

Chopra, Deepak (2004). The Book of Secrets. New York, Random House.

Secret #14



THE MEANING OF LIFE IS EVERYTHING

HAVE WE COME CLOSER to answering the ultimate question, "What is the meaning of life?" Imagine for a moment that someone came up with an answer. Directly or indirectly, most of the traditional answers have crossed everyone's path; the meaning of life usually comes down to a higher purpose, such as:

- To glorify God
- To glorify God's creation
- To love and be loved
- To be true to oneself

As with many other spiritual questions, I find it difficult to imagine how these answers could be tested. If someone holds down a good job, supports his or her family, pays taxes, and obeys the law, is that an example of glorifying God or of being true to oneself? In times of great crisis, such as war, does the meaning of life change? Perhaps it is all one can do to stay alive and be reasonably happy in a crisis.

One way to test the answer to the question "What is the meaning of life?" would be to write it down, seal it in an envelope, and mail it to a thousand people picked at random. If the answer is right, anyone who opens the envelope would read what is written and say, "Yes, you're right. That's the meaning of life." A breathless young bride would agree on her wedding day. A paralyzed old man would agree on his deathbed. People who war bitterly over differences in politics and religion would agree, and so would those who enjoy a marriage of the mind.

This might seem like an impossible test, however, since there might be absolutely no answer that would satisfy everyone. But what if the piece of paper is blank, or if it said, "The meaning of life is everything"? In the one reality, these aren't trick answers but very close to each other in reading the truth. The blank piece of paper indicates that life is pure potential until someone shapes it into something. The meaning of pure potential is that life is infinitely open. Similarly, to say that the meaning of life is everything indicates that life leaves nothing and no one out. "Everything" is just another way to embrace the infinite range of possibilities.

Life refuses to be pinned down. Whatever meaning you want the universe to reflect, it provides. In medieval Europe, people wanted the universe to reflect their intense belief in the Holy Trinity; at that same period in history, people in India wanted the universe to reflect the cosmic dance of Shiva and his consort Shakti. Wherever Islam held sway, the universe was expected to reflect the will of Allah. Right now, agnostics expect the universe to reflect their own spiritual confusion and doubt; therefore, the cosmos seems to be a random explosion that began with the Big Bang. Many religious people accept this reality, except on Sunday, when the universe feebly reflects the possibility of a divine maker.

If you try to pin the universe down to one reflection, you pin your own life down at the same time. Reality is like a two-way mir-

ror that shows you yourself as well as what lies on the other side. This mutual effect is mandated because the universe doesn't possess one set of facts. You the observer bring your version of reality into being. Let me offer an example of how the two-way mirror works in the field of medicine.

It seems completely baffling that the human body can be healed in so many ways. If you take almost any disease like cancer, there is a typical history that the illness usually follows. Breast cancer, for example, has a known survival rate from the time of the first detected anomaly in the breast cells. Women who contract the disease will fall somewhere on the bell curve of survival. As one oncologist told me years ago, cancer is a numbers game. A statistical range will tell you at what age the disease is most likely to occur. The response of tumors to different modes of radiation and chemotherapy is constantly being documented. With these facts in hand, medicine proceeds to find a definitive cure, and if the definitive cure hasn't been found yet, science will keep working until it is.

Outside the statistical norm, however, strange things are happening. In my own medical experience, I have met the following patients:

- A young woman who told me that her mother, living on a farm in remote Vermont, developed a large tumor in her breast but decided that she was too busy to get it treated. She survived more than a decade without medical attention.
- A woman who felt a lump in her breast and decided to visualize it away. She saw hordes of white cells descending like snow to engulf the lump. After she performed this visualization for six months the lump was gone.
- A woman with a massive tumor checked out of the hospital a day before surgery because she didn't want to approach her con-

dition out of fear and panic. She returned months later only when she felt confident of her survival. The operation succeeded and she did survive.

Every doctor has encountered the opposite side of the spectrum, women who die very quickly after receiving news of a small number of malignant cells in their breast. (In some cases, the cells are anomalous, meaning that they might be harmless, yet in a few women these anomalies quickly turn into tumors. This phenomenon was tagged long ago as "dying from the diagnosis.") I am not making recommendations about how to approach cancer, only observing that the disease often seems to reflect the beliefs brought to it by the patient. A now-famous study by David Siegel at Stanford took a group of women who had late-stage breast cancer and divided them into two groups. One group was given the best medical care, which by that point was very little. The other group sat down once a week and shared their feelings about having the disease. This alone produced a remarkable result. After two years, all the long-term survivors belonged to the second group, and the overall survival in that group was half again as long as in the group that didn't discuss their feelings. In essence, the women who confronted their emotions were able to shift the reflection in the mirror.

