A Rationale for Being

Chuck Trunks

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Nampa, Idaho

Edited by Emily Faye Cothran

For more information or additional copies, please contact Chuck Trunks at chucktrunks@gmail.com.

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There was a time when I felt safe—shielded from what lurks within the underbelly of a society predicated on corruption, exploitation, and manipulation. “I’m too smart, too aware, to be seduced by the ruling class’s lies,” I’d tell myself. But then one day, you wake up and find yourself exactly where you said you’d never be—smack dab in the middle of the spider’s web. Reality hits hard: nobody’s coming to save you. That’s when I realized it was up to me to save myself.

Although packaged within a playfully fictitious storyline acted out in a fifth-grade classroom in Idaho and at CBS Studios in New York City, *A Rationale for Being*—while utilizing a handful of fascinating scientific facts and well-understood psychological theories presented in the first three chapters of the book—concludes with a philosophical message that offers a way back to what you allowed others to take from you.

A Rationale for Being may be filled with interesting characters, passion, humor, and imagination, but make no mistake—this is the story of how I was able to save myself.

This book is dedicated to the memory of Herman and Barbara Jackson, whose rapidly failing health inspired me to write this book sooner rather than later. Sadly, they both passed away within a few weeks of each other before I finished it.

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Preface

I imagine prospective readers picking up this book, reading the back cover, and asking themselves, about an author they've never heard of before, "Who does this guy think he is?" I can't say that I blame them. After all, with a pretentious title like *A Rationale for Being*, who *wouldn't* think I was likening myself to the prophet Moses stumbling down from Mt. Sinai with a message from God? The truth is, I'm simply a guy who grew up in the 1970s, disinterested in following the same path as everyone else—not because I wanted to be different, but rather, because I *was* different. If asked to imagine what it would be like to live life on their terms, in their own unique way, I believe most people—if they weren't completely stymied by the question—would conjure up idealistic scenarios, where their distinctive lifestyle choices would be well-received by their family, friends, and society in general. I can assure you that wouldn't be the case.

In reality, authenticity often comes with a steep price tag. Here's what living life on *your* terms really looks like: Imagine a busy New York City sidewalk before the internet

and smartphones. It's 8:45 on a sunny Tuesday morning, and everyone is walking in the same direction. People, six to eight abreast, are practically shoulder-to-shoulder as they quickly scurry to their office jobs. Suddenly, a man wearing a fedora turns around and begins to walk against the flow of human traffic. He is met with neither admiration nor kindness. Instead, people are barely making room for him as he takes one shoulder bump after another. He hears things like "Watch where you're going!", "Wrong way, moron!", "What's the matter with you?", and "Dammit, you just made me spill my coffee!"

I'm certainly not the first, nor will I be the last, to face disappointment, contempt, and even hostility from friends, family, teachers, coaches, significant others, coworkers, and society for simply living life in a way that makes sense to me. Soon after I started writing *A Rationale for Being*, I realized that only a person like me could write a book such as this, giving me a renewed, yet profound, sense of relevance and purpose. I looked to my editor, Faye, for a sanity check:

"Do you think I'll come off delusional or self-aggrandizing if I write that in the preface?" I asked over the phone.

“It depends on the reasons why you believe that,” she replied in her unmistakable southern twang.

“First of all, to write a book like this, a person would have to have a special blend of personality, disposition, intellect, and consciousness to even be capable of contemplating, articulating, and writing about our mind-body interconnectedness with the universe. But to derive a philosophical answer to the existential question, ‘Why do I exist?’ from within that same mind-body interconnectedness with the universe, that person would have to be on a path few have taken.”

“I agree,” said Faye. “But what would—”

“Wait, I’m not finished,” I interrupted. “While that same person works to unify the mind, body, and universe *and* provide a rationale for our existence, they simultaneously offer an escape route from the United States of Dystopia—a country so bloated with corruption, greed, immorality, cruelty, and indifference that it’s beyond rescue from the fate that annihilated previous empires.”

“Geez, Chuck, your latest book sounds insanely ambitious.”

“I know,” I said. “That’s why it’s important to me that the reader understands that it takes more than just brains to write a book like this; it takes having rebuilt oneself over and over again after being systematically crushed by family, friends, significant others, employers, corporations, and society—all because I wanted to live life without a script. Each rebuild took me further from roles and relationships that emptied me and closer to what protects the gift of life from inevitable fate and those who seek to destroy it.”

“The preface of a book is supposed to answer *why* you wrote the book—not what qualifies you to write it,” offered my get-to-the-point, no-nonsense editor.

“I get that, Faye, but if they can’t relate to me, my words will sound hollow to them. I’m literally blowing a whistle and waving them over to a path that has the look and feel of running away from life when it’s actually a way back to your authentic self. Even with guidance and self-motivation, the reader must work to overcome a society that demands constant busyness and screen time, which obliterates boredom and

idleness—two necessary ingredients for finding your way back to nature, spirituality, others, and yourself."

"Oh my god, Chuck. I can't wait to read this one!"

"Don't get your hopes up too high," I cautioned.

"And why's that?"

"Just like those TV ads—especially the ones telling you to ask your doctor if fill-in-the-blank is right for you—*A Rationale for Being* also comes with irritating fine print. It goes something like this: Warning: If you follow the author's advice, it could be one of the greatest things to have happen to you. Unfortunately, nobody will care."

Introduction

What would you do if you discovered something that could help people transcend the feeling of hopelessness, anxiety, and depression caused by having to pretend that life in today's society isn't a death sentence? What if you knew it would cost them nothing other than the time and energy they were wasting on social media, television, online dating, and the so-called news? What if you understood that the remedy—their salvation—was already inside of them, requiring no insurance premiums, prescription drugs, doctor visits, copays, monthly subscriptions, or permissions of any kind? You'd write a book, of course! But what if the essence of *A Rationale for Being* relied heavily on scientific facts from biology, genetics, chemistry, atomic physics, metaphysics, quantum mechanics, cosmology, and even ecology? You'd package your sentient message of enlightenment inside a fictional premise that promised to make it entertaining and relatable for readers to comprehend, of course!

