

THE STORY OF OUR TIME



FROM DUALITY
TO INTERCONNECTEDNESS
TO ONENESS

Robert Atkinson



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PART ONE

THE NATURE OF CONSCIOUSNESS

*The major problems in the world are the result of the difference
between the way nature works and the way people think.*

Gregory Bateson

*Learn to see God in the details of your life,
for He is everywhere...
Let nothing disturb you. Let nothing worry you.
Everything is passing away. Only God is changeless. God alone suffices.*

St. Teresa of Avila

*Our present world is conditioned by our present mode of consciousness;
only when that consciousness passes from its present dualistic mode
conditioned by time and space will the new creation appear,
which is the eternal reality of which our world is a mirror.*

Bede Griffiths

Principle 1

Consciousness is a potentiality set in motion by an organic process.

As biological development is designed to unfold in degrees and stages, transcending its own seeming limits, so too is our evolving consciousness. Yet, even as a divinely endowed capacity for seeing beyond the seen, and understanding beyond the understood, the fulfillment of consciousness is not guaranteed.

The potentiality of consciousness is wholly dependent upon the initiative taken to actively investigate reality. Consciousness expands as greater and greater levels of awareness and comprehension of self, society, the mysteries of life, and the wonders of the universe are explored in their fullest. As the degree of awareness we have of something increases, and as the capacity to reflect upon and make greater sense of it increases, we are led to a comprehension of its place in the greater whole.

Forces are operating to liberate human consciousness from previously restricted stages, propelling it onward in its evolution. Now, more than ever, it is the independent investigation of reality that will unleash our fullest potential, leading to the spiritualization of human consciousness. The awakening of new capacities is bringing with it the recognition of new responsibilities for a collective maturity that are restructuring society.

Be Lost in the Call

Lord, said David, since you do not need us,
why did you create these two worlds?

Reality replied: O prisoner of time,
I was a secret treasure of kindness and generosity,
and I wished this treasure to be known,
so I created a mirror: its shining face, the heart;
its darkened back, the world;
The back would please you if you've never seen the face.

Has anyone ever produced a mirror out of mud and straw?
Yet clean away the mud and straw,
and a mirror might be revealed.

Until the juice ferments a while in the cask,
it isn't wine. If you wish your heart to be bright,
you must do a little work.

My King addressed the soul of my flesh:
You return just as you left.
Where are the traces of my gifts?

We know that alchemy transforms copper into gold.
This Sun doesn't want a crown or robe from God's grace.
He is a hat to a hundred bald men,
a covering for ten who were naked.

Jesus sat humbly on the back of an ass, my child!
How could a zephyr ride an ass?
Spirit, find your way, in seeking lowness like a stream.
Reason, tread the path of selflessness into eternity.

Remember God so much that you are forgotten.
Let the caller and the called disappear;
be lost in the Call.

Jalal ad-Din Rumi

1

Our Inherent Urge to Understand Reality

*Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path leading wherever I choose.*
Walt Whitman

*If we have our own why in life,
we shall get along with almost any how....*
Friedrich Nietzsche

*I get the urge for going
When the meadow grass is a-turning brown...*
Joni Mitchell

We are born into a mystery. For some, the journey of life seems to provide a fairly steady comfort level, whatever may come. For others, there may be a subtle anxiety about life or death, or both, which may or may not change things. For yet others, there may be an unconscious quest moving toward deeper understanding. And for still others, there may be an all-out, conscious quest, or search for truth, directing every aspect of life.

Perhaps hidden somewhere within us all is what Elizabeth Gilbert, in the popular *Eat, Pray, Love*, calls “the itch, the mad and relentless urge to want to understand the workings of existence.”

She tells the story of the youth she met in India who had this “urge,” having left his family farm in Ireland to find inner peace through yoga in India. After he had returned home, he sat with his father, the lifelong farmer and man of few words, telling him about his spiritual discoveries. The father listened with mild interest, watching the hearth and the fire, smoking his pipe, as the son said excitedly, “Dad, this meditation stuff, it’s crucial for peace and serenity. It can really save your life. It teaches you how to quiet your mind.”

His father turned to him and said kindly, “I have a quiet mind already, son,” and then returned his gaze to the fire.

Who’s to know, really, whether the farmer or anyone else has somehow gotten to a “quiet mind”? This may be a universal goal, but its opposite—the Buddhist teaching that most of humanity has their eyes so caked shut with the dust of deception that they will never see truth no matter who tries to show it to them—seems to loom fairly large, as well. Perhaps the only thing we can know for sure is whether or not we ourselves have gotten to that cherished goal.