The human body runs on dual controls. If you heal it from the outside by material means, it will respond. If you heal it from the inside by subjective means, it will also respond. How can it be that talking about your feelings can have as much effect as a powerful cancer drug (or even more)? The answer is that consciousness always takes these two roads. It unfolds objectively as the visible universe and subjectively as events inside the mind. *Both are the same consciousness.* The same intelligence has put on two masks, differentiating into the world "out there" and the one "in here." So the wisps of feeling that arise in a cancer patient communicate with the body much like the molecules of a drug.

This phenomenon isn't remarkable anymore—all of mind-body medicine is based on the discovery of messenger molecules that begin in the brain as thoughts, beliefs, wishes, fears, and desires. The breakthrough will come when medicine stops giving all the credit to molecules. When Mozart wanted to compose a new symphony, his intention called up the necessary brain function. It would be absurd to say that Mozart's brain wanted to write a symphony first and produced messenger molecules to inform him of the fact. Awareness always comes first, and its projections, both objective and subjective, follow.

This brings us to a new principle that is crucially important, called "simultaneous interdependent co-arising." *Simultaneous* because one thing doesn't cause another. *Interdependent* because each aspect is coordinated with every other. *Co-arising* because every separate part comes from the same source.

When Mozart wanted to compose a symphony, everything associated with his creation happened simultaneously: the idea, the notes, the sound in his head, the necessary brain activity, the signals to his hands as they wrote the music down. All these ingredients were organized into one experience, and they arose together. It would be false to say that one caused the other.

If one element should fall out of place, the whole project would collapse. Should Mozart get depressed, his emotional state will block the music. Should he get physically exhausted, fatigue will block the music. One can think of a hundred ways that disorder could disrupt the picture: Mozart could have had marital problems, a stroke or heart attack, a sudden artistic block, or the noisy distraction of a two-year-old in the house.

Creation is kept from anarchy by simultaneous co-arising.

The cosmos matches the human mind far too closely to ignore. It's as if the universe were putting on its mind-boggling show of galaxies exploding from nothingness only to tease us. It makes no sense that a process spanning billions of light years and expanding with unbelievable speed to generate trillions of stars should climax

with the appearance of human DNA. Why did the universe need us to look on in wonder? Perhaps it's because reality just works that way: The unfolding cosmic drama exists simultaneously with the human brain, an instrument so finely attuned that it can delve into any level of nature. We are the ultimate audience. Nothing gets past us, no matter how minuscule or vast.

Now an extraordinary answer is beginning to dawn: *Maybe we are putting on the whole show ourselves.* The meaning of life is everything because we demand nothing less than the universe as our playground.

Quantum physics long ago conceded that the observer is the deciding factor in every observation. An electron has no fixed position in space until someone looks for it, and then the electron pops up precisely where it was looked for. Until that moment, it only exists as a wave propagating everywhere through space. That wave could collapse into a particle anywhere. Every single atom in the universe has a minute probability of being located as far away as possible or as near as possible.

The universe runs on a switch with only two positions, on and off. "On" is the material world with all its events and objects. "Off" is pure possibility, the changing room where particles go when no one is looking. The "on" position can be controlled only by external means. Once you light it up, the physical universe behaves by a set of rules. But if you catch it in the "off" position, the universe can be changed *without regard for time and space.* Nothing is heavy and immovable in the "off" position because there are no objects. Nothing is close or far away. Nothing is trapped in the past, present, or future. The "off" position is pure potential. There, your body is a set of possibilities waiting to happen, and present, too, are all those possibilities that have already happened and those that might happen. In the "off" position, everything in creation collapses down to a point, and miraculously, you live at that point; it is your source.

"On" and "off" don't give quite an accurate picture, however.

Just as there are many degrees of physical reality, there are many degrees of nonphysical reality. Your body is a solid object, a swirl of atoms, a storm of subatomic particles, and a ghost of energy, all at the same time. These states are simultaneous, but each operates according to different rules. In physics, this jumbled set of rules is called a "tangled hierarchy." The word *hierarchy* indicates that the levels are stacked in a certain order. Your body is in no danger of flying apart into random atoms because, in the hierarchy of things, solid objects stay in place, but in truth you are a cloud of electrons and a probability wave and everything in between.