Set in an Idaho elementary school, the opening three chapters of *A Rationale for Being* unfold within a fifth-grade

classroom, where students, parents, teachers, a television production team, and over four billion viewers bear witness to astonishing realities about the human body and mind never seen outside of a laboratory. The respective goals of the first three chapters are clear. The intention behind Chapter One, "Mind-Body Separation," is to not only demonstrate to the reader that the mind (non-physical) and body (physical) are two distinct entities but also to set the stage for the next two chapters. Whereas Chapter Two, "Body Conscious," focuses on proving to the reader how our bodies are extensions of the physical universe, Chapter Three, "Mind over Matter," offers an explanation of how our minds are woven into a cosmic, interstellar feedback loop.

With the table set with scientific facts and well-established psychological theories supporting the notion of mind-body interconnectedness with the universe, the conclusion of *A Rationale for Being* rightly assumes that knowing my version of the grand design is not enough for the reader. I can easily imagine them being genuinely fascinated by the first three chapters of this book; however, the question the reader should be asking is, "How is knowing all this going to change my life?" While I wrote the conclusion, I kept this question in the

forefront of my mind as the story's setting transitions from Idaho to CBS Studios in New York City. Utilizing what was exactly learned in the first three chapters, I chart a course toward a glitch in the matrix—an escape route from what the ruling class of America has done to our country, our communities, our homes, our relationships, and our minds.

Chapter 1: Mind-Body Separation

Break a Leg

"Ten minutes to showtime, people!" shouted Bruce from across the packed classroom. "In ten minutes, we'll be broadcasting to the entire world!" The unflappable MSNBC television director wearing a faded Hawaiian shirt rotated on the heels of his worn New Balance sneakers, stopping as soon as his eyes found mine. Despite the dirty-blonde man bun, scraggly beard, and random skin doodles, I was surprised by how easy it was to both like and trust the thirty-something-year-old. After all, I had only one shot at this. Bruce Warner was not only competent, but he was also a calming force to everyone involved. No wonder the bigwigs at Comcast tapped him for the job. He made a beeline toward me, zigzagging between the yellow-topped desks and smiling at the upturned faces of the excited children.

He reflexively covered the headset's microphone with his free hand since the other was cradling an iPad against his chest. He leaned in and asked, "How goes it, Dr. Chuck? All set to stun the world?"

Bruce was the only person I didn't mind addressing me as Dr. Chuck. I preferred Chuck or Mr. Trunks because anything with "doctor" in it sounded pretentious and self-indulgent. After earning two PhDs, one in molecular biology and the other in theoretical physics, including a handful of honorary degrees and distinctions from various institutions in the United States and Western Europe, I was well past the need for further recognition or validation. In fact, I was sick of it. At 61 years of age, I simply wanted to offer my fellow human beings something to seriously ponder before my relevance completely ran out like sand through an hourglass. In other words, the end of my 15 minutes of fame was fast approaching. "C'mon, Bruce. You know I was born for this, right?" I replied. "The better question is why are you dressed like you skateboarded here?"

"Good. Good," he said absently, obviously missing my little joke; his eyes were focused on what was behind me. "I'm never going to get used to that thing," he continued. "It looks like a pool table wrapped in polished stainless steel. And what's *that* strange gizmo next to it? I hadn't seen that before."

“The High-Performance Atomic Spectrophotometer—er, I mean the ‘pool table’—is where the magic will happen this afternoon, but it won’t work without Google’s quantum computer, Willow,” I replied. “It’s the fastest of its kind on earth with 105 qubits. It can complete tasks in less than a minute that would’ve otherwise taken a regular binary computer more than 10,000 years.”

Bruce stepped in front of me as if he felt safer having something between him and the space-age apparatus behind me. “Spare me the mumbo-jumbo, Dr. Chuck,” he chided. “To me, it looks like the pool table made friends with an eight-foot-tall jellyfish trying to disguise itself as a chandelier. The whole ensemble totally creeps me out.”

“Hey, I like that description of the quantum computer! The kids will love it. I think I’ll use it today,” I joked.

“Just stick to the script, Dr. Chuck.”

In a more serious tone, I inquired about the status of the one and only guest I’d have on during the 90-minute presentation. “I take it that the star of the show is already here, yes?” I asked.

“Yes, Mrs. G is with her doctors and family in the principal’s office as we speak,” he answered while holding my gaze. In less than two weeks of working with Bruce, I’d come to view him as a stickler for details and a man of rare emotional depth.

And with that, the award-winning television director slapped me on the shoulder of my sport coat and walked toward one of the cameras stationed midway against a curated wall of belated Halloween decorations and fifth-grade artwork. A second camera dominated the center of the room. A third, operated by a single cameraman, was a handheld unit designated as a floater for the all-important close-ups. For now, I remained perched on top of my stool, knowing I’ll begin to pace back and forth once I start lecturing. When Bruce suggested removing it during rehearsals, I quickly defended the wooden stool, which looked freshly pilfered from the stage of a local comedy club, telling him, “No, no, leave it here. I like having options.”

While Bruce circulated through the buzzing classroom, gathering last-minute assurances from his production team leads, I peeked over the top of my handwritten notes at the group of 10-year-olds in kid-sized desks facing me and their

parents seated in adult-sized plastic chairs behind them. Temperature highs and lows in Southwest Idaho in early November were always a challenge to pin down, especially for the recent influx of transplants from California and Arizona, which explained why so many of the parents sat with big, puffy coats either draped over the backs of their chairs or folded across their laps. Whereas the children's faces were painted with expressions you'd expect to see on a snowy Christmas morning, their parental counterparts presented a mixed bag of nervous smiles, jittery eye movements, and sporadic facial tics. Their expressions ranged from "I'm giving my little princess a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity" to "What kind of lunacy am I about to expose my innocent little boy to?"

"Two minutes, people!" shouted Bruce, jolting me from my thoughts.

His booming voice in such a cramped space, coupled with the sudden change in lighting, had a sobering effect on me. What may have looked like a momentary case of stage fright was actually an internal shudder stemming from an undeniable

truth. Deep down, I knew what to expect—that most of the viewing audience will hate what I have to say.

It's Elementary

"Let's imagine for a moment," I said in my best Carl Sagan voice, "that you and I were sitting comfortably on an asteroid, looking at the jewel-like Earth Stone. From our vantage point, the Earth would appear as small as a glass marble if you were holding it in your fingertips at an arm's length away—no larger than your thumbnail. We'd see the sun and crave its warmth since we're so far away. Without Earth's atmosphere obscuring our view of the heavens, we'd be able to see the crispness of the chalk-white moon and numerous blinking satellites orbiting our shimmering blue home. We'd have planned for the bitter cold and absolute silence, but not for the lack of inky blackness we grew to expect of outer space. In fact, it's just the opposite. Light from countless stars in countless galaxies radiates in every direction, illuminating a universe teeming with an array of celestial bodies, from planets to moons, comets to meteorites, and black holes to colorful nebulae clouds."

