

AI (The Journey)

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It is well understood certain topics are potentially discomfoting or offensive in the sense that they harbor the potential to deeply wound the innermost emotions of fellow human beings. This sentiment spans the plethora of religious beliefs, cultural and racial traditions, varied nationalities and gender. I doubt any person can easily assume the task of answering the questions: “Who is God?”, “Why do I exist?” or “Is there life after death?” The answers to these questions cannot be experimentally determined, scientifically calculated or analysed, our only hope is to access suitable answers through challenges and lessons learnt, as we make our way through the sum of personal experiences we ultimately end up calling life. A colleague (and friend) asked me to write a short narrative on what my belief system encompasses. I thought it useful to include how this too impacts upon my perception of the world around me and how I may choose to interact with it.

The answers we seek may be more readily attained when realizing these, more often than not, are unique and person-specific, there is no one-size-fits-all... Although there is some degree of freedom when telling your own story – since no one can deny you the life you have lived – the inherent fear of criticism and antagonism by those you disagree with your blatant honesty, remains. Herein is the first hurdle to overcome! The opposite of fear is not courage but love, the biblical answer to the first question I mention above.

At some stage most human beings will wish there is a God, even if they don't necessarily think or believe He exists. When this moment comes He can encounter you at your point of total honesty. Total honesty can be frightful and unkind. Your anger and pain may compel you to ask a lot more than: “Who is God?” You might insist upon His exact job description. Your frustration may not stop there; it may well extend to Jesus, His Son, and His role in the Family business. If per chance you have heard of the Holy Spirit – as a catholic I heard of Him but only in passing – you may wish to boldly question His performance too. You might demand to know who God really is, since Their combined level of incompetence appears glaringly obvious to you – albeit for the wrong reasons.

... and so your journey begins... His mercy truly is never ending!

Growing up in a predominantly catholic family enabled me to envisage God as a stern, serious personality, constantly updated regarding my wrongdoings that included all misdemeanours. This notion was endorsed by teachings from family members, my parents and teachers alike. Sunday school teachings elaborated upon Godly punishment and the forms it could take. Ironically, we were not avid churchgoers and my church attendance was mostly confined to wedding ceremonies and baptisms. Nevertheless, the bloodied body nailed on the cross saddened me. How could anyone do such a thing? As my childhood unfolded the second question became more prevalent and ultimately predominated well into my adult years. Considering all that I had done I felt lucky to have escaped punishment. To me it was glaringly obvious my routine comport was hardly above reproach, with no corrective path insight given

my understanding of God. To alleviate my troubled conscience I would resort to the occasional guest appearance at a Sunday service, tick the box, and continue on my way. At one stage I took these occasional visits more seriously but ultimately fell victim of repetitiveness and old habits returned. At a later stage the need to know the purpose of my existence became increasingly pressing, as I searched without any assistance for an answer. My beliefs gradually diverged from the teachings of my childhood and the experiences as a young adult, disappointing my parents and family on some occasions. Eventually I was on my own; trying to rationalize my existence, while simultaneously proving that I was worthy of it. For a long time it seemed the answer to the second question was going to remain as inconclusive as the answer to the first ...

Time brought its momentary joys but also wound-inflicting losses. A lapse in concentration and any person can identify less happy moments or challenging events that cauterized their emotions. Personal experience has shown me these moments of profound loss present, sometimes forcing upon us, an opportunity to answer the last question first: “Is there life after death?” Mostly we think of death as the terminating addition to our sum of personal experiences. But what if it were possible to terminate the addition of personal experiences and begin adding differently? What if you could die before you die – dying by parts if you like? It is the clue that helps us answer this question. Sounds insane, but true Christianity expects this of every true follower.

As a young man I was asked: “Do you know Jesus?” This extremely intrusive, unexpected question annoyed me intensely! During a lunch break I am hardly predisposed to even attempt a question of this nature. Almost immediately I replied: “There are well over 20000 students on campus and it is impossible for me to know everyone.” How I wish I could apologise to this person! I was presented with an opportunity to find the answers long before my experiences would force me to ask the questions. Years later I learnt Jesus teaches one how to die, before you die. Get this right and you begin to perpetually add to your personal experiences. Upon the death of human nature the summation of personal experiences continues to infinity... I was not totally unfamiliar with scripture and some of the Sunday school teachings and remnants of sermons heard over time made me aware of the scripture below:

*He who finds his life will lose it,
and he who loses his life for My sake will find it.*

Matt 10:39 (NKJV)