That is the "on" position. In the "off" position, the same tangle continues but is totally out of sight. The invisible domain is divided in strange ways. At one level, events are all merged. Beginnings and endings meet; nothing happens without affecting everything else. But at another level, some events are more important than others; some can be controlled while others may float around with only the weakest kind of causation. By analogy, look inside your mind: Some thoughts demand to be acted on while others are passing whims; some follow strict logic while others obey very loose associations. Events in the universe are exactly the same mixed bag of potential events. If you want to, you can dive deep into the "off" position and start bringing up the events you want. You have to be prepared to meet the tangled hierarchy head on, however, because every event you might want to change is enmeshed in every other event. Still, there are certain conditions that remain the same.

DIVING INTO PURE POTENTIAL

How to Navigate the Field of Everything

1. The deeper you go, the more power is available to change things.
2. Reality flows from more subtle regions to more gross ones.

3. The easiest way to change anything is to first go to the subtlest level of it, which is awareness.
4. Still silence is the beginning of creativity. Once an event starts to vibrate, it has already begun to enter the visible world.
5. Creation proceeds by quantum leaps.
6. The beginning of an event is simultaneously its ending. The two co-arise in the domain of silent awareness.
7. Events unfold in time but are born outside of time.
8. The easiest way to create is in the evolutionary direction.
9. Since possibilities are infinite, evolution never ends.
10. The universe corresponds to the nervous system that is looking at it.

Exploring these conditions is the way you create the meaning of your own life. Let me compress these ten points into a sketch, leaving you to fill it in: The entire universe since the Big Bang behaves the way it does in order to conform to the human nervous system. If we could experience the cosmos any other way, it would be a different cosmos. The universe is lightless to a blind cave fish, which has evolved to exclude anything visual. The universe has no sound to an amoeba, no taste to a tree, no smell to a snail. Each creature selects its own range of manifestation according to its range of potential.

The universe is forced to respect your boundaries. Just as no literal vision of beauty can affect a blind cave fish and no sweetness of perfume entices a snail, any aspect of life that lies outside your boundaries will not hold meaning for you. You are like a hunter-gatherer searching the forest for food. Unless a plant is edible, you pass it by, and thus a forest full of exotic flora would be empty to you. The force of evolution is infinite, but it can work only with what the observer brings to it. A mind closed off to love, for example, will look out on a loveless world and be immune to any evidence of love, while an open mind will look out on that same world and find infinite expressions of love.

If our boundaries told the whole story, evolution could never break through them. This is where quantum leaps come in. Every observer creates a version of reality that is bound up in certain meanings and energies. As long as those meanings seem valid, the energies hold the picture together. But when the observer wants to see something new, meaning collapses, energies combine in a new way, and the world takes a quantum leap. The leap occurs on the visible plane when the switch is "on," but it was prepared in the invisible domain when the switch is "off."

Here's an example: Our ability to read came into being when prehistoric man developed a cerebral cortex, yet no one in the prehistoric world needed to read. If evolution is as random as many geneticists argue it is, the ability to read should have disappeared a million years ago, since its usefulness for survival was zero.

But this trait survived for the creature who was emerging. Consciousness knows what is to come, and it builds into every particle of creation the potential not just for one unfolding future but for *any* future. Nature doesn't have to predict what is going to happen on every level. It just opens avenues of growth, and then a given creature—in this case us—makes the leap when the time feels right. As long as potential is alive, the future can evolve by choice.

On several occasions, a sharp-eyed person spots a flaw in what I've been saying. "You're contradicting yourself. On the one hand, you claim that cause and effect go on eternally. Now you're saying that the end is already present at the beginning. Which is it?" Well, it's both. That doesn't seem like a very satisfying answer—it certainly makes sharp-eyed critics frown. But the universe is *using* cause and effect to get somewhere. When it wants to take a quantum leap, cause and effect get molded to the purpose. (Actually, you experience this every second. When you see the color red in your mind's eye, your brain cells are emitting signals in a precise way. But you didn't order them to do that; they fell into line automatically with your thought.)