I had their attention. Who wouldn't be able to imagine what I had just described? A lecture that hinged on the listener making small leaps of faith with me fared much better if I began with the big picture first.

"It's a peaceful image, isn't it?" I said, casually sliding off my stool. "Hello, everyone. My name is Chuck Trunks, and contrary to what the internet and social media had to say about me after my interview with Anderson Cooper on *60 Minutes* last Sunday, I don't think of myself as a 21st-century Willy Wonka, nor do I believe that I'm standing in my very own chocolate factory in front of a group of schoolchildren holding golden tickets to today's events. I specifically chose Pine Branch Elementary to deliver this presentation for two simple reasons. First of all, I believe in exposing children to avant-garde ideas *before* their sense of wonderment and creative minds are silenced through repetitious dogma, systematically pounding square pegs through round holes. It's 'mission accomplished' when the next generation blindly accepts—without question—what came before them. My apologies, Principal Reid. Secondly, I don't live very far from the school, and I'd like for the City of Nampa to be known for something other than crumbling strip malls, urban sprawl, soul-crushing

traffic, and agro-industrial hellscapes. No disrespect, Mayor Campbell."

I stepped toward a nearby counter and reached for one of the pre-opened water bottles. Just before taking my first sip, I noticed a blinking red light on the side camera—my cue, according to Bruce, to face that particular camera when addressing the television audience. Instead, I returned to face the kids and parents and asked, "Wouldn't you like to make sense of the entire universe and everything in it so you could understand your reason for existing? You didn't ask to be born. None of us did. You just happened to show up one day. Then, when you were like five or six, perhaps your mom and dad sat you down after losing a beloved grandparent and gently explained that life itself comes with its own bubble-popping fine print? Maybe an older kid, sensing your immaturity, blurted the inevitable truth to you in the middle of a neighborhood game of kickball? At least that's how *I* found out. When the game ended, I walked home shellshocked, asking myself, "What's the point?"

A little girl wearing a pink and white dress raised her hand excitedly in the front row. Her expression clearly said she had

something important to share. “Yes, Amy. What is it?” I asked.

“My grandpa died two days after Easter, and he’s in heaven now.”

Of course she nodded solemnly after I obligingly asked if she still misses him. “Well, Amy, I think you might feel a little better about his passing by the time I’ve finished my talk this afternoon,” I continued. “In a way, you might even feel closer to your grandpa even though he’s gone.”

I returned to the stool and placed the water bottle on the seat. Next, I asked everyone to return to the mental images they created in their mind’s eye when I described our stellar view of the cosmos from the asteroid. After a short pause, I dropped the first of many surprises. “Everything you see—and I mean *everything*,” I began while gesturing toward the periodic chart on the wall behind me, “is comprised of various combinations of only 118 different elements—including the orbiting satellites, the Earth itself, and everything *on* Earth. And in case you’re wondering, birds, fish, trees, butterflies, bicycles,

clouds, air, and you name it—even you and me—are an assortment of these same 118 elements."

I stepped closer to the kids in front of me and asked, "Can anyone name an element for me?"

"Gold!" shouted a boy with dark eyes and a wild mop of curly brown hair.

"You're right, Jeffrey. Good job."

While looking over his shoulder at his mom, he shouted, "Silver!"

"You're on a roll, Jeffrey." I looked at the parents in the back and joked, "I guess we all know who's going to own a pawn shop someday, huh?"

From the corner of my eye, I saw Bruce give me a thumbs up on the impromptu joke, followed by a rotating finger motion, telling me to speed things up. Although I had forfeited my compensation and raised enough money to ensure there wouldn't be any commercial sponsors or disruptive ads during

the entirety of my presentation, I still had to adhere to a definitive time limit. Just another reason to appreciate Bruce.

An arm the color of alabaster shot up from the middle of the desks, waving with urgency. “Do you know another element, Phyllis?” I asked.

“Water,” replied the blonde, blue-eyed girl who could easily pass as Principal Reid’s granddaughter.

“Water isn’t an element, Phyllis,” I said as I retrieved my water bottle from the stool behind me. While holding it up in front of the fifth-graders, I explained that just as salt is composed of only two elements, sodium and chlorine, water is comprised of hydrogen and oxygen. “Salt and water,” I continued, “are called compounds, which means they contain two or more different elements. Sugar has three elements, but the box of baking soda in your fridge has four. Isn’t that intriguing? Again, those 118 elements organized on the periodic chart are responsible for all visible matter in the entire universe. Think of them as the ultimate Lego set.”

When Bruce gestured that they were getting ready to bring out Mrs. G, I nodded and quickly moved on to the last thing I wanted to say about elements. “Now that we understand the basics of elements and compounds, let’s dive deeper into what defines an element. According to Google, an element is a pure substance made of only one type of atom and cannot be broken down into simpler substances by chemical means. So, if I dropped a gold brick on the table in front of you, you’d know that it’s totally comprised of gold atoms, each identical to one another. To give you an idea of how small an atom is, one grain of salt has around 600 trillion sodium atoms and 600 trillion chlorine atoms. That’s 1,200 trillion atoms in total! Now does anyone know how many billions are in one trillion?”

A baritone voice from the back shouted, “One thousand!”

I was surprised to hear an adult’s voice responding, figuring everyone understood I was directing all my questions to the students. “You’re right,” I replied and added, “Isn’t that mind-blowing?” Without waiting for a response, I stepped back and stood in front of the quantum computer’s control panel. While typing in a command, I half-turned toward the side camera’s

blinking red light and said, “If you think *that’s* mind-blowing, wait until you see what *this* baby can do.”

Goodbye Mrs. G

Meanwhile, as the peculiar-looking quantum computer began to power up, mesmerizing everyone in the room, I took the opportunity to explain some of the fascinating features of Google’s Willow, citing my book, *Physics from the Heart: A Quantum Story*, as an excellent source for the layman. As if cued to do so, a collective hush fell over the room as a thin cloud of light stretched across the flat surface of the High-Performance Atomic Spectrophotometer, aka, the pool table. A clicking noise emerged from the hissing computer, reminding me of the sound my stove makes right before the gas is pleasingly ignited into a circular blue halo. While Willow dutifully worked through its internal diagnostics, I walked around the H-PAS and stood behind it, marveling at the thin layer of light wafting from one end of the tabletop to the other like a sheet of dry ice.

