

Chapter 6. The Spiritual Atheist

Religious spirituality, and its moral dictates, are fairly straightforward, with well established guidelines for interpretation. But for the substantial minority of agnostics and atheists, what are the guidelines for developing spirituality and morality, or meaning and purpose in life? You perhaps know what you don't believe in, but not necessarily what you do believe in. More importantly, without religion, you may not have the rituals or practices needed to implement your spirituality. You might say that the atheistic/agnostic population is underserved, and sometimes quite confused, when it comes to spiritual development. We will therefore take a good bit of time in addressing atheistic spiritual issues.

Okay, as a starting point, you have a handful of solid, rational objections to belief in gods and other spirits, and we will acknowledge them. A little further on, however, I will become more interested in what you do believe in than what you don't believe in, more focused on spiritual practices than beliefs, and more interested in respecting others' beliefs than tearing them down. Beliefs are substitutes for facts. When pushed upon others, they lead to alienation and warfare. Ideological sparring separates us from one another, while spiritual practices enrich and connect us. A focus on our commonalities, rather than our differences, provides us with a more connecting way of thinking. Nonetheless, I understand that you have probably been ridiculed and shamed for your beliefs, and pushed vigorously to think differently by those around you. With no offense intended toward the theists who may be reading, for their faith is strong enough to withstand objections, the atheists amongst you may need a brief spotlight on your objections to mainstream religious thought before we move on to more productive discussions. You have a right to object to the way that you are treated in the more dogmatic, conservative circles of the Christian world, but you might perhaps be careful not to return the disfavor. As we saw in our chapter on anger, there is power in forgiveness. Through forgiveness, we are able to move beyond the confines of our anger and alienation, toward a more connected stance.

But you certainly have a right to feel angry. "Atheist" is a pejorative term, which in the religious world, is roughly akin to "nigger" in racist circles. It is an accusation, an exclusion, a statement of who you are not, a declaration that you do not belong. Atheism literally means non-theist,

a nonbeliever of God, though its connotation is much worse. It is a term coined by theists to describe you as someone who is lacking, a miscreant. If atheists ruled the world of language, they may have conjured up equally pejorative language, perhaps referring to themselves as “thinkers,” and theists as “athinkers.” Your anger is justified by the discrimination that spawned it. Do African Americans have a right to be angry regarding the enslavement of their ancestors and the declining but still obvious racial discrimination which has followed in the last fifteen decades? Do American Indians have a right to be angry regarding the violent theft of their lands and the destruction of their culture? Do gays and lesbians have a right to be angry over being called queer, ungodly, or sick and perverted, while being denied civil rights such as marriage? And do atheists have a right to be angry over being called immoral heathens, as if religion has a monopoly on morality, and told they are destined to be punished via eternal hellfire for their wayward beliefs? Of course you have a right to be angry. Healthy anger involves a response to injustice, and the far right wing edge of the politico-religious spectrum is quite prejudiced and promotes discrimination against all of the above outgroups. The question is not whether you have a right to be angry, but what you choose to do with it. Karen Horney described three social orientations: moving toward, against, or away from others. Anger, by its very nature, is alienating, as it involves a “me against you” feeling over something I perceive you have done against me. Spirituality, on the other hand, is about connecting, moving toward and being with others and the environment, focusing on commonalities and connectedness rather than differences. How are we to move toward, and be with, if we are moving against? You can try to do both, but spirituality, in the connecting (or even the more traditional religious) sense of the term, is much easier once we have allowed forgiveness, acceptance, or some other means of resolving our anger against others, so we can focus on connectedness and community (commonality, common unity) rather than alienation. Love is the antithesis of anger. We all aspire to mutual, safe love, as it connects us, intimately, in much the same way that we were originally connected to our mothers, or at least hoped to be. Love connects; anger disconnects. Anger may be a necessary and even appropriate step on your path, but it is bankrupt as an endpoint. Resolve it as best you can, and move on to more fertile fields where you can connect, via spirituality, love, and acceptance of self, others, and the reality that is. As I write this, a

message arrives from the depths of my mind, from 1969 specifically, reflecting both the spiritual power of music in general, and the healing power of compassion and forgiveness. Graeme Edge of the Moody Blues wrote a song which arrested my consciousness at age 19, and captures the essence of the above message far more eloquently than my own attempts. I include it at the end of this chapter, to end on an uplifting note, but feel free to peek ahead.