In the tangled hierarchy, an amoeba, a snail, a galaxy, a black hole, and a quark are equally valid expressions of life. Prehistoric people were as immersed in their reality as we are in ours, equally fascinated by it, and equally privileged to watch reality unfold. Evolution gives each creature exactly the world that fits its ability to perceive. But there is something above all else that needs to evolve: the gap. If you aren't ready yet to accept that the meaning of life is everything, find your own meaning in closing the gap. Fetch the world back from the brink of disaster; steer the future off a collision course with chaos. Dharma, the upholding force in Nature, will support any thought, feeling, or action that closes the gap because the universe is set up to fuse the observer and the observed.

Because you are self-aware, your fate is unity. It has been built into your brain as surely as the ability to read was built into the brain of Cro-Magnon man. As the gap closes, modern people will find themselves merging with higher and lower forms of life. All generations of humanity, from the first hominid to whatever comes after us, will be seen as one. And then what? I imagine we will take the picture off the wall, detaching ourselves from any fixed image. To live from the level of pure existence, without the need to be bound by any event in the physical world, is the end of this journey and the beginning of one never before seen. This will be the arrival of unity and the final stroke of freedom.

CHANGING YOUR REALITY TO ACCOMMODATE THE FOURTEENTH SECRET

The fourteenth secret is about total understanding. Understanding is not the same as thinking. Understanding is a skill developed in awareness. It's what you've made out of your potential. A baby turns into a toddler by developing the skill of walking, for example. This skill represents a quantum leap in the baby's awareness that reaches

into every corner of existence: Brain patterns change; new sensations arise in the body; uncoordinated movements become coordinated; the eyes learn to view the world from an upright, forward-moving perspective; new objects in the environment come within reach; and from the threshold of the first step, the baby enters a world of unexplored possibilities that might culminate in climbing Mount Everest or running a marathon. So it's not one skill we are talking about but a true quantum leap that leaves no part of the baby's reality untouched.

The difference between a toddler and a marathon runner is that the level of understanding has deepened, not just on one front but for the whole person. Whenever you perform an action, you are actually expressing a level of understanding. In a race, two runners can be compared in such areas as mental discipline, endurance, coordination, time management, balancing obligations and relationships, and so on. When you see how far-reaching awareness really is, you begin to grasp that nothing is left out.

Understanding changes the whole picture of reality.

Being able to affect your whole reality at once is the essence of "simultaneous interdependent co-arising." There is no limit to how far your influence can reach but to find that out you must engage life with passion. When you do anything with passion, you express every aspect of who you are. Passion releases all the energy you possess. At that moment you put yourself on the line, for if you throw everything you have into a pursuit, your defects and weaknesses are also exposed. Passion brings up everything.

This inescapable fact discourages many people, who dislike the negative parts of themselves so much, or are so intimidated by them, that they hold their passion in check in the belief that life will be made safer. Perhaps it will, but at the same time they are greatly limiting their understanding of what life can bring. In general terms, there are three levels of commitment you can express:

1. Going into a situation only far enough to meet the first real obstacle
2. Going into a situation far enough to conquer some obstacles.
3. Going into a situation to conquer all obstacles

Using this model, think about something you passionately wanted to do well, whether it's painting, mountaineering, writing, raising a child, or excelling in your profession. Honestly assess where you are in that endeavor.

Level 1: "I'm not satisfied with what I've accomplished. Things didn't go the way I wanted them to. Others did a lot better than I have managed to. I lost my enthusiasm and got discouraged. I still keep doing what I have to, but mostly I'm skating on the surface. I feel I have mostly failed."

Level 2: "I'm fairly satisfied with my accomplishment. I'm not always at my best but I keep up with the pack. I am counted on as someone who knows what they're doing. I've overcome a lot to get to be this good. I feel mostly like a success."

Level 3: "I mastered what I set out to do. People look up to me and consider me the old pro. I know the ins and outs of this whole thing, and I feel deep satisfaction about that. I rarely have to think anymore about what's involved. My intuition carries me along. This area of my life is a major passion."

Each level of commitment reflects the understanding you are willing to achieve. If you didn't know human nature, you might suppose that a single activity like painting, mountaineering, or writing could be treated separately, but the whole person is affected because the whole person is being expressed. (This is why it's said that you get to know yourself on the mountain or in front of the blank canvas.) Even if you pick a very narrow skill, like running a marathon or cooking, your whole sense of self shifts when you succeed with passion as opposed to failing or backing off.