“Since we’re a few minutes ahead of schedule,” I announced with an impish smirk, “who’s up for a game of air hockey?”

After the laughter died down, I returned to the front of the room and peered into the glassy eye of the center camera. It was time for the most sensitive part of the demonstration—one that required the brain's prefrontal cortex's penchant for reasoning rather than the hippocampus's ability to imagine. In other words, I would need the people in this classroom and the worldwide viewing audience to be open-minded and receptive of scientific fact. Although everything I was about to show the world had been duplicated at much smaller scales in various laboratories across the globe over the last several years, no one had attempted to subject a living, breathing human being to the power of the H-PAS—especially over a live broadcast.

"I'm sure most of you are aware of what's about to happen," I began. "Some of you have compared me to the late pathologist Jack Kevorkian, a man who assisted in over 100 suicides, one of which was broadcast on *60 Minutes* in 1998. Yes, someone will die on the H-PAS this afternoon, but I won't liken it to 'assisted suicide.' Whereas actress Gwyneth Paltrow referred to her divorce from Chris Martin of Coldplay in 2015 as 'conscientious decoupling,' I see today's demonstration as 'conscientious expiring.' Of course, the most difficult aspect of making this groundbreaking presentation a reality was

getting all the necessary blessings from a litany of agencies and, most importantly, the McGillicuddy family. But before we bring out 93-year-old Mrs. G, the cherished matriarch of the McGillicuddy clan, I'd like to say a few words about the Idahoan native."

Telepathy or instinct made me look at the rear of the classroom just as Bruce held up his hand with all five fingers splayed, warning me that Mrs. G would be making her entrance in a mere five minutes. I returned my gaze back to the parents and their kids, relishing the opportunity to speak highly of a woman whose lifelong stature as a selfless humanitarian was disguised within a five-foot frame weighing in at less than a hundred pounds.

"Ruth Emily Ballard was born and raised on a 270-acre potato farm in Blackfoot, Idaho, in 1933. After marrying Horace McGillicuddy in 1952, the newlyweds settled here in Nampa, where Horace worked for the Union Pacific Railroad while Mrs. G tended to their five children. After Horace died in 1993 at the age of 63, Mrs. G, a self-taught accountant, continued to keep the books for two food processing plants in nearby Caldwell well into her 80s. Not only did she outlive her

husband of 41 years, but Mrs. G also survived the tragic losses of three of her adult children. Soon after I began searching for a volunteer for today's monumental exhibition, I came across Mrs. G's application. Out of the 17,000 that were submitted, I chose to work with her and her wonderful family because they possessed most of what I was looking for—a full understanding of everything that would happen here today and an ironclad conviction to aid in the betterment of all mankind; plus, she has a terminal illness with not much time left on the clock."

Suddenly, half the overhead lights went dark, something I had asked Bruce to do the moment Mrs. G was brought into the room. It was less of a cue and more out of respect for her and her family's act of courage and sacrifice. Besides a sedated Mrs. G, three others entered the subdued fifth-grade classroom: two nurses, one at each end of the gurney transporting Mrs. G, and her doctor, a hyper-focused Indian man who looked younger than Bruce, pushing a cart of sophisticated monitoring equipment tethered to the motionless white-haired lady. Having practiced the choreographed ministrations numerous times during the prior week, they knew what to do, wasting no movements while maintaining

impassive expressions. After gently placing Mrs. G's fragile body on the H-PAS, the nurses exited the near-silent room, taking the empty gurney with them.

As Mrs. G lay with a thin white sheet covering her body from the neck down, Dr. Gupta centered his attention on the pulsing digital readouts from the humming equipment charged with monitoring her brain, lung, and heart function. I stepped aside after introducing the Stanford graduate to allow a professional medical doctor to explain the particulars of Mrs. G's present condition without disclosing the source of her affliction.

"Earlier today," he began, "Mrs. G was removed from life support after spending a couple of hours with her family and a few close friends at St. Luke's Hospital. During those precious hours, she was lucid, animated even, despite the enormity of today's events. As of now, she is very much alive—as you would be if you were put under while your dentist removed your wisdom teeth—but without her medication, her ventilator, and her ventricular implant, Mrs. G will pass away in about three minutes."

"Dr. Gupta," I asked, "would you please prepare the H-PAS?"

Without a word, the Mumbai native removed the sheet from atop a peaceful-looking Mrs. G, folded it, and placed it on the cart. Next, he unclipped the spaghetti-like tendrils from her naked body, disconnecting her from the monitoring equipment. He turned toward the quantum computer's control panel and pressed a flashing green button. As the thin layer of foggy light evaporated from the tabletop, I looked at the little girl who had lost her grandfather.

"Amy, would it be alright if I asked you to help me with this next part?"

Surprisingly, she didn't turn around to look at her parents for cautionary approval. Instead, she stood up from her desk, smoothed out her dress, and bravely walked to the front of her classroom.

Weight of the World

"Now we need to act quickly," I urged. "Amy, would you please go to Willow's control panel and type in capital Q-C-M, backslash, followed by a lowercase *a*?"

Amy stepped past me but stopped when she looked at the nearly translucent old woman. “Why is Mrs. G naked?” she asked.

“Because we’re going to weigh her,” I replied. “The H-PAS is equipped with a quartz crystal microbalance that’s sensitive enough to measure the weight of a single atom. You certainly wouldn’t need something like this as your bathroom scale, but it’s critically important for what’s going to happen next.”

After she finished typing in the command, a flashing yellow button appeared on the control panel’s computer screen. She looked at me for further instruction. “Go ahead and press it with your finger, Amy, and tell me what comes up on the screen,” I said.

“I see the number 98 with a whole bunch of digits on the right side of the decimal point,” reported Amy.

“How many digits?” I asked. “Can you count them, please?” I caught Dr. Gupta’s eyes while Amy counted each decimal place. Without saying a word, I knew he was telling me that Mrs. G was soon to pass.

“24,” announced Amy.