As we have seen on the more alienated plane (note your difference in mood as we again transition between these two perspectives), the term “atheist” is a pejorative term, created by the ingroup to describe what you are lacking (theism), designed to implicitly devalue the outgroup, in the same vein as “nigger,” “redskin,” and “queer.” We are talking about identity here, and the attempt to shame you, to undermine your identity, to banish you from the community, or at least silence you. This you must resist, vigorously. You must forge your own identity. You may prefer a term which identifies who you are, rather than who you are not, such as “secularist,” or “secular humanist.” Even the “humanist” part may be too anthropocentric for your taste, focusing excessively on the human portion of our vast universe. Perhaps because atheists vary so much in what they do believe, there may not be a single term which captures the essence of a nonreligious person who has developed his or her own system of ethics, spirituality, meaning and purpose, cosmology, and self soothing techniques. Regardless of your moniker, these creations are your own responsibility in the absence of a divine creator.

As an atheist on a planet full of theists, you have likely arrived at your atheistic destination via one of three routes, with or without the support of your parents and significant others. Perhaps the spiritual dimension was not particularly salient in your supportive family, and you gravitated naturally toward an agnostic position, in which you left the origins of our universe up in the air, without investing much energy into determining whether a theistic or atheistic orientation best fits the facts. Perhaps you moved toward atheism with the support of those who believed likewise, but encouraged spiritual connectedness in other ways, guiding you toward development of a nonreligious form of spirituality. Or perhaps your atheism contradicts the beliefs of your parents, but you were encouraged to be a free thinker. In any of these scenarios, opposition and rebellion were largely unnecessary in the development of your atheism within your family. If so, you are fortunate, but you still face the daunting task of developing your own

meaning and purpose, morality, and spirituality in the absence of the divine version.

For some of you, religion was an early source of comfort, but trauma and loss interrupted your path. Perhaps you lost a parent at an early age, were sexually abused by a close and trusted relative, or suffered some other massive assault on your security, safety, or trust in the world. You wondered how a loving God could permit such atrocities upon His beloved children, and thus came to question His very existence. Or perhaps you just looked at the myriad injustices in the world, even if they hadn't directly touched you yet, and questioned whether the existence of God is compatible with such injustice. Some of you may have found a way around this dilemma, by concluding that God simply sets the world in motion, and allows it to unfold via the free will and actions of each person in His dominion. You reasoned that in this view of the divine, God is not a micromanager who constantly monitors and approves the millions of daily events in the world, and is therefore not responsible for the human damage caused by its disasters and injustices. But for others, this argument doesn't hold water, and an all knowing, all loving God cannot escape responsibility for what He allows to take place in the world. A loving God would not permit such atrocious violations of love, and therefore cannot exist.

For still others, atheism within your religious family was considered heresy, perhaps even a capitulation to evil, a wholesale rejection of the sole truth, of the only path to salvation. Under such conditions, considerable pressure was likely exerted, perhaps by otherwise supportive parents, to redirect your wayward path. Or perhaps your family was not supportive at all, and in the course of your opposition to their control, you questioned their dogmatic religious beliefs along with everything else. In this case, your atheism may be steeped in rebellion, as you battled against the ultimate authority, God, in the course of your rebellion against the parental authorities who stifled the development of your autonomy and identity. Such rebellion and opposition may have been necessary for you to achieve autonomy within such a controlling family structure, but the side effect may be an overall oppositional focus on what you are against, without due consideration of what you stand for.

Atheism is not a belief system; it is a statement of what you DO NOT believe. You still have to develop your own notion of what you DO believe in, as well as your own morality and spirituality. Without a God

given moral code, you face the task of developing your own set of ethical principles for your conscience to operate within. Otherwise you are rudderless morally. And without spirits guiding your spirituality, you must rely on other forms of connectedness, lest your oppositional stance leaves you as disconnected and alienated in your adult world as you perhaps were as an adolescent rebel in your family. If your atheism sprouted within the confines of a dogmatic, controlling family, you are likely to go through three stages in your spiritual development. At first, in a dependent child position, you swallow your parents dogma whole. Then, when rebellion was necessary as a means of developing your autonomy in adolescence, your atheism was likely energized by your overall rebellious spirit, becoming the cognitive flank of your rebellion. But opposition has its drawbacks as well, and as a young adult, you may still find yourself moving against rather than toward, leaving you largely disconnected, isolated, or alienated from the world around you. In this third stage, you seek connectedness, and realize perhaps that spirituality is about connectedness, through spirits for some, but not necessarily. How will you establish this connectedness for yourself? Perhaps you are reading this chapter because you find yourself stuck at the end of the second, essentially adolescent stage, or in need of some skills even after passing into the third, more mature stage of identity, which embraces who you are more than who you are not.