The willingness to reach inside every part of yourself opens the door to total understanding. You place your entire identity on the line, not just an isolated part. This may sound daunting, but actually it's the most natural way to approach any situation. When you hold some part of yourself in reserve you deny it exposure to life; you repress its energy and keep it from understanding what it needs to know. Imagine a baby who wants to walk but has these reservations:

1. I don't want to look bad.
2. I don't want to fall down.
3. I don't want anyone else to watch me fail.
4. I don't want to live with the burden of failure.
5. I don't want to expend all my energy.
6. I don't want any pain.
7. I want to get things over with as fast as possible.

For a baby these reservations seem absurd. If any of them applied, learning to walk would never happen, or it would happen tentatively. The chance for mastery could never present itself. Yet as adults we resort to these reservations all the time. We deny ourselves mastery as a result. No one can change the fact that all the negatives of a situation express themselves the minute the situation arises, along with all the positives. There is no escaping the internal decisions we've made.

Everything you've decided about yourself is in play at this moment.

Fortunately, these individual decisions can be reexamined and changed. Since all the negatives are right in front of you, you don't have to go searching for them. What people experience as obstacles in life are reflections of a decision to shut out understanding. If you shut out too much understanding, you become a victim, subject to forces that bewilder and overwhelm you. These forces aren't blind fate or misfortune; they are holes in your awareness, the places where you haven't been able to look.

Today, try to look at one of the decisions that has kept you from totally engaging in life, which may be included in the list just above.

I don't want to look bad: This decision involves self-image. "Looking good" means preserving an image, but images are just frozen pictures. They give the most superficial impression of who you are. Most people find it too hard to get past self-image. They fashion a certain look, a certain way of acting, a certain level of style, taste, lifestyle, and status that gets assembled into who they think they are. Their self-image is applied to every new situation with only one possible outcome: They look either good or bad. Long ago such people decided that they would never look bad if they could help it.

This decision can be countered only by your willingness to forget how you look. I'm sure you've seen slow-motion films of Olympic runners crossing the finish line, drenched in sweat, their faces distorted with effort, expending every last ounce of themselves. In their passion to win they haven't the slightest care about how they look. This gives a clue to your own situation: If you are really focused on the process at hand, you won't consider your appearance.

Today, take the following ideas and follow them through until you understand how they apply to you:

- Winning doesn't have to look good. The two have nothing to do with each other.
- Being passionate about something looks good from the inside, which is where it really counts.
- Looking good from the inside isn't an image. It's a feeling of satisfaction.
- You won't be satisfied as long as image is on your mind.

I don't want to fall down: This decision revolves around failure, which in turn revolves around judgment. In the field of painting,

every masterpiece is preceded by a sketch. Sometimes these sketches amount to a few rough scribbles; sometimes they require years and dozens of tries. Did the painter fail when he made a sketch? No, because it takes stages of development to master a skill. If you judge your early efforts to be failures, you are putting yourself at odds with a natural process.

People who are afraid to fall down usually were ridiculed or humiliated in the past. This is one area where parents pass on negative judgments with terrible effect—failing is something you inherit from someone who discouraged you. Fear gets attached to failure by connecting it to sense of self. "Falling down means I'm worthless." Next to looking bad, the second most crippling mental reservation is fear of falling down and feeling like a worthless person.

Today, face yourself honestly and confront how much of this fear is inside you. The degree to which you judge yourself is the degree to which you need to heal. Most people say they hate to fail, but behind the word *hate* can be a wide range of emotions, from devastating collapse of the self to mild annoyance at not doing your best. You can sense where you belong on the scale. Give yourself a rating:

- I feel devastated when I fail. I can't shake the feeling for days, and when I look back at my biggest failings I relive how intense the humiliation was.
- I feel bad enough when I fail that I usually walk away. It takes a lot for me to get back on the horse, but eventually I will. It's a matter of pride and self-respect.
- I take failure in stride because it's more important to accomplish what I want to do. I learn from my failures. There's something positive in every setback. If you can learn from your mistakes you haven't failed.

- I don't think in terms of winning and losing. I stay centered and watch how I perform in any situation. Each response shows me a new aspect of myself. I want to understand everything, and from that perspective each experience is like turning a new page in the book of evolution.

Having assessed where you stand, develop a program for change that is suitable to that stage.

First, people at this level are oversensitive to setbacks and take them so personally that they keep reopening old wounds. If this is you, go back to the basics. Find something very minor to accomplish, such as making an omelet or jogging around the block. Set aside time to do this activity, and as you are engaged in it, feel what it's like to succeed. Be like a good parent and praise yourself. If things go a bit wrong, tell yourself that it's all right. You need to reformat how you feel about setting a goal and reaching it.