“Good job,” I replied. “What that means is that the H-PAS, with help from Willow, weighed Mrs. G to the septillionth place—an atomic level of accuracy. Again, the H-PAS is so high-tech, it can detect and weigh a single atom. I don’t know about you, but I think that’s incredible.”

Dr. Gupta began reattaching the cuffs, clips, and patches of the monitoring equipment to Mrs. G’s body, making Amy think that was her cue to return to her desk. I stopped her mid-stride and had her stand next to me while the doctor checked Mrs. G’s vital signs. After 20 seconds, Dr. Gupta disconnected the electrodes and shook his head. She was gone. After a full minute of silence, Mrs. G’s doctor somberly coiled the monitoring cables on top of the medical cart and pushed it toward the exit. All eyes were on him as the squeak of the cart’s caster wheels on waxed linoleum followed him out the door.

“Amy,” I said, “I know it’s strange to be up here next to a corpse, but time is of the essence. Would you please type in capital Q-C-M, backslash, followed by a lowercase *b*?”

While Amy bravely did as I asked, I took a moment to survey the ultra-alert, wide-eyed kids, who could hear and see everything. I couldn't imagine a video game like Minecraft or Fortnite enrapturing their minds more than what they were witnessing on the H-PAS.

"Should I press the flashing yellow button again?" she asked.

"Yes, and tell me what you see."

"I'm seeing the same thing as last time: the number 98 with a whole bunch of digits on the right side of the decimal point."

"That's good," I said. "Now type in capital D-I-F, backslash, lowercase *a* minus *b*, and tell me what you see."

"It says zero," she replied.

"Excellent, Amy. You did a terrific job. You may take your seat now, but I'll need your help again in a few minutes. In fact," I continued, scanning the faces of the kids who were looking up at me, "I'll be needing *many* of you to come up and help me."

It was easy to pick out who Amy's parents were as she made her way back to her desk. Dad was giving his daughter a thumbs-up while her proud mom blew kisses and dabbed the corners of her eyes with a tissue.

"What Amy and I have just demonstrated," I began, "is that Mrs. G weighs exactly the same only moments after her passing as she did when she was alive—right down to the very last atom. 'Why does that even matter?' you may ask. It matters a lot. Remember when I said that all visible matter within the entire universe—which includes human beings—comes from the 118 elements on the periodic chart? Well, the late Mrs. G is no exception. Although the average human being is comprised of around 60 different elements, only 21 are considered biologically essential, like potassium, calcium, sodium, magnesium, iron, and zinc. However, 96% of a person's total body mass comes from only four elements: oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, and nitrogen—with oxygen alone accounting for a staggering 65%. When we look at the dearly departed woman on the H-PAS, we see all of her atoms arranged into a form we can all recognize, but what if we could indulge our obsessive-compulsive nature and reorganize all of Mrs. G's atoms not by body part but instead by element type?"

A stirring in the back of the room made everyone turn to look. “In a few moments,” I announced, “you’ll be needing the eyewear being handed out by the production staff. Don’t worry. You’re not in any danger. These dark glasses are like the ones you get from the eye doctor after a dilation. It’s just a precaution that the TV audience needn’t be concerned about.”

When I caught my little helper’s eye, I waved Amy over and handed her a pair of shades. I had her stand next to me while we waited. I looked down at the top of her head and whispered, “Are you okay with being up here?” She looked up and nodded enthusiastically, making me think of how shy and distrusting I was at her age. Once the room had quieted, I took center stage again and began to explain what was going to happen next.

“Amy is going to start the atomizing sequence that will rearrange Mrs. G’s atoms from biological function to specific element types. When the dust settles, so to speak, we should be left with around 60 different piles, if you will, of elemental atoms. I’ll warn you now that many of the piles won’t be visible to the naked eye because numerous elements appear in

the human body in only trace amounts. For example, we should be able to see a small atomic pile of calcium, which constitutes about 1.5% of the average person's body weight, but since iron's percentage is only 0.005%, we won't be able to detect that particular atomic pile with just our eyes."

Approaching from my right, Bruce's third camera operator moved in to frame and capture the impending metamorphosis in ultra-high-definition with his state-of-the-art handheld. His sudden presence startled my seemingly unflappable assistant with hair ribbons that matched the pink and white flowers on her dress.

"It's okay," I said reassuringly. "I need you to type capital D-N-A, backslash, followed by lowercase f-l-u-x, and tell me what you see."

"Something's wrong," she answered. "I must have typed the wrong thing because the screen is totally black."

"That's fine. Just wait a few seconds. What's happening now?"

“A flashing white circle just came up,” she replied.

“Perfect. Go ahead and press it with your finger. Then put on your glasses and come stand next to me.”

The H-PAS Has Spoken

At first, the vibration beneath my feet was no different from what I’d feel while standing in a moving elevator. Suddenly, the classroom lights began to flicker randomly. Since cell phones weren’t allowed, only the monitor above Willow’s control panel glowed steadily. Across its cerulean blue surface, a mixture of strange symbols, complicated mathematics, and 3-D vector diagrams disappeared as fast as they popped up on the illuminated screen. As a blanket of misty light began to fill the stainless-steel tabletop, enveloping Mrs. G’s lifeless body, the needling vibrations downshifted into lower-frequency thumps I could feel in my back teeth. They say that our sense of smell is the oldest of the five senses and that it can trigger the most vivid of memories. Instead of staying focused on the atomizing sequence, the acrid scent of inorganic solvents took me back more than 25 years to a time

when I dismantled an old HP laptop just to see what it looked like inside.

“Alright, folks. Here we go!” I shouted.

I had fantasized about offering a play-by-play account of everything that was happening—including a final call as memorable as Al Michaels’ famous “Do you believe in miracles? Yes!” Instead, I could only watch along with everyone else. Besides thumping, the H-PAS was also emitting a high-pitched whistling noise that made it impossible to shout over. As the piercing sound rose in intensity, so did the luminosity of the light clouds swirling on its surface. It was deafening, blinding—and more chaotic than controlled. I felt Amy’s hand grab the cuff of my sleeve just as an incredible pulse of white light erupted from the center of the H-PAS.

“And *that*, my friends, is atomic sequencing through chemical electrolysis,” I declared.