At this stage in your development, your rational arguments against religious beliefs in a god or creator may be well developed, and manifold. We will take a few pages to review some of them briefly, but refer interested parties to other writers who are more interested in the truth or falsity of such beliefs, while we go on to focus more on spiritual practices. Richard Dawkins' book, *The God Delusion*, Christopher Hitchens' *God is Not Great*, or Mick Power's *Adieu to God* may be good starting points if you wish to explore atheistic thinking regarding religious dogma in more detail. We will selectively cite four such arguments, and then proceed to the more important issues of what you DO believe in, and how to construct alternative spirituality, morality, meaning and purpose in life.

First of all, what actual evidence do we have that consciousness exists independently of matter? If God is supposed to be pure spirit, then this question certainly relevant. From one angle, we can view the universe as having two primary components, matter and consciousness (alternatively, you might also cite energy, or life itself). Matter is the

substance of the physical world, the particles of reality, whereas consciousness is awareness of the world. We know that matter exists in the absence of consciousness, e.g., a rock, but we debate whether consciousness exists independently of matter, e.g., God and ghosts. Likewise, from one perspective, there are two ways of dealing with the world, operating and being. We can operate upon the world, by driving the car, fixing the sprinkler, eating the broccoli, etc., without awareness that we are in the process of doing so, i.e., without mindfulness in modern parlance. That is, we can be aware of the taste and crunchiness of the broccoli, without self-awareness of being in the act of eating the broccoli. We can be aware of, but we can also be unaware of this awareness at any given moment. When we simply be, we operate on the world, by sensing and perceiving, thinking about, feeling some way about, or behaving within or upon the world, without focusing on our own presence in the world while doing so. We are conscious, but not conscious of our consciousness. Or we can also be aware of and observe our process of being in the world, which opens up a more spiritual dimension, an awareness of our spirit or consciousness functioning within the physical world. Developing your capacity for consciousness is important, as is taking good care of your material existence, your body. But there is still no substantial evidence that consciousness exists independently of matter, beyond the confines of material life. As Power notes, consciousness is an emergent property of increasingly complex brains. The problem is that we do not yet understand how consciousness sprang forth from its neuronal underpinnings. In this scientific gap, religion can sprout the notion that consciousness exists independently of (grey) matter, and is a function of the soul, which is supposedly indestructible, thereby conveniently providing us with spiritual immortality (though the soul is also conveniently invisible, and therefore untestable). Spirits, ghosts, and gods are active within our imagination, and sometimes close to our hearts, but to date, have no empirical support. We have no solid, irrefutable evidence of their existence, and it is difficult to prove the nonexistence of anything, especially creatures or entities, like gods and souls, which supposedly have the power of invisibility.

Secondly, you object to the notion of creation itself. How can something emerge out of nothingness? This proposition violates the basic, accepted laws of physics. How did the universe come into being? Our religious friends tell us that God created the universe. But who

created God? God the grandfather? God simply adds another layer of creation. God the grandfather would add another layer, and so on, but somehow the craziness of this additional baggage, and the fact that it does not explain anything new, does not get applied to the first superfluous layer, God himself. It would be more parsimonious to simply say that the universe always existed. But how did it get here? Perhaps it always was, but this also boggles the mind, leaving us contemplating the mysteries of infinity in time and space. In our experience, something always comes before and after something else. How can there be a starting point in time, without something one moment, one month, or one eon before it? How was the Big Bang ignited, and who or what ignited the igniter? Infinity in space is just as discombobulating. How can the universe go on and on, ad infinitum, yet if it stops with a brick wall, what does the other side of the brick look like? While we prize the size of our frontal lobes compared to our competitors on this planet, they remain too puny to answer such questions. Either we rely on faith for an answer, like our religious friends, or we suspend the subject as a beautiful mystery and become agnostics (non-knowers) on the subject.

Thirdly, you object to the primacy of human beings within the religious order. Some religious zealots accuse you of being a narcissist, of usurping the place of God in the universe, without due humility. You argue back that despite their humility at the foot of God, it is quite narcissistic to view humanity, amongst all life forms, as God's pet species, so special that both our immediate universe, as well as a blissful afterlife, were created by God solely for our benefit. This is anthropocentrism cubed. What is anthropocentrism? Anthropocentrism (Chandler, 1977) is an ideological stance that posits man as the most important entity in the natural world, and cites the well being of humanity as the ultimate purpose of the universe. It is a subjective statement of value, the central value of humanity, sanctioned by God, who created man in His own vision. Or, you say, was it man who created God in his own image, to narcissistically bathe in our own glory? Until Copernicus, our anthropocentric cosmology delusionally insisted that Earth was placed at the center of the universe, no doubt reflecting God's view of the importance of humanity. Despite the emerging science, it seemed to take forever to let go of the geocentric, and finally the heliocentric model of the universe. In between, for awhile at least, our sun (identity as a species) was still the center of the universe, allowing

us to maintain a death grip on this cosmological cornerstone of anthropocentrism. Okay, so now we're nowhere near the center of the universe, but just a speck in one of billions of galaxies. But at least we're the only harbor for life in the universe. Right? So of course, the scientists want to take that away too, so other planets are now considered capable of supporting life. What is this world coming to?