Inside you there is a discouraging voice that you notice too quickly and give too much credence to. Slowly develop a connection to the voice of encouragement. That is also inside you but has been drowned out by the voice of criticism. Gradually increase the challenges you are able to face. Go from making an omelet for yourself to making one for someone else. Feel what it's like to be praised. Absorb the fact that you deserve this praise. Don't compare yourself to anyone else—you are where you are and nowhere else. Keep reinforcing your successes.

At least once every day, do something that looks like a success in your eyes and that earns you praise from either yourself or someone else. Be sure that the external praise is sincere. It will take time, but you will notice after a while that the voice of encouragement inside you is beginning to grow. You will learn to rely on it, and you will come to understand that it is right about you.

Second, people at this level feel bad enough about falling down that they often walk away from new challenges, yet they don't feel so

bad that they are devastated. If this is you, you need more motivation because you are on the cusp of wanting to win but are reluctant to risk failure. You could tip one way or the other. To increase your motivation, you can join a team or find a coach. Team spirit will help you override the discouraging voices inside you. A coach will keep you focused so that walking away is not an option. Pick a level of activity that won't overtax your self-confidence. It's more important to internalize the elements of success than to conquer a big challenge. A team doesn't have to mean sports—find any group that has *esprit de corps*. It could be a jazz band, a volunteer group, or a political party. External support will help you over your internal hurdles. You will come to understand that those hurdles aren't mountains; they can be whittled down into small peaks of achievement.

Third, people at this level are more encouraged by success than discouraged by failure. They have positive motivation in good supply. If this is you, you may succeed for a long time but eventually find that external rewards are no longer satisfying. You need to set a completely internal goal for yourself in order to grow. Among the most valuable internal goals are learning to be more intimate, learning to serve others without reward, and learning about the depths of spirituality. Aim to gain more understanding of yourself without any outside accomplishment. Over time, the distinction between success and failure will begin to soften. You will start to see that everything you've ever done has been about the unfolding of yourself to yourself. The greatest satisfactions in life come about when that unfolding is the only thing you need.

Fourth, people at this level have conquered failure. They enjoy every twist and turn in life, being satisfied with experience of every kind. If this is you, aim to deepen your mastery. Your remaining obstacles are subtle and belong at the level of ego. You still believe that an isolated self is having these experiences. Aim for detachment and expansion beyond this limited self. For you, the deepest spiritual

texts and a personal commitment to one of the four paths will bring great satisfaction.

I don't want anyone else to watch me fail: This decision revolves around shame. Shame is the internalized fear of the opinion of others. Their disapproval becomes your shame. The cliché that people from the East cannot bear to "lose face" refers to shame, which can be a powerful social force. The answer to shame isn't to become shameless in your behavior. Many people try that solution as teenagers, hoping that their intense self-consciousness can be overcome by external acts of bravado, like joyriding or dressing outlandishly. If you easily feel ashamed, you've made an internal decision that needs to be changed.

First, realize that what others think about you is often dependent on whether your actions are good or bad in *their* eyes. Social judgment is inescapable, and we are all affected by it. However, others will try to shame you through words, tone of voice, and behavior. Stand aside from your own situation and watch how this works. Read a tabloid or watch a celebrity gossip show. Be aware of the constant stream of insinuation and judgment. Get comfortable with the fact that such treatment of others exists. You aren't here to change it, only to become aware of how it works.

Second, withdraw from shaming others. This behavior is a disguise for you. You think that if you gossip, tear people down, try to look superior, or in any other way go on the attack, you will find protection from your own vulnerability. In reality, all you are doing is immersing yourself in the culture of shame. Step away; you can't afford to be there any longer.

Third, find ways to earn praise that makes you feel like a good person. This is different from praise for what you accomplish. You no doubt can do many things that would get somebody else to say you did a good job. But what you lack is praise that heals your sense of shame. That can come only when emotions are at stake. You need to

feel the warmth of someone else's gratitude; you need to see admiration for you in somebody's eyes. I'd suggest service to the poor, the elderly, or the sick. Devote some time in a volunteer program to help the needy in any way that you define that term. Until you reconnect on the basis of love, with no hint of personal criticism, you won't be able to separate yourself from feelings of shame.

