, or could it be vice versa?

Consider the horse races, with all the utilitarian purposive causes which bring about the placement of thoroughbreds into the starting gate: raising colts, training, finding jockeys, etc. It is nearly 100% predictable that they will all leave the gates as the starting gun goes off. But despite the chain of intentional causes, as the race goes forward around the track, predictability is dispersed. Consider the winning of a horse race by a 100-to-1 long shot. A group of highly expert scientists, horsemen, race enthusiasts, veterinarians, etc., would most likely come up with a report entailing a number of very probable causes of why a long shot horse whose chance of winning was

almost nil, won a race against several champion quality horses. They would consider such factors as an exceedingly skilled jockey, expert preparation, diet, care, and perhaps such things as some of the champion horses being handicapped by an unrecognized fever, an ankle strain, a new unfamiliar jockey. Yes, myriad causes could probably be found that possibly enhanced the chances of the long shot winner. And yet each of these enhancements/causes were themselves imbued with elements of chance — of occurring or not occurring according to the random play of unforeseen circumstances. Thus we have Born's subtle blend of cause and chance effecting the outcome of the race.

In competitive sports where two teams compete, preparation, skill, dedication, determination, talent, all combine in one team to a greater degree than the other, enhancing their "chances" to become winners on a certain day. Yet on another day, because of certain changes due to no explicit clear-cut causes, the opposite team wins. Both teams were intensely concentrating on "creating their own reality" of victory. And the winners will believe they did that. But chance comes into it at all times, merging with all intentional factors. Watching a football game involving the Minnesota Vikings versus Tampa Bay, the Viking's receiver went out for a pass, determined to catch the ball, his skill and discipline and talent in full purposive operation, as three huge Tampa Bay defensive players closed tightly in on him. As the whole group of hundreds of pounds of muscle and bones hurtled down the field in a dynamic quartet of concentrated effort, the receiver leapt in the air, stretching his arms above the outstretched arms of the defenders, and with his fingers protruding just inches above this surging sphere of energized flesh, grasped the ball, creating a winning offensive play. I've seen similar plays where a receiver just about to grasp the football is hit, or trips, and the play fails. In football, as in poker, or golf, etc., we can witness the complex play betwixt causality of intentive action and chance/accident. Within the surge of any individual's life, intentions, purposive orientations, all have a certain degree of vulnerability to the random interference of chance — a veteran skydiver's chute becomes tangled in another's; a rock climber is struck by a falling boulder, a student out to get a degree in engineering falls in love with a woman who convinces him to become a hippie. Of course, skill, acute attentiveness, quality of self-knowledge, can make a significant difference when random chance interferes with intentive action. A skillful veteran motorcyclist has more of a chance of surviving a race along a winding road during a sudden rain storm than a novice, because of expertise in reacting to the unexpected, thus having a better chance with chance. And yet, a deer running out of the woods, a tree falling on the road, and the most skillful veteran cyclist dies. Random accident is the offspring of the essential uncertainty of chance that underlies all existence. Captains with many years at sea, caught in a storm, no matter how skilled, went down with their ships. All we can do is set sail toward spiritual awakening, cultivating our seamanship as we go, preparing for whatever storms may arise, being acutely attentive to every pertinent detail relating to our endeavor. One thing is certain — when it comes to spiritual awakening and the dangers of psychic crisis or confrontation with evil, the quality and expansiveness of one's knowledge is a deciding factor as to how one handles the disruption of chance within

the psychic-spiritual ambit, possible unexpected terror, or even chaos of momentary madness. Well honed introspection and acute attentiveness to one's surroundings, including the games people play, plus the ability to remain calm within the chum of fear, all add up to surviving the upheaval of an unexpected paranormal episode. All in all, it's a dance of skill and chance amid the play of possibilities.

The seeker must become strong enough and humble enough to accept that this bewildering conscious life flows through us as briefly and precariously as a candle's flame exposed to an increasing wind. To open oneself to our actual situation ignites a magnificent comprehension of the wondrous and terrifying extensiveness of deeper dimensions of consciousness. Certain esoteric teachings clarify that such comprehension, if expanded and enhanced with determined commitment to varied mental disciplines and yoga techniques, creates the possibility of engendering an after death glow of consciousness — alert and lasting in degree and duration according to the state of one's strivings for spiritual awakening while alive.

The perennial philosophy of spiritual teachings are guideposts, to touch on, understand, catch a sense of direction, and move on. To cling to a guidepost, to establish a static religious stance because it offers safety and comfort, is to obstruct the soul's journey. Only by constantly moving courageously forward in search of the depths, never clinging to the security of what we are sure of, will we find another guidepost further on, to pause and rest for awhile, knowing we will face the darkness of the unknown, even the "nigredo," the dark night of the soul, between one guidepost and the next. Such periods of dark perplexity are portions of the psychological pain which is something every seeker of self-knowledge must deal with, and learn to accept. This spiritual "dark night" doesn't necessarily entail Sartrean nausea or nihilistic despair, for paradoxically, the farther you travel on this journey, if you stay centered in your heart chakra, the more esoterically significant your life becomes — not in the recognizable way of the quotidian world, but with the grace of the meaningful uniqueness of an inner voyager.

It is not vanity to realize the person you are is as unique as your fingerprints, or DNA pattern, or voice, or iris, which all have patterns no other human has. Mentally and physically you are unlike anyone else who has ever lived on the planet earth. But keep in mind, this uniqueness is also true of a slob or a fool, and adds up to little that is meaningful if an individual has no awareness of depth of being. Authentic meaningful uniqueness can only come forth in the paradoxical surrender and victory that imbues an individual life involved in significant spiritual development and challenge. Intentional commitment to alchemical individuation enlarges a person's life, not as a superior ego, but as a spiritually distinctive being of inner wholeness, integrity, and spiritual strength.

The intensely brilliant philosopher, Fredric Nietzsche, said it takes rare inner courage for a person to question his or her convictions and "tear asunder" those found to be false, shallow, or misleading. It is very important to become aware of the power negative habits and inadequate convictions have to stunt our spiritual growth. Only such awareness of the distorting quality of one's convictions will raise a person above

the influence of acculturated illusions and manipulation. The more you are aware of your tendencies to succumb to growth hindering religious symbols, or political manipulations and personal vanities, the greater the inner potential to live an authentic spiritual existence. You have to constantly and thoroughly question yourself, your motives, intentions, goals, self-image, belief system, projections. This is the mulch of self-knowledge. No personal flaw is too small to be acknowledged. Overcoming minor temptations is a significant element of inner development. For if banal temptations haven't been conquered, greater temptations will prove overpowering. As D. T. Suzuki stated, the way is strewn with obstacles of all sorts, and the seeker must develop a unique sense of moral integrity in order to prevail. The noble truths taught by authentic spiritual teachers are invaluable in honing such integrity.

Let your cosmic insignificance and your coming death be your constant companions as you walk amid the wild wonder of it all. This has nothing to do with the escapism of satiated Epicureanism — *“eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we may die.”* To walk in wonder means to live intelligently, conscious of the precarious immensity of life, striving to conquer the ego's addictive needs, its games of vanity, and the clinging to delusive beliefs. We are here on this strange global ark called earth, sailing through the cosmos, conscious for a brief sixty or eighty or hundred years out of the aeons that have been and shall come. We do not know where we came from, and we do not know what lies beyond death. All we know is that during this brief existence, which can end any moment, we have an opportunity to experience reality to our utmost by developing our minds and spiritual potential, and perhaps, just perhaps, create a conscious intensity that catches a glimpse of the redeeming meaning of our strange wondrous journey.