I removed the dark glasses from my face, which prompted everyone to do the same. I felt Amy’s hand let go of me as she

removed hers. The cramped classroom still smelled like someone had attempted to microwave a circuit board, but that didn't distract from what was revealed on the H-PAS. The scene was a perfect example of ironic juxtaposition. Sophisticated space-age equipment, on loan from both Google and NASA—and governed by the same mathematics that gave birth to the field of quantum mechanics—created something that looked almost primordial. The conical tops of seven or eight piles of elemental atoms poked through a thin layer of cottony light, reminding me of the view outside my airplane window when flying into Seattle on cloudy days. But instead of pointing out Mt. Rainier, Mt. Baker, Mt. Adams, and Mount Olympus, I was staring at molehills of oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, and nitrogen.

"Amy, would you please type in capital C-O-M-P, backslash, followed by a lowercase *b* minus *c*?"

"We're weighing the atom piles, aren't we?" she asked as she began punching in the command.

"Yes, but it's more appropriate to say we're weighing *Mrs. G* again," I explained. "After all, those are still *her* atoms."

“It says zero again,” she reported.

“Sounds like the atomic sequencing worked perfectly,” I said as I walked toward the counter with the water bottles. I unzipped my backpack, thinking how much I despised stuffy briefcases, and pulled out the priceless moon rock that the fine folks of NASA had given me weeks earlier. I handed it to Amy, along with the framed proof of authenticity, and thanked her for her assistance. She gushed wildly as she practically skipped back to her desk, reminding me that she was, indeed, a 10-year-old. After noticing the lights were returned to full power, including the ones that were turned off when Mrs. G first entered the classroom, I gestured at Bruce, who understood we no longer had to look at a naked body. However, he, like everyone else, would soon learn that Ruth Emily Ballard was *still* on top of the H-PAS.

“Isn’t it compelling,” I began, “that despite reorganizing Mrs. G’s atoms into their respective element types, she still weighs exactly the same—right down to the very last atom? Again, you might be thinking, why does that even matter? Every logical person knows that a car weighs the same whether it’s assembled or disassembled, right? I hear you, but hang in there

with me and you'll soon know why this is an important observation. I think a lot of us can imagine elemental atoms making up body parts like skin, arms, legs, hair, and teeth, but what about something as complex as a strand of DNA inside the nucleus of a human cell? Carbon atoms form the DNA backbone, nitrogen atoms form the four different genetic bases, and hydrogen atoms hold the double helix together. Like I said, *all* visible matter, including human beings, comes from one or more of the 118 elements on the periodic chart."

I moved away from the side camera and stood directly in front of the schoolchildren. From behind, I sensed the jerky movements of the cameraman with the handheld. "Please don't get too close to the H-PAS," I cautioned. "I haven't taken an inventory of her elements yet, so there might be some exposed lead or mercury." He backed away immediately, giving me a brief thrill from having told a believable white lie on live TV. I just wanted him out of the way.

"Okay, kids. I need you to lift up your desktops and see if there's a blue envelope inside. If so, I need you to come up here with the envelope and stand behind the H-PAS, facing

the room. If you don't want to come up, give it to a classmate who does."

I love watching kids react to unexpected situations. Because they've yet to learn the socially mandated fine art of hiding their true selves, their unique personalities are revealed in moments they aren't prepared for. To some, everything is a game—a competition to determine the necessary pecking order. To others, it's a chance to nosedive into uncharted territory—an opportunity to meet the abyss head-on. And for a few, like me when I was a kid, it's a deer-in-the-headlights response until they've had enough time to assess the situation and rationally choose the right course of action.

When all six children were standing behind the H-PAS, holding their little blue envelopes like winning scratch-off tickets, I scanned the faces of the kids who remained at their desks. All, except for Amy, looked dejected. She was looking down at the moon rock in her hand and smiling.

Sealed with a Kiss

A week earlier, I had met with Mrs. G's family and friends, asking them to compile six attributes that best describe their soon-to-be-deceased friend, mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother. I told them, "I want you to pare it down to just six words, with each word written on an index card and individually sealed in these blue envelopes. For example, if she was trustworthy, write that down and put it in the envelope." "What for?" asked Norma, Mrs. G's 71-year-old skeptical daughter, who had traveled from Spokane, Washington, for the event. "Don't worry," I reassured her. "These cards are not only a crucial part of the presentation, but they will also serve to honor your mother."

"Before we get to the envelopes," I said to the classroom audience, "I need to prepare the H-PAS first. You're really going to appreciate this next feature."

After typing the command in Willow, I stood beside the excited children and watched while the layer of frosty mist retreated from the tabletop, revealing many piles of elemental atoms nowhere near as tall as the "big four."

“Hey, Carlos,” I whispered. “Would you mind helping me out?”

“Do I have to say anything?” he whispered back.

“No, not at all. You just have to press a glowing orange button when it pops up on the small screen in front of you.”

When a look of bewilderment emerged on his face, I leaned over and pointed at the seldom-used interface, which was cleverly built into the top rail of the H-PAS. “It’s easy to miss,” I whispered.

No sooner had Carlos removed his finger than the names of the elements present on the tabletop materialized above their respective atom piles in colorful holographic letters. I had to shake my head at the audible gasps heard around the room, prompting me to sarcastically say, “Yeah, it’s pretty cool to see a hovering purple phosphorus, a yellow sulfur, and an orange copper, but those are just *words* in 3-D laser light—you just witnessed a first-ever live atom sequencing event, folks!”

“Another cool thing to point out,” I continued, “is that the H-PAS is able to defy a few pesky natural laws of the kinetic energy of matter. Some of the elements you see here are only stable in gas or liquid form; yet, here on the H-PAS, Mrs. G’s atoms are presented unilaterally as piles of powdery solids. If this were not the case, we’d all be toasted by the intense heat generated from out-of-control chemical chain reactions. But don’t worry. The production staff will be handing out lead aprons for everyone. If they’re too heavy to lift, just ask your neighbor to help you drape it over your chest and midsection.”

I paused a few seconds, allowing the leg-pulling to marinate for maximum effect, catching my director’s eyes in the process. Bruce was smiling and shaking his head, playfully feigning either his disapproval or weariness of my incessant joke-telling. Feeling emboldened, I doubled down and pointed out that Mrs. G not only had some silver atoms in her, but she also had a little gold, too. “In fact, we all do,” I said, while looking directly at the seated 10-year-old future pawn shop owner. “We absorb trace amounts of these precious metals from what we eat, drink, and breathe before storing them in our skin, bones, liver, kidney, spleen, lungs, and brain. Did you get all that, Jeffrey?”