I don't want to live with the burden of failure: This decision revolves around guilt. Guilt is the internal knowledge of wrongdoing. As such, it has its place as a healthy reminder from your conscience. But when guilt gets attached to the wrong thing, it can be destructive and unhealthy. Guilty people suffer most from the inability to tell thoughts from deeds. They are burdened by things that are purely mental rather than actions in the world. Sometimes this is called "sinning in your heart." Whatever name you give to it, guilt makes you feel like a failure because of your horrible past.

Guilty people don't want to face new challenges for fear that when they fail, they will feel more guilty, adding to the burden of the past. To them this sounds reasonable, but in actuality, guilt itself is extremely unreasonable. As with shame, you can break guilt down into its irrational components:

- Guilt doesn't accurately measure good and bad. It can make you suffer for trivial reasons.
- Guilt is a blanket that tries to cover everything. It makes you feel guilty about people and things that have no bearing on your guilty actions except that they happen to be in the vicinity.
- Guilt makes you feel overly responsible. You believe you caused bad things to happen that in truth had nothing to do with you.

- Guilt is prejudiced. It finds you wrong all the time without any chance of reprieve.

When you understand these four things you can begin to apply them to yourself. Don't try to force guilt to go away. Have your guilty reaction, let it be what it is, but then ask yourself: "Did I really do something bad?" "Would I condemn someone else who did the same thing?" "Did I do the best I could under the circumstances?" These questions help you get a more objective sense of good and bad. If you find yourself in doubt, seek the opinion of a non-guilty, noncondemning person.

"Who did I actually hurt?" Be specific; don't let guilt be a blanket. You may find that you've never really hurt anyone. If you still think you have, go to the person and ask how he or she feels. Discuss your actions. Try to reach the point where you can ask forgiveness. When it is given, accept it as genuine. Write the forgiveness down as a mental note. Whenever your guilty voice accuses you again, hold up the piece of paper that proves you've been forgiven, saying, "See? It doesn't matter how you try and make me feel. The person I actually harmed doesn't care anymore."

"Am I really responsible here? What part did I really play? Were my actions a small part of the situation or a big part?" You can be responsible only for the actions you took or failed to take. Be specific. Detail those actions to yourself; don't exaggerate them and don't fall for the irrational notion that just by being there you are totally responsible. Many family situations immerse us in a general sense of shared guilt, but if you are specific and narrow your responsibility to what you actually said and did, not what others around you said and did, you can diffuse the guilt trip of being responsible for everything.

"What good things have I done to atone for the bad ones? When will I have done enough to let go? Am I ready to forgive myself?" All

bad actions have their limit, after which you are forgiven and reprieved from guilt. But as we've seen, the inner voice of guilt is prejudiced—you are guilty the moment you step into the courtroom and will remain so forever. Take any guilty action and write down the day you will be forgiven. Do everything you can to atone for your bad action, and when the day of release arrives, take your pardon and walk away. No heinous action deserves condemnation forever; don't buy into the prejudice that would hold you responsible for even your most venial sins year after year.

I don't want to expend all my energy: This decision revolves around a belief that energy, like the money in your bank account, is limited. Some people who don't want to spend much energy avoid new challenges out of laziness, but that is mostly a disguise for deeper issues. It's certainly true that energy is limited, but if you have ever committed yourself passionately to anything, you've found that the more energy you devote to it, the more you have. Passion replenishes itself.

What drains energy, strangely enough, is the act of holding back. The more you conserve your energy, the more narrow become the channels through which it can flow. People who are afraid to love, for example, wind up constricting love's expression. They feel tight in the heart rather than expanded; loving words stick in their throats; they find it awkward to make even small loving gestures. Tightness develops fear of expansion, and thus the snake keeps eating its own tail: The less energy you spend, the less you have to spend. Here are a few steps that can cause the channels of energy to expand:

- Learn to give. When you feel most like hoarding, turn to someone in need and offer some of what you possess in abundance. This doesn't have to be money or goods. You can give time and attention, which actually will do much more to open your channels of energy than giving away cash.

- Be generous. This means generous in praise and appreciation even more than generous with your money. Most people hunger for praise and get much less than they deserve. Be the first to notice when someone has done well. Appreciate from a full heart and not just with formulaic words. Praise in detail, showing the other person that you actually paid attention to what he or she accomplished. Meet the person with your gaze and stay connected as you praise.
- Follow your passion. Some area in your life makes you want to spend all your energy there. For most people, there's a built-in inhibition about going too far, however, so they don't really spend themselves even in those areas. Be willing to go the limit, and then go a bit further. If you like to hike, set your sights on a mountain and conquer it. If you like to write, start and finish a book. The point is not to force yourself but to prove how much energy is really there. Energy is the carrier of awareness; it allows awareness to come out into the world. By devoting more energy to any endeavor you increase the reward of understanding that will come to you.