That’s why to truly understand this relentless urge, Gilbert says we have to “look for God, like a man with his head on fire looks for water.” In this light, the urge is a single-minded quest that nothing could deter us from.

The Call

Rumi tells us “Be lost in the Call.” David, in this poem, asks one of the most mystical questions of all: “Why did you create these two worlds?” Reality replies, likening the worlds to the front and back of a mirror, one side shining brightly and the other dark. If we are prisoners of the temporal world, the dark side may suffice; we may not hear the Call anyway to seek the other side. But if we *have* glimpsed the other side, and have seen the shining face, “the soul of my flesh,” we are enabled to “tread the path of selflessness into eternity.” We are no longer content with only the temporal world; the Call becomes the loudest sound to our ears.

7th-century Vedanta philosopher Shankara said, “When a man follows the way of the world, or the way of the flesh, or the way of tradition (i.e. when he believes in... the letter of the scriptures, as though they were intrinsically sacred), knowledge of Reality cannot arise in him.” To seek to know Reality, we have to be open to what is beyond us, to what is greater than what we already know; we have to be open to connecting with something greater than we are.

But this is the way it has always been.

One of the very first archetypes, or patterns of inherited, oft-repeated behavior, is the *call to adventure*, or the quest to understand

*The germ of the transcendent life,
the spring of the amazing energy
which enables the great mystic to
arise to freedom, is latent in all of
us; an integral part of our
humanity.*

~Evelyn Underhill

reality. This is a theme as old as story itself; it is ubiquitous to all literature and the most common basis for all plots.

Perhaps hearing the Call is central to our purpose as human beings. Classic mythology, and fairy tales too, are framed by the motif of search. Mythic heroes became heroes and heroines *because* they were the original seekers after truth. Though their adventures involved much drama and many overwhelming challenges, as they all must, Odysseus, Gilgamesh, Inanna, Icarus, Daphne, Jonah, Moses, King Arthur, Sleeping Beauty, *Siddhartha*, and countless others lived out a pattern that is not only understood as heroic but as sacred, too.

The archetype of the *call* consists of a quest that always begins with a separation from the familiar (“from the way of the world”), which signals a “departure,” and is followed by the quest’s fulfillment in the closely related archetypes of “initiation” and “return.” This is the three-part pattern Joseph Campbell has identified as the monomyth, or the adventure of the hero.

The meaning of this archetype is the unfolding of destiny; its appearance is the first sign that something of significance is about to happen. There is usually a herald of some kind signaling the coming of this archetype, as in the frog who retrieves the ball from the pond for the princess. This archetype not only marks the beginning of a transformational undertaking, it is, in mystic terms, “the awakening of the self.”

Evelyn Underhill characterizes “the mystic type” as the personality who refuses to be satisfied with someone else’s experience. Wherever this “urge for going” takes us, it seems this is where we are meant to be going.

All who seek something beyond have one passion in common: pursuing a spiritual quest to find a “way out” or a “way back” to what will “satisfy their craving for absolute truth,” which then also constitutes their whole meaning of life. This, of course, leads to not only the awakening of the self, but to a transcendental consciousness that usually involves a vision of the Divine as immanent in the world.

In the Baha’i tradition, Baha’u’llah, answering a query from a Sufi, explains this mystical quest in the familiar and timeless framework of the seven stages of the journey of the soul, beginning with the motif of *The Valley of Search*, as did the 12th-century Persian Sufi Attar. This confirms that the spiritual realities, or the inner verities, of all religions are the same. He says the first characteristics of the valley of search, after taking “leave of self,” are patience and perseverance. Other prerequisites of this quest are to “cleans[e] the heart” and “turn away from [blind] imitation.”

It soon becomes evident in this quest that guidance will be provided when most needed, again from *The Valley of Search*: “At every step, aid from the Invisible Realm” is offered; as the intensity of the search grows, union with “the object of [the] quest” is desired. When the Call is answered, it signals the awakening of consciousness, leading to the fulfillment of a potentiality, like a seed growing into fruition.

The Question of Consciousness

Only by our conscious effort can the potential of consciousness be realized. Consciousness is the dynamic unfolding of a systematic awareness of ourselves in relation to others and the world, and how we put this together to make sense of it all. As consciousness evolves, it changes the way we see everything. Everything exists the way it is because of our *awareness* of it as we see it.