I came out from behind the H-PAS to retrieve my bottle of water from the stool. After taking two big swigs, I explained that I was kidding about the lead aprons, but my remarks about Mrs. G's gold and silver atoms weren't jokes.

"Now let's continue down the homestretch and get to the conclusion of this initial part of today's presentation, shall we?" I placed the water bottle back on the stool and returned to the H-PAS, positioning myself in the middle of the half-dozen schoolchildren. "Inside each of the envelopes, you'll find a description of Mrs. G. I have no idea what's written on the index cards," I lied, "but all you have to do is read it out loud and then point to it on the H-PAS. For example, it might say 'knobby knees,' 'hard bones,' or 'pale blue eyes.'"

Alex, whose parents most likely wrestled him into his corduroy sport coat, spoke up from the other side of Carlos. He looked like a miniature college professor. All that was missing was the suede patches on the elbows and a pocket protector. "But wouldn't it be easier if Mrs. G wasn't reorganized into 58 piles of elemental atoms?" he asked.

Wow, this little guy really is a professor! "Excellent observation, Alex," I replied. "You're right. But give it your best shot. If I were you, I'd just point to oxygen or carbon if I didn't know the answer. Those two atoms are practically everywhere in the human body, right? But if you happen to know that bones contain phosphorus and calcium, go for it."

Soon after the kids began pulling the index cards out of the envelopes, their expressions went from anticipatory eagerness to stilted confusion. So far, my plan was working perfectly. I watched one little girl sharing what was written on her card with the classmates on either side of her. "What's wrong, Sasha?" I asked. The freckled-face redhead turned toward me and—through her expression alone—looked as if she was speaking for the other five. "Mine doesn't have a body part written on it, and I don't think the other cards do either," she said.

"Really? What does yours say?" I asked, doing my best to look as befuddled as her and her classmates.

"It says, 'funny.'"

“Hmm. Okay. Well, can you point to it on the H-PAS anyway?”

“Point to what?” she asked.

“It sounds like Mrs. G had a terrific sense of humor,” I explained. “Isn’t that a part of who she was, Sasha? You’re not just a skull, a face, skin, bones, hands, feet, organs, and ginger hair, are you?” Sasha slowly shook her head and looked toward who I presumed were her parents. “Of course, you’re not, and neither was Mrs. G. Let’s see what’s written on the other cards, okay?”

“Okay,” she said, “but I still don’t know where to point.”

“Let’s hold off on that for right now,” I replied.

Over the next few minutes, I had similar exchanges with the other children whose cards said ‘compassionate,’ ‘nurturing,’ ‘dependable,’ ‘honest,’ and ‘generous.’ Their inability to point out these six attributes of Mrs. G prompted me to ask them a rhetorical question: “If they’re not on the H-PAS, then where are they?”

And then it happened. One of the seated kids blurted out an answer without being called upon—a big no-no that the children were warned about doing. But I was far from annoyed. It was unscripted perfection that only a child could pull off—one that would open the door and pave the way to my conclusionary statements.

Amy had shouted, “They’re in heaven—like my grandpa!”

Mind-Body Separation

After ushering the children back to their desks and promising that they and their classmates will be receiving a Kindle Paperwhite, including a five-year reading subscription to Amazon Kids+, I turned my attention to Amy, who was making me wonder if the moon rock was less of a gift and more like a savvy investment on my part. “How can your grandpa be buried in a cemetery *and* be in heaven at the same time?” I asked.

While shuffling the moon rock back and forth between her hands, she replied, “His *soul* is in heaven.”

“Okay. But what’s a soul?” I pushed.

“It’s the ‘inside person,’” she clarified.

“So, you’re telling me that when you die, your inside person goes to heaven, right?”

“Yes.”

“Do you think people who are still living have souls, too?”

“Of course. Everyone has a soul.”

“I agree with you, Amy, but not everyone refers to their inside person as a soul. Some call it their spirit; others call it their true self. My best friend refers to her inside person as her inner voice. Personally, I go back and forth, calling it either consciousness or the mind. But they all basically mean the same thing. It’s like we’re all driving around by ourselves in our own little car with tinted windows. Nobody can see the driver behind the wheel. Nobody knows what the driver is thinking or feeling or what they’ll do next. All they can see is the outside of the car. Would you agree that a car is like a

person's body and the hidden driver is the inside person?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied.

"Then your way of thinking is in alignment with iconic philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, and René Descartes, all of whom rationalized the separateness of mind and body. So, in a way, Amy, with your understanding of the inside person, you're like a modern-day philosopher? Isn't that cool?"

Right away, I knew I had made a mistake. She tucked her arms against her chest and dropped her gaze to the moon rock clasped in her hands. I either embarrassed her or insulted her intelligence, most likely the latter. Of course she knew she wasn't a philosopher. She simply felt comfort in believing her grandpa's soul was in heaven. Rather than backtrack to save face, I chalked it up as a lesson learned and pushed forward.

"Isn't it ironic," I continued, looking into the fisheye of the center camera, "that it's the 'inside person' who we feel most when we interact with others, and yet, as the H-PAS clearly demonstrated, this invisible entity hasn't any mass or weight?"

I stepped toward the H-PAS, and while gesturing toward the 58 piles of elemental atoms, I said, “Here lies the late Ruth Emily McGillicuddy—all 98 pounds of her—the same weight and number of atoms she had when she was first wheeled into this room not more than 20 minutes ago. Even after passing away and having her atoms reorganized, these parameters remain unchanged. Whether we’re observing Mrs. G as a lifeless body or piles of elemental atoms, we cannot detect the hidden driver. No matter how many different ways we arrange and rearrange Mrs. G’s physical composition, we can only measure what’s left of the inoperable car that up until today carried her through life for 93 years.”

I walked toward Google’s gem of a computer and stood in front of the control panel. I paused for a moment, nodding at Bruce to let him know I was about to launch into the presentation’s second part. My fingers tapped along the keyboard, finishing in dramatic flair as I pressed ENTER. I returned to the front of the room and scanned the faces to see if I had lost anyone along the way. They were riveted and sitting on the edge of their seats—and, of course, I knew why.