I don't want any pain: This decision revolves around several issues, all having to do with psychological rather than physical pain. The first issue is suffering in the past. People who have suffered without being able to find healing have a great aversion to any new possibility of pain. Another issue is weakness. If pain has defeated someone in the past, the prospect of more pain brings up fear of getting even weaker. Finally, there is the issue of vulnerability. Pain makes us feel exposed and more prone to further pain than if we remained invulnerable. All these issues run deep, and it's rare to find anyone who is immune to them. As always, there are degrees of sensitivity here.

Pain is neutral in the cosmic design. In the material world, pain motivates us negatively while pleasure motivates us positively. Learning to be free means that your actions don't depend on throwing either switch. No challenge is greater, given that all of us are deeply attached to the cycle of pleasure and pain. Only by reaching the state of witnessing can you observe how uncomfortable you feel when either pleasure or pain drives you onward.

I want to get things over with as fast as possible: This decision revolves around impatience. When your mind is restless and disorganized, you can't help but be impatient. You lack the attention span needed for taking time and being patient. People who hold back because they can't pay enough attention are also deprived of new challenges. Their understanding is forced to remain on a very superficial level. Ironically, time is not essential to a thoughtful response. It's not how long you pay attention but how deep that counts.

In the movie *Amadeus*, a very proficient composer, Salieri, was tormented by the genius of his rival, Mozart. Mozart wasn't a better person than Salieri—for the movie's sake Mozart was turned into a vain, childish hedonist. He didn't spend more time composing than Salieri; he didn't have greater favor from patrons; he didn't go to music school longer. Salieri blamed God for this gross inequality in gifts, and unconsciously most of us do the same when we confront somebody who vastly exceeds our abilities.

Impatience is rooted in frustration. We refuse to pay attention because the results aren't coming fast enough or with enough rewards. The mind prefers to hop away from this potential source of discomfort. If you find that you're easily made impatient, you probably blame outside circumstances. Traffic isn't moving fast enough; the grocery checkout line takes forever; when you ask someone to do a job the person always drags his feet.

Projecting your impatience on the outside world is a defense, a way of deflecting a fear of inadequacy. In the most extreme cases of

attention deficit disorder, particularly among young children, this fear always underlies the surface inattention. Impatient people are too discouraged to go inside very deeply. Even without a rival of Mozart's commanding genius, all of us are intimidated by a shadowy competitor inside—someone who by definition is better than we are. This ghost drives us out of our own awareness.

Impatience ends when you can go back inside yourself with enough confidence to let awareness unfold. Confidence cannot be forced. You will be adequate in your own eyes when you experience deeper and deeper levels of understanding. If you are impatient, you need to face the reality that you aren't the best at everything, nor do you need to be. Stop yourself when you feel overshadowed by greater genius, talent, wealth, status, or accomplishment. The only real person inside you is you. That person is a seed whose growth is unlimited. The way you make seeds grow is with nourishment, and in this case that nourishment comes from paying attention. Be willing to face yourself, whatever you think your shortcomings are. Only a direct encounter with yourself brings the nourishment of attention, and the more nourishment you offer, the greater your growth will be.

Secret # 15



EVERYTHING IS PURE ESSENCE

AT LAST, EVERY LAYER OF THE ONION has been peeled away. We come face to face with the indescribable, the secret at the core of life. Yet words have almost reached their limit.

What do you have when you find yourself facing the indescribable? You can only try with inadequate words to describe it. The mind can't help itself. Used to putting everything into a thought, it cannot grasp *something* beyond thought.

We each draw a world of line, form, and color using invisible ink. Our instrument is no more than a speck of consciousness, like a pencil point moving across a blank piece of paper. Yet everything pours out of that single point. Could anything be more mysterious and at the same time more miraculous? A point infinitely smaller than a pencil point draws the shape of the universe.

That point is made of essence, or the purest form of Being. Essence is the ultimate mystery because it manages to do three things at once:

It conceives everything in existence.

It turns what it has imagined into reality.

It enters that reality and keeps it alive.