And then there was Darwin. Evolutionary theory and science are not so much a threat to religion as they are a threat to anthropocentrism. Both astronomy and evolution can be reconciled with theology if you are willing to say that God created the Big Bang and set the evolutionary process in motion. But no, this is not good enough, for without creationism, man was not initially created by God as the center point and purpose of the universe. Surely man came first, either literally in the Garden of Eden or otherwise, with the rest of creation designed solely for man's benefit. And note the animal/man dualism inherent in the anthropocentric stance of Christianity. There are plants and animals, and then there is man. Supposedly, man is not an animal. Humans and animals are separate categories. Man is not a civilized animal who evolved from other animals and developed civilization to mute his more animalistic tendencies. No, man was created separately from animals from the start, and intentionally placed by God in a superior position, as the master, or at least the steward of the natural world. Since the rest of creation is designed for our benefit, exploitation of the planet is easily rationalized. Some religions are far less anthropocentric than Christianity. Native American traditions, and most eastern religions, have a more balanced view of the importance of man versus the rest of the environment, and more environmental spirituality. And while we're in the neighborhood, why would a loving God create a universe in which species had to kill and consume other species in order to survive?

Beyond this man-centeredness there is an additional layer of male-centeredness. The women amongst us might also note that the Bible, the document which enshrines a male as the one and only God, and largely endorses female submission to male domination, was written by men 2000 years ago. Is this really just a massive coincidence? As Power has noted, male dominated monotheisms are anachronisms which have outlived the patriarchal and feudal god-king social structures that produced them. In our era of increasing gender equality, such monotheisms undervalue the feminine, which previously

dominated the fertility focused early agricultural era. How long will it be before feminist rebellion against male control gains a foothold in the supernatural arena, resulting in the evolution of a more gender neutral god? The problem is that as creators of God, we seek an all loving, protective parent who is focused, like the ideal mother, only on our infantile needs. But we aspire to two ideal parents, a mother as well as a father. For nurturance, a mother is preferable, for protection, perhaps a father, and for male leaders to enforce societal patriarchy, certainly a father. But we are unlikely to return to polytheism, which would allow equal standing for God the Father and God the Mother. If there is only room for one god, the only resolution to the escalating societal gender battle is a single androgynous or inkblot god. The point here is that from an atheistic standpoint, human narcissism led mankind to create a god in our own image, for our own earthly and eternal gratification; and with the emergence of large, centralized, patriarchal societies, men were in the driver's seat as far as intelligent design of the supernatural world. Yes, you say, there is room for intelligent design of the universe!

Fourthly, you maintain that religion is based on emotional reasoning, that needs and wishes create religious beliefs more than reason and evidence. The epitome of this wish fulfillment is immortality. The most central fact of life is death. We enjoy being, and fear nonbeing. Our death anxiety is evident in everything from black birthday balloons to heaven. You argue that the notion of an afterlife is a product of mass psychosis, attempting to massively bend reality in order to deny death. You note that immortality in itself is not good enough, but that this delusion requires blissful immortality. You likewise note the wide variety of emotional needs met by belief in God, specifically the need for meaning and purpose in life, moral guidance, spiritual connectedness, a benign father figure bestowing unconditional love, a comforting explanation for the loss of a loved one when overcome with grief, some type of karma in which good deeds are eventually rewarded and bad deeds are punished, etc. You suggest that some such things are simply too good to be true, and that religious beliefs are generated more by need and wish fulfillment than by rational, empirical evidence.

All of this may be true. Or not. If not, God is certainly laughing heartily at this very moment. But if so, you still do not have a belief system. All you have is an objection system, a series of arguments against someone else's beliefs. As is true elsewhere in our world, it is easier to destroy than to create. As an atheist, or secularist if you prefer,

there is still a need for you to create a half-dozen or so systems in order to meet your needs. These include 1) a cosmology to explain the origins of the universe and of life itself, as well as a perspective on man's place in the universe, 2) a personalized set of moral values to guide your behavior in the absence of objective, divinely inspired ethics, 3) spirituality, a means of feeling connected to the world around you in the absence of spirits, 4) a means of self soothing if God is not an ever present wing mate to soothe and comfort you, 5) a robust social life in the absence of the fellowship of a religious community, and 6) a worldview to provide you with meaning and purpose in life in the absence of God-given purpose. It is up to you to create each of these systems. Otherwise, your atheism is little more than a late adolescent statement of who you are not. It is an oppositional identity, not an affirmative identity. Without God, you have the burden, the responsibility, or if you prefer, the opportunity to create each of the above tools to meet your needs. Let's look at each in turn.