Carl Jung sees consciousness as a process that emerges from the depths. Consciousness awakens gradually from childhood throughout life as contents of the unconscious arise to a conscious level. All human beings share a common biology and a common psychological inheritance. He says, “The collective unconscious contains the whole spiritual heritage of mankind’s evolution, born anew in the brain structure of every individual.” The iceberg-like *capacity* of consciousness causes our *awareness* to widen, deepen, and take on fuller meaning.

Our developing, evolving consciousness helps fulfill our unique purpose of investigating the nature of Reality. All the world’s religions and spiritual philosophies stress the importance of cultivating the capacity of consciousness through a practice that aligns us with the universal order.

Consciousness is a complex capacity consisting of the spiritual powers of imagination (conceiving things); thought (reflecting upon realities); comprehension (understanding realities); and memory (remembering what we imagine, think, and understand). These are our inner powers, while sight, hearing, smell, taste, and feeling

are our five outer powers, the agents of perception. The mind is the intermediary between the outer and inner powers, connecting them both.

In real life, our sight sees a flower, conveys this perception to the imagination, forming an image of the flower and transmitting this to our thought, which reflects upon it, grasps the flower's reality, and conveys this to comprehension, which delivers the image of it to our memory, which keeps it in its repository.

As we strive toward the perfections embedded within us to reach the spiritual capacity we are endowed with, how we utilize our power of choice and free will determines whether we develop the virtues of the soul such as justice, equity, and goodness and reach the heights of consciousness, or succumb to expressions of the material self such as greed, tyranny, and injustice and fall short of our capacity.

This is why a new chapter to the ongoing story of our evolving consciousness is needed. Our time seems to embody the characteristics of the biblical "time of the end." We need a renewal of the perennial truths that have gotten us this far.

Consciousness Changes with Experience

Our consciousness of who we are is further complicated by the multiple identities we carry with us all the time. Not only do many more identities exist now than ever before ethnicity, nationality, language, religion, gender, socioeconomic class, age, sexual orientation, physical ability, education, occupation, and more all of these interact in ways that impact all of the others.

These multiple identities converge, *and* are the cause of even more complex issues for us; they are all part of a system of privilege and oppression. Each of our multiple identities put us on either the privileged/dominant side of the identity continuum (whites, men, heterosexuals, Christians, etc.), or on the oppressed/subordinate side (any minority group we are a member of). This can make our awareness of who we are more confusing when we realize that some parts of who we identify as may be afforded certain privileges while other parts may be oppressed.

Ultimately, this tricks us into believing that these are our primary, maybe even only, identities, and that what is most important in determining who we are is dictated by these temporal aspects of ourselves.

The competing views of who we are create the need to defend or cling, which in turn creates pain and suffering if our identities are threatened. But they also create the conditions for growth and transformation, which ultimately lead to being able to embrace the one reality. So there is a purpose to our multiple identities, but they are not the end goal. They simply give us a basis for understanding how personal and social consciousness evolves.

Our multiple identities also create the illusion of multiple paths, multiple priorities, and multiple options to choose from in selecting our allegiance. But, as Chief Leon Shenandoah has put it, there is but one path, one identity, that has our true nature as its signpost:

*Everything is laid out for you,
Your path is straight ahead of you.*

*Sometimes it's invisible but it's there,
You may not know where it's going,
But you have to follow that path.
It's the path to the Creator.
It's the only path there is.*

Our consciousness is set up to allow us to see many things when there is really only one thing in front of us. Sometime after we are born our unified consciousness becomes divided. At some later point we become aware that we reside in a world built upon polarities, each one competing for our attention and allegiance. We continue to live within this world of dualities until we come to the further awareness that all the parts we have become so familiar with are actually components of a greater wholeness, within which we regain our consciousness of oneness.

Our understanding of reality gradually evolves as our consciousness evolves. Born with a limited consciousness, we transcend our own finite perspective over and over in our lives until we arrive at a glimpse of the infinite, which then becomes the wider base with which we understand everything else after that. Life is a process of moving from an underdeveloped, localized, fragmented consciousness toward a fully developed universal consciousness.

Once we have an experience of oneness and unity that is what we will want to strive to see everywhere. It is like looking above ground at a vast field of wells that appear from this perspective to be tapping independent sources of water, compared to being able to see from the underground perspective and knowing that there is really only one interconnected source of water. We realize our fullest potential as we

transcend apparent barriers and limitations, eventually merging our individual consciousness with a boundless consciousness.

How we see ourselves, how we understand our personal identity, depends on our current level of consciousness. If we expand our consciousness enough to change our worldview, we are at the same time changing our identity, since we are really one with what we know. It is all interconnected; shifting our awareness shifts our level of consciousness, which shifts our sense of identity.