These are the very words of Jesus that to me sounded like a suggestion, rather than a command, so as to remain in His good books with a trouble-free conscience. Pondering upon the part “... *loses his life for My sake* ...” meant forsaking all the fun, pleasant things that a clergyman might not do, but represented small infractions for a common person like myself. Nothing an occasional or repeated prayer would not solve... In more serious times I became aware something had to perish: my nature and my plans, designed to single handedly attain self-validation. Accepting this proved to be extremely difficult and not easily achieved. Indeed it needs reminding from time to time, although not as often as was previously the case. It is

counterintuitive to expect new life and vision to be birthed from forsaking a well structured and familiar life that may have taken a long time to establish. However, this must happen – we must die before we die – if “for His sake” a return to the original natural state is to occur. The initial natural state where intimacy between man and God is evident daily, since man’s purity of heart enable him to see God face to face. This nudged me towards the second question: “Why do I exist?” I exist for His sake! Wait a minute, what do I have that He could possibly need? We are told God is omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent which practically covers all requirements from a human perspective. There is something all people have that He desperately wants but will not use his omnipotence to get: our company! I am flabbergasted, some family members and acquaintances might not want or enjoy my company but God insists upon it. It is in our company that He shares His wisdom and understanding with us. Most of us have hobbies or favourite pastimes that we enjoy. Hiking in reserves or spending time observing wildlife in national parks ranks top of my list and affords me priceless tranquility. On occasion my thoughts wonder and marvel at the beauty embraced in nature. Good job “Big Guy” I have sometimes fleetingly thought before grabbing my camera and doing my best to freeze the moment in time. With each picture His invitation; if you dare to focus on Me, I will move closer to you. This was the subtle introduction to my journey. Seeking gets me closer; the proximity allows me to know Him better and the answer to: “Who is God?” becomes ever more apparent. So it has become with all I do...

The early days of my career were away from home in a country I had not previously visited and where there were no friends initially. I recall arriving at my destination and for the first time becoming aware of the weight of solitude – time to see what you are really made of lad. The unfamiliar surroundings and a lifestyle so foreign made me really wish there was a God, someone that would point me in the correct direction and repair my bad judgments. Although I did not appreciate it at the time, He was already at work. His plan had been set in motion and I was reluctantly onboard, starting to ask and question who He really was. I returned home after a few years but in the fifteen years that followed relished the opportunity to meet and learn from some amazing people, establishing friendships that will survive a lifetime. The need to know Him better survived the travels that spanned four continents until the disruptive invitation occurred. It was delivered in an unexpected manner while walking to the beach on a spring Sunday morning. An unease and discomfort resided within me for no apparent reason and this I attributed once again to being in a new environment in a foreign country. Surrounded by kind people that accepted me and appreciated my efforts was rejuvenating. I loved being in the United States and enjoyed the new circle of friends and my new temporary home. Why the gnawing thoughts in my mind? On that day while walking to the beach I mustered the courage and thought it is time to speak sternly to this God that won’t let me be. It was probably my first sincere prayer although I did not know it at the time. His reply was surprising in a manner I did not fully comprehend until much later. It came in the form of a church notice board by the roadside that said: “Is your life a façade?” This moment too was frozen in time and I began to consider Him more seriously but dared not share this with anyone; what would people think and how would they react to this apparent insanity. I remained quietly determined to continue my search in secrecy for who He really was. From this moment on relating to family and friends back home became increasingly difficult. I could now see the fragility of their existence

and how very similar it was to my own. Greed and desire outplayed honesty and truth in people I firmly believed were inherently good but I dared not say anything for fear of reprisal. When prompted to speak I cowardly said what most expected to hear, rather than what I was beginning to know was truth. The sense of guilt became overpowering; I withdrew myself, minimizing any interaction with those around me attempting to quench all background head noise.

Then suddenly the background noise ceased; my father's words echoed in my mind: "No matter what you achieve remember to Worship God above all things!" I had gone full circle, the loss was irredeemable and the question resurfaced: "Is there life after death?" I opened a Bible that had been gathering dust on the shelf for almost fifteen years and slowly a different more comforting voice dominated my innermost thoughts: "Yes, but only if you die before you die! If you choose to lose your life, I will resurrect you... Don't worry I have done this before, this is why they call it Christianity – it is named after Me. Your existence thereafter will conform to My plans and objectives. This is how you truly exist! Once again, do not worry My Spirit will show you how..." Nevertheless, an unanswered turmoil persisted within me and thankfully the following passage of scripture caught my attention:

There are many plans in a man's heart,

Nevertheless the Lord's counsel – that will stand.

Prov 19:21(NKJV)

Counsel can be misleading or misinterpreted and one seldom expects it to be freely available. In addition, counsel must be trustworthy and reliable. A few biblical courses did shed some light on the matter, as did the kindness of newly acquired friends, but a pressing need remained. Where could I find high standard counsel to satisfy my unanswered thoughts? Assuming my ignorance I resorted to the Bible and learnt the "Spirit of the Lord" is also referred to as: "The Spirit of Wisdom"; "The Spirit of Understanding"; "The Spirit of Knowledge"; "The Spirit of Counsel"; "The Spirit of Power"; and "The Spirit of The Fear of the Lord." Fear in this sense means reverent fear; to consider with unwavering respect; to behold in the highest esteem. I pondered upon the possibility of an alternative source of wisdom, knowledge and understanding to that which I had become accustomed. After careful thought, I realized it was indeed time to surrender the life I had created, based upon a myriad of self-fashioned choices. Life's compass had to be reset, additions to my list of personal experiences had to be terminated – dying to self-will – allowing for a recalibration of my inner being.

The watershed moment leads me to understand that each day given to me, may not necessarily be granted because I require it but because someone else may need me out there... The container of my being will ultimately need to be replaced for something infinitely better. When this occurs all questions will be perfectly answered and I will know who God is intimately, for I shall see Him face to face!