As we noted above, we can acknowledge our intellectual inadequacy and adopt an agnostic stance regarding cosmology, accepting the origin of the universe as a beautiful mystery enshrouded in the complexities of infinity in time and space. As for man's place in the universe, our increasing control over our planet does not mean that we are the most important species. Some religions, such as Christianity, are far more anthropocentric than others; they place humanity just one step below God, appointed as a steward for all other species. Other religions display more reverence for other life forms, although all attempt in their own way to show reverence for life itself, at least until competition erupts between life forms. One might question why a loving God would create a universe in which species must destroy and consume each other in order to survive. Moreover, as noted above, why would an omnipotent and all loving God create cataclysms and other misfortunes which torture or destroy His children? From your atheistic perspective, this combination is unfathomable, and these are just additional major dents in the religious belief system. In an agnostic cosmology, we accept the world as it is, and accept the rules of the game, consuming other species in order to survive, while attempting, like our American Indian ancestors, to show reverence for them. Evolutionary theory, despite its own limitations, provides us with some evidence and enlightenment regarding our origins in less complex life forms, while biochemistry explores the mechanisms and requirements for non-divine

creation of life. Scientific investigation continues, while we work on our tolerance for ambiguity. Acceptance of the lack of sufficient answers trumps belief in a bad answer.

Turning to morality, religion does not have a monopoly on ethics. Any rudimentary analysis finds abundant evidence that we are innately capable of developing a conscience, a system of beliefs regarding right and wrong behavior. As an atheist, you may object to the religious notion that right and wrong are the central dimension, or even central properties of the universe. You may view morality as a product of consciousness, which does not exist independently of either the mind, or the material system which is required for the mind to operate, i.e., the brain. In the absence of evidence for objective, divinely inspired ethics, you may argue that all ethics are subjective, and therefore have no objective basis in reality, no moral imperative. If this is the case, why not do whatever you want? This view ignores the human capacity to develop a conscience, and to develop interpersonal agreement regarding a shared code of conduct. Yes, if there is no God, and no objective ethics, you will not receive eternal consequences for your behavior, and are thus freer to do as you choose. But there are other consequences for such a choice, both interpersonal and intrapersonal. Socially, karma certainly applies in a rough kind of way. What goes around comes around, and even though you may get away with a specific behavior at a given time, your behavior will eventually generate social consequences. A sort of natural law applies. And intrapersonally, even the most sociopathic individuals experience pangs of conscience some of the time. If there is no objective moral imperative, you are faced with the task of developing your own subjective ethical guidelines, and the responsibility to monitor your behavior for compliance which your conscience, if you are to minimize guilt and maintain self-esteem. Without objective ethics, we are also faced with the dilemma of how to judge others' behavior. If ethics are subjective, why should anyone else be expected to follow your moral values, or the shared moral values of a society? Perhaps it is best to apply our own moral values only to our own behavior, and reduce our frustration by not expecting others to do the same, even if we do create laws to codify our social expectations and the consequences of violating them. Listen to and follow your conscience. Even without divine inspiration, it is plenty robust enough to meet your need for moral integrity.

Spirituality and religion are not synonymous. Religion is the most popular form of spirituality, and encompasses many different faiths. Spirituality is a broader concept, which includes religion and other methods of connecting to something or someone greater than oneself. Spirituality can be about spirits, but is always about connectedness. The concept of a “Higher Power” is utilized in AA in order to provide a large tent which invites members of all religious faiths, as well as nonreligious individuals, to enrich their spirituality and connectedness, as an antidote to the self-centeredness and alienation which often accompany addictions. Indeed, we have argued that one perspective on mental health is that healthy psychological functioning involves both internal and external connectedness, as opposed to alienation from both oneself and the external world. In addition to internally accepting and loving/nurturing oneself, healthy mental functioning requires external connectedness, including healthy social and family relationships, as well as a meaningful attachment to something or someone greater than oneself. This could be a supreme being, or alternatively, attachment to a group of humans such as your family, or to life, the universe, or the power of an idea, essentially any concept which allows one to attach to and invest in something larger than oneself. Thus, one could believe in and promote the well-being of all life, or humanity, animals, forests and the natural environment, one’s family, gender or race, the power of love, equality and human rights, the word of God, etc. The list is endless, and includes attachment to both conscious beings as well as non-conscious physical entities and ideas. Thus, spirituality does not necessarily have to involve the “spirits,” or attachment to other earthly or supernatural beings who share our capacity for consciousness, though most forms of spirituality do so. For the purpose of healthy mental functioning, the goal is to develop some type of spiritual connectedness, as a means of counteracting the destructive power of self-centeredness, cynicism, and alienation from our surroundings. Ponder on the most important forms of your external connectedness, and set aside adequate time to pursue and enrich them.