If the mind is silent, content, and focused on what does not change, we have gotten to our core identity, as well as to pure consciousness. As Peter Russell puts it, “The essential self is eternal; it never changes.”

All the multiple identities we carry hide a single identity we all share. We all come from

Where do you come from?
From the other world.
And where do you go?
Into the other world.
And what do you do in this world?
*I jest with it by eating its bread and
doing the works of the other world in it.*
~A conversation with
Rabi'a of Basra

the same Creator, and will return to that Creator. Our eternal connection to the Creator is the essence of our fullest identity, of who we are at our unchanging core. If we think we are any of the multiple, hierarchical, dominant or subordinate identities that make up our temporal self, these are not who we are for eternity.

Eastern spiritual traditions say that identifying with and desiring the temporal is surely a cause of suffering. Attachment to the fleeting places hope on that which is not real, and does not last. Our choice to build up and maintain multiple

identities creates tension and suffering within us and between others. To identify first and foremost with our eternal essence unites us with everyone.

If we could strip away all of our temporal identities, those aspects of ourselves that will disappear at death, what would remain? Our physical, genetic, social, and psychological identities are who we are, but only for the limited time we are on this earth. If we could take a more farsighted perspective, we might see that what remains after we continue our eternal journey from here is our eternal identity, our soul.

We are a merging of the temporary elements of earth and the lasting elements of heaven. Our threefold nature consists of body, mind, and soul. We are *physical beings*, with a body, a clear reflection of the world of creation; *human beings* with a mind, having a unique capacity for reflective consciousness, and, *spiritual beings* with a soul, a clear reflection of the Creator.

Although the soul is our divine reality, giving us our spiritual potential, it needs the mind, an intermediary between our physical and spiritual natures, to interact with in order to become one with the body. Who we become is a result of how these three natures interact with and influence each other.

Our true nature is that part of us that does not change, the unified whole we can become. As we integrate all of our multiple identities, including our eternal identity, we take on a unified identity that tells us who we are in both the temporal and eternal realms. As we identify equally with our eternal self and our temporal self, we become that eternal self.

The Search for Truth Expands Our Consciousness

I was recently moved by the story of a gospel singer who, not yet aware of her longing, was slowly but convincingly drawn to investigate life's deepest mysteries. This eventually became her conscious quest, and she was led to a new spiritual tradition that answered all of her unasked questions. She put the process she had embarked upon very succinctly: "If you have a question, go look for the answer; it will be there for you!"

We have but to set out on that open road before us, with eyes wide open, to seek answers to our deep questions. It will serve us well on this quest to dedicate some time, perhaps an hour a day, for reflection upon what we are finding along the way. There is a rich and deep spiritual heritage waiting to guide us into this adventure.

Jung points out an unexpected reward. "To find out what is truly individual in ourselves, profound reflection is needed; and suddenly we realize how uncommonly difficult the discovery of individuality in fact is." In other words, the power of our own consciousness, reflecting upon itself, reveals how connected we all are.

This is clearly seen in the great vision that came to Black Elk in his youth:

...I was standing on the highest mountain of them all, and round about beneath me was the whole hoop of the world. And while I stood there I saw more than I can tell and I understood more than I saw; for I was seeing in a sacred manner the shapes of all things in the spirit, and the shape of all shapes as they must live together like one

being. And I saw that the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that made one circle, and in the center grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father. And I saw that it was holy.

Consciousness is a gift designed to help us see beyond what is evident, delve into the hidden meanings of the obvious, and extract the essence of what we are pondering. The deepest meaning available to us becomes apparent with meditation, which allows us to transcend the purely physical, enter the realm of the spirit, and discover the reality of things. Through conscious reflection, we gain second sight, our “power of insight,” or illumination.

We cannot search for truth to live by without conscious effort. If we are satisfied with what has been handed down to us, we will remain complacent, probably even inert. If we continually seek the unknown and make it known, new knowledge, especially lasting and meaningful, will guide our way to the perennial truth of oneness.

This search for truth is a key principle of a timeless wisdom that recognizes the individual soul as a reflection of divine Reality. Once the life of the spirit, or the quest of the soul, has begun, it is never without fulfillment. Spiritual discernment, development, and search always bring us closer to the Creator.

The world’s religions agree upon this. Every sacred tradition expresses some form of the familiar “Seek and ye shall find.” From Judaism, “If from thence thou shalt seek the Lord thy God, thou shalt find him...;” or, as in Islam, “He who

approaches near to Me one span, I will approach near to him one cubit... and whoever approaches Me walking, I will come to him running.”