Spirituality is also about consciousness. What exactly is a “spirit?” It is a manifestation of consciousness. Whether we connect with God, the spirit of a lost loved one, the shared consciousness of the human spirit, or life itself, we are connecting our experience of ourselves with the consciousness or spirit of an external entity. Spirits are conscious entities. Spirituality involves shared consciousness. You may object that

nonliving entities, such as deceased loved ones, and trees or rocks, do not possess the power of consciousness. There is no evidence for the existence of consciousness in the absence of matter. While this may well be true, it misses the point. If we are seeking spirituality, we are seeking connectedness. If we allow ourselves to experience shared consciousness with other entities, we connect with them. They need not be conscious themselves for us to do so. To connect with your deceased grandmother, she need not be conscious herself. But you do need to connect with your memory of her essence, and your past experience of shared consciousness with her. If you believe, like your religious friends, that she retains consciousness after death, you may find it easier to connect with her. But if not, you can still connect with the essence of her being, and the beauty of your relationship with her. And while a tree may not possess consciousness in the usual sense of the term, you can still connect with its being, the wonder and beauty of its existence, and your shared capacity to experience the gift of life. You can likewise enjoy a snow capped mountain, or a galaxy sharing its light through the dark of night, celebrating your shared existence in this vast universe, even if these entities are not conscious or do not possess life as we define it. Spirituality is about sharing, whether we share consciousness, reexperience co-consciousness from the past, or share the wonders of life or simple existence and being in the world. There are major differences between being, living, and consciously experiencing, but we can celebrate all three, using our awareness or consciousness of each to enrich our spirituality.

Environmental spirituality is one form of spirituality which is shared between theists and atheists. While those of faith frame their environmental spirituality as awe regarding God's creation, and tend to see humans as rightful stewards of this environment, atheists certainly find themselves capable of such awe themselves. Some atheists are pantheists, perhaps without realizing it. At the core of pantheism we find reverence for the universe (versus reverence for God in theism), as the ultimate focus of reverence. Wonderment regarding the intricacies of the veins of the leaf, the ability of the sun to warm us from 93,000,000 miles away, the beauty and physics of the galaxies, the complexity of the human body or the unending variations in the structure of snowflakes leave each of us awestruck. It helps to take time to be mindful of these wonders around us. In our goal directed lifestyles, it is easy to be mindlessly lost in the future, hurrying toward our next goal, as we race

through traffic, oblivious to the way that the late afternoon light and shadows play upon the Spanish moss hanging from the oak trees along the way. As the old saying goes, life happens while you're planning other things. And as we noted during our previous discussions of mindfulness, taking time to be here, now, and take in the gifts around us allows us to both count our blessings and feel connected to the world we live in.

Take some time to touch base with your capacity for environmental awe. Play with the following exercises. Next time you watch a sunset, don't just watch the sun gradually drop below the horizon. Feel the earth rotating backward, away from the sun, while feeling the enormous distance between Earth and the sun. Experience the power of the sun, as it warms us and sustains our lives from such a vast distance. Likewise, next time you have clear skies at night, lay on your back and gaze at the universe. Pick out two stars, one brighter than the one next to it. Imagine that they are equally far from you, with the brighter one being much larger. Now imagine that they are of equal size, with the brighter one being much closer to you. And finally, imagine that the brighter "star" is much further away than the dimmer star, but is actually a huge galaxy. Feel the immensity of our three dimensional universe, not just a two dimensional ceiling with stars painted on it. By daytime, as you look at the person across from you, feel the substance of the air between yourself and the other person. The space between you is full of nitrogen and oxygen, substance not nothingness. Experiencing three dimensional space helps you be mindful of your presence in the universe, and activates your environmental spirituality.

For those of religious faith, God is an incredible resource for soothing oneself in times of loneliness or other forms of emotional distress, and for guidance. If you reject theism, it is incumbent upon you to learn how to soothe and guide yourself. One way of looking at this issue is to distinguish between a higher power and a "higher parent." From an atheistic perspective, religion involves a projection of our own talents and capacity for goodness into a godhead, while projecting our moral failings into a devil figure. Prayer is simply a projection of one's higher parent, allowing one to invent and rely upon an external, infallible source of wisdom when one has difficulty accessing the wise part of oneself. From this viewpoint, prayer provides an unwitting access to internal wisdom, disguised as divine guidance. From this

secular perspective, we have all that we need within us to produce moral or immoral behavior, to soothe ourselves when distressed, or to access our wisdom when facing difficult decisions or dilemmas. We do not have to be vigilant for devils or demons, we simply need to remain aware of our own moral values, and alert to natural temptations to skirt them. We do not have to pray to God for guidance, or for his love to soothe us, but rather, we need to develop our capacity to get in touch with the healthiest part of ourselves. As we saw in our chapter on inner child work, the “higher parent” is a term we can use to describe the healthiest, wise, loving part of ourselves. While it is easy to temporarily lose sight of our higher self, via excessive preoccupation with our immediate needs and desires, or excessive defensive reactivity, our wise, loving, and moral higher self is always available. Learning how to access it is the key. I refer you to our chapter on inner child work for detailed explanations of how to access these internal resources. From a religious perspective, one's higher power, God, not only speaks to us directly, but also divinely inspires and promotes our connection with our higher self. From an atheistic perspective, God is once again excessive baggage in the equation, as we can activate the healthiest part of ourselves directly. To the extent that we fail to do so, via either faith in an external God, or via internal connectedness, we inadvertently short-circuit our potential for wise choices, moral integrity, and emotional self-soothing.

Religious individuals also have the advantage of the social connectedness and fellowship that they experience amongst their fellow believers in church. Atheists are far less organized, in part because their morality and spirituality are far less systematized, and typically are not pursued within a community atmosphere. We are a very interdependent and social species, and must take initiative to develop and maintain social connectedness, lest we become isolated and alienated. In the absence of religious fellowship, increased initiative is necessary in other social domains. An active social and family life is helpful in meeting the need for social connectedness, though involvement in community groups, whether they be volunteer groups promoting a shared cause, or a group sharing a leisure pursuit, is also beneficial.

Which brings us to meaning and purpose in life. As I bounced between majors during my sophomore and junior years of college at Marquette University, seeking career direction, I took my introductory psychology course during the second semester of my junior year. By the end of the first month of this class, I knew that I had found my calling. I

took nothing but psychology and philosophy classes during that summer and in my senior year, including a fascinating course on existentialist philosophy. This in turn introduced me to what was then the third force in psychology, beside psychoanalysis and behaviorism, namely, existentialist psychology. There were two books which I found very useful at that stage of my life, when meaning and purpose were both central to my identity transition, and part of the zeitgeist of the times. *Man's Search for Himself*, by Rollo May, and *Man's Search for Meaning*, by Viktor Frankel. Those two books served me well, and I still recommend them four decades later. If you can tolerate your death anxiety long enough to imagine yourself one hour from your death, looking back upon your life, you will no doubt want to be able to say that your life and relationships were meaningful, and that your life had purpose. This goes for all of us, but death anxiety infuses life with extra meaning for atheists, who believe that this is not a dress rehearsal for a better afterlife to come. If your purpose does not primarily involve serving God, or reserving your place amongst your loved ones in heaven, then the burden is solely upon you to discover what is meaningful to you, and what purposes lead you toward self-actualization. While existentialist psychology is not as prominent now as in the past, you may find the writings within this camp quite useful when exploring issues relating to meaning, purpose, and identity.

Another tradition was also popular during my formative years as a future psychologist in the early 70s. Eastern religious thought, particularly Buddhism and Taoism, were making their way into Western culture, along with meditation practices. These were welcome excursions for my questioning and curious mind, and have been supplemented in recent years by the current emphasis in psychology upon mindfulness, a practice which we have visited previously. There are a host of meditation exercises which you can explore and practice, as a way of calming your mind and cultivating your capacity to be at peace in the present. Transcendental meditation has been popularized in the States since the 60s, but one can also access myriad other forms of meditation, and organize them in various ways. Some distinguish between “mindless” meditation, whose aim is a state of pure being or consciousness, and “mind focused” meditation practices, which focus upon the nature of consciousness rather than moving beyond the content of consciousness. For example, concentration and visualization meditations involve the control and guidance of consciousness for

specific purposes. Mindfulness meditations emphasize an awareness of oneself in the process of observing the objects of one's consciousness. There are literally hundreds of types of meditation available, and one can start anywhere, pursuing distinctions between practices later. Other practices involve a simultaneous focus upon both mind and body, involving both physical movement and breathing techniques, such as yoga and tai chi. The word "yoga" comes from the Sanskrit root, "yuj," meaning to yoke the spirit and physical body together. It is a mind/body practice which combines stretching exercises, controlled breathing, and relaxation in order to create inner peace. Like meditation, there are many forms of yoga for you to sample before finding one that feels best for your body and mind. Hatha yoga is often recommended for stress management, and is sometimes preferred by beginners because of its slower pace and less challenging movements. Sometimes described as meditation in motion, tai chi is a form of exercise performed in a graceful, slow, and focused manner, accompanied by deep breathing.