Shankara’s Hindu/Buddhist Vedanta perspective also makes the individual effort required very evident: “The nature of the one Reality must be known by one’s own clear spiritual perception; it cannot be known through a pundit (learned man). Similarly, the form of the moon can only be known through one’s own eyes. How can it be known through others?”

In our time, the investigation of reality has been made a primary spiritual principle by Baha’u’llah. This involves discovering truth for ourselves, not following blindly, but seeing with our own eyes, hearing with our own ears, and utilizing the power of our own mind. If we use the power of our own spirit, an emanation of the Divine spirit, and if we “investigate the religions to discover the principles underlying their foundations we will find they agree, for the fundamental reality of them is one and not multiple...All the prophets have been the promoters of these principles.”

In this age, the right of every one of us to investigate reality for ourselves is the most fundamental of all human rights; exercising this right can bring us the greatest of benefits, not only in this life but in the life to come. That human consciousness is endowed with the intellectual, moral, spiritual, and aesthetic capacities needed to undertake such an effort is evidence enough that this right exists. Our own spiritual development depends on this to transcend earlier levels of consciousness.

Our inherent urge to understand reality expands and fulfills our consciousness, enabling us to acquire the wisdom available to us as co-creators of this creation. An expanded consciousness is a means for advancing civilization. Those who seek truth facilitate their own transformation as well as the transformation of society.

Ervin Laszlo says our challenge is “reorienting our vision.” We need a good compass to guide us that can set standards and direct our steps. These ideals, he says, are found in our existing cultural and spiritual heritage, and “still have a latent power to motivate actions and influence decisions:”

“The great ideals of the world religions...embody perennial values...and should be reaffirmed... There is, for example, the Christian vision of universal brotherhood governed by man’s love for a God of all men and for his fellow human beings. There is Judaism’s historical vision of an elected people in whom all the families of the earth are to be blessed. Islam has a universal vision of an ultimate community of God, man, nature, and society. The essential goal of the Baha’i Faith is to achieve a vision that is world embracing and could lead to the unity of mankind and the establishment of a world civilization based on peace and justice. Hinduism envisions matter as but the outward manifestation of spirit and urges attunement to cosmic harmony through the varied paths of yoga. Buddhism, too, perceives all reality as interdependent, and teaches man to achieve union with it through rejection of the drives and desires of a separate ego. Confucianism finds supreme harmony in disciplined and ordered human relationships, and Taoism finds such harmony in nature and naturalness. The African tribal religions conceive of a great community of the living and the dead, to which each person belongs unless he willfully creates imbalances between the seen and unseen forces in and around himself.”

These are the perennial ideals based on universal human values. In their original and purest form, they can guide our steps into a sustainable future. In our search for truth, with our consciousness expanded, we come to a remarkable

realization. We find that what we thought was out there is also within us. We find that essence of ourselves that unites us with all creation, all beings, and divinity itself. As Deepak Chopra has said, “What you seek, you already are.”

*Everything that is in the heavens,
on earth, and under the earth
is penetrated with connectedness,
penetrated with relatedness.*
~Hildegard of Bingen

Our consciousness has its source in unity. And this is where our search leads us; the goal of the spiritual journey is the transpersonal reality of the boundless consciousness that unites us with all of creation, with divine reality.

Our quest is one of remembering where we came from, what our purpose here is, and where we are going. As our consciousness grows, all the pairs of opposites we encounter matter less and less. We gradually find a comfort level with them and eventually they even seem to merge into a greater whole.

At the deepest level, all things are one. As Brother Wayne Teasdale said, “Every person is a mystic. The call to the spiritual journey is always inviting us. We need only respond. In this summons, in the cave of the heart, we are all one.”

While each spiritual and religious tradition includes detailed beliefs and practices that promote the spiritual life, it is only in the mystical branches of those traditions that a deeper path to oneness is laid out. The mystic path is meant to lead us to union with the source of our being. Teasdale implies that we don't have to be part of any one those traditions to have this same deep desire, or urge. It is an all-human trait, or characteristic, to want to seek union with the deepest part of who we are that comes from and connects us to our Creator, or to all of creation.

It is on this so-called 'mystical' path that everyone will find the same thing – at the deepest level all things are connected in an undeniable oneness. And all sacred traditions have their own tools and practices that are specifically designed to help any of us get there – prayer, meditation, deepening in the sacred writings, remembrance (of God), whirling dance, upholding the highest of ethical standards, ritual, initiation, vision quest, pilgrimage, yoga, seeing with the inner eye (the eye of oneness), and service to others, just to name a few.