Using the term "meditation" in a different way, there are also various pocketbooks available which focus upon daily meditations, which can be an excellent way to center yourself as you start and end your day. In a different direction, the literature on mindfulness has exploded in recent years. My first introduction was *Be Here Now* by Baba Ram Dass (previously Richard Alpert), in 1971, but my attention shifted elsewhere until I discovered *The Way Beyond*, by a local professor, William Mikulas, a decade ago. This small book captures the essence of Eastern spiritual practices quite well, including meditation and mindfulness, and is a good starting point if you are seeking the benefits of spiritual practices without the spirits. Likewise, Ronald Siegel's *The Mindfulness Solution* is an excellent and more comprehensive introduction to mindfulness. But just what is the attraction of this concept and practice? First of all, as an atheist, prayer is not an option for you, as it requires reliance upon a deity which you do not believe in. Meditation and mindfulness require no such external focus, but rather, an internal focus upon consciousness. They are far more focused upon spiritual practice than beliefs. Secondly, there are myriad exercises available which specifically teach you how to pursue various meditation and mindfulness practices.

As Siegel notes, at its core, mindfulness involves a focus upon the present moment, allowing you to be here, now, and smell the roses of life, rather than dwelling on the past or planning the future. Not that the

past or future are irrelevant, but in our goal directed Western society, by necessity, we learn as young children to look forward, only to find ourselves gradually losing the natural wonders of play in the present. We become all too prone to sadness as we dwell upon losses in the past, and anxiety as we contemplate threats in the future. Mindfulness practices teach us to being mindful of, rather than mindless regarding our consciousness and its components: sensations, perceptions, thoughts, feelings, impulses, etc. In addition to focusing us on the moment to moment richness of life, mindfulness also teaches us to experience rather than evaluate and judge these experiences. Rather than operating out of the pleasure principle, whereby we constantly try to seek out and maximize pleasure while minimizing and avoiding pain, we notice and experience each. As we have seen during our discussions of mindfulness as an antidote to both anxiety and depression, embracing rather than running from the ups and downs of life ultimately renders our distressing moments more tolerable, and less likely to escalate into full-blown anxiety and avoidance behavior, or severe depression. Thus, mindfulness involves both an embrace of the present moment, and a radical acceptance and experience of who you are and what you feel any given moment. And in line with our discussion of integration, mindfulness allows you to be more whole as a person, as you are less inclined to disown your distressing feelings and experiences. It is more of a coping mechanism than a defense, in that practicing tolerance for immediate negative experiences eventually yields more satisfaction, whereas disowning, avoiding, dissociating, or distracting yourself from momentary negative feelings leads you to accumulated and carry them, reinforcing avoidance behaviors which maintain them. But I digress. My main point regarding mindfulness as well as meditation practices in this chapter is to point you toward daily exercises which you can use to calm and soothe yourself. Like the inner child work which we discussed previously, these practices require introspection, an internal focus upon consciousness, and your relationship with yourself, rather than an external focus upon a deity.

If you focus more on these practices, and less upon disputes regarding beliefs, I believe that you will find yourself more connected to and at peace with yourself. And if you allow others to find their own way, even if it is different from your own, rather than bickering regarding unverifiable "truth," I believe you will find yourself less

alienated, and more at peace with your brethren, as we each seek our own path through our struggles.

As we finish, let us return to the spiritual power of music. Music has been called the language of the soul, and regardless of your beliefs, music is one of the most emotional, powerful gateways to your spiritual being. Seek out and discover your own spiritual music, whether it be flutes from the Andean mountains (or those of my local psychologist colleague, Michael DeMaria at ontos.org), the Irish spirit of Enya, psalms sung in unity from Christian pews, the more raucous, collective joy of an African American church, or perhaps an echo from my youth, Graeme Edge of the Moody Blues, singing The Balance, from A Question of Balance in 1970:

...And he saw the tree above him,
And the stars,
And the veins in the leaf,
And the light,
And the balance.

And he saw magnificent perfection.
Whereupon, he thought of himself in balance,
And he knew he was...

...And he thought of those he angered,
For he was not a violent man,
And he thought of those he hurt
For he was not a cruel man,
And he thought of those he frightened
For he was not an evil man,
And he understood.
He understood himself.
Upon this he saw that when he was of anger,
or knew hurt, or felt fear,
It was because he was not understanding,
And he learned, compassion.

And with this eye of compassion,
He saw his enemies like unto himself,
And he learned love.

Then he was answered...