“Even before today’s demonstration, I believe it’s fair to say that the vast majority of people, whether they’re spiritual or not, agree with the philosophical notion of mind-body separateness. Mrs. G’s family and friends will be the first to tell you that her hidden driver, inside person, soul, spirit, inner voice, mind, consciousness, or whatever you want to call it was felt by them during their emotional visitation with her this morning. We’re going to talk a lot more about the mind in the third part of today’s lecture, but the second part is wholly dedicated to understanding the body like the one you see on the H-PAS right now, which is, for the most part, no different than all the human bodies that ever existed—including the bodies of living people like you and me.”

Suddenly, as if on cue, Willow began repeating a pattern of three chirps followed by a deep rumble, exciting Carlos enough to make him raise his hand and causing me to conclude that his shyness must come and go.

“Yes, Carlos. What is it?”

“Are you going to turn Mrs. G back into her body?” he asked.

“No, Carlos. That’s not possible.”

“Why not? She’s dead already,” he reasoned.

“It’s more complicated than that,” I replied. “You’re right. She’s dead, but her body isn’t. Not by a long shot.”

Chapter 2: Body Conscious

Everlasting Life

"Bruce, can we have the lights turned off completely?" I asked. Despite overcast skies and a sinking mid-afternoon sun, autumn sunlight scattered off tiny water droplets trapped inside flat and featureless stratus clouds, sending light in every direction like a frosted lightbulb. A bank of southwest-facing windows in the classroom provided enough light for me to easily find my water bottle on top of the wooden stool. A small spotlight illuminated me just as I sat down. The red light on the center camera pulsed in accordance with my heartbeat—slow and steady with a hint of deep satisfaction from knowing what's to come.

"If you were asked to contemplate the meaning of everlasting life," I began, "I believe most of you would conjure up images of religious figures, mythical gods, vampires, or, my personal favorite, Peter Pan. If I were granted a *second* wish—my first being today's global presentation—I'd wish we never stopped being 10 years old. That way, our curiosity would remain intact, we'd still be kind to one another, and we wouldn't have

to backtrack at 50 to ‘find ourselves.’ But I digress. For most of my young life and into early adulthood, the idea of living for eternity seemed as probable as stumbling upon a Willy Wonka everlasting gobstopper. But all that would change in my early 30s after being introduced to the fascinating fields of atomic physics and quantum mechanics. Not only did I learn perpetual motion and never-ending energy were possible, but also that they’re integral to how the universe functions.”

When the screen above Willow’s control panel began to flash repeatedly, creating a short-lived strobe effect not seen since the disco ball went away, I asked Carlos if he’d like to be my assistant during the next phase of the presentation. Once again, he surprised me with his eager willingness. After all, we were broadcasting to all but 13 of the 195 countries around the globe. He wore a white long-sleeve dress shirt buttoned all the way up to his collar. It was neatly tucked into black trousers, making him look like he’d be clocking in at an upscale bodega after he finished helping me. I fought the urge to order a mojito from the dark-haired fifth-grader, opting instead to direct him to the quantum computer to type in the word ‘random’ in capital letters, followed by a backslash, and ending with the word ‘atom’ in lowercase.

After completing the task, he walked toward where I was sitting and stood beside me. “Do I need to get my dark glasses?” he whispered.

“Oh, no. We’re finished with those,” I whispered back, noticing that he exhibited the same rational thinking as the little professor, Alex.

I stood up and waved off the spotlight in preparation for what was about to happen. I led Carlos to the far side of the H-PAS and watched, along with everyone else, while the undulating light mist reclaimed the flat surface, removing all 58 piles of Mrs. G’s elemental atoms from our view. Immediately, the holographic names of all the elements disappeared as well, turning the H-PAS into a stage whose floor looked like the tops of clouds. Next, a translucent blue sphere the size of an exercise ball materialized and hovered a foot above the H-PAS. It was my cue to explain the unfolding of a true phenomenon.

“Just as I expected,” I began. “I asked Willow to select one random atom for us to observe, and of course, it picked one of Mrs. G’s oxygen atoms—the most abundant elemental atom

in the human body. I can already tell it's an oxygen atom by the bluish tint of the holographic sphere. At this very moment, the quantum computer, with help from advanced AI technology, is preparing to slow down the perpetual motion of the oxygen atom to create a 3-D rendering to reveal its subatomic componentry. Because an atom's protons, neutrons, and electrons exhibit a property called wave-particle duality that pushes subatomic behavior into a fourth dimension, we're incapable of seeing this kind of complexity—thus, the need for a 3-D rendering—which *is* a complexity our brains can handle."

I felt a series of unmistakable yanks on the hem of my sport coat, prompting me to look down at Carlos with a hint of annoyance. "What is it?" I whispered.

"That guy back there is trying to get your attention," he whispered back.

Bruce was standing next to the side camera, holding his iPad with one arm and repeatedly pretending to throw something with the other. I knew exactly what he was reminding me to say.

“To give you a mental picture of the difference between 3-D and 4-D, imagine throwing a stone into the middle of a still pond in a quiet mountain meadow. You might say to your nerdy quantum physics friend, ‘Look at all the pretty concentric ripples the rock created,’ and then hear them reply, ‘No, the ripples *are* the rock.’”

“That’s crazy!” shouted one of the parents.

“No, *that’s* wave-particle duality,” I replied.

Without warning, the translucent blue ball began to quickly change, ultimately morphing into what could only be described as a model of our solar system, complete with eight BB-sized blips orbiting a stationary bright orb the size of a black olive. The white-colored “planets” moved around the centralized yellow “sun” with the same quickness as daredevils riding motorcycles inside a grated metal sphere at a stunt show. Despite such high speeds in close proximity, they somehow avoided crashing into one another. Now that the stage was set, it was time to direct their attention to the greatest show on earth. Underneath the bravado, I couldn’t help but feel like a huckstering ringmaster as I announced, “I

present to you . . . an oxygen atom—the 21st-century's version of an everlasting gobstopper!"

From Here to Eternity

The oversized 3-D rendering of one of Mrs. G's oxygen atoms not only looked like a mini solar system, but it also created the same kind of glow that a campfire would produce just as the sun dipped beneath the horizon. But instead of an orange-yellow radiance, it was bluish, like the light emitted from a TV screen in a darkened room. Looking down at Carlos, I saw the whole scene reflected in his unblinking brown eyes.

"Let's go over some of the basics," I said to the mesmerized classroom audience. "The bright, olive-sized nucleus contains eight protons and eight neutrons with eight electrons zipping around them. If I took one of each away, you'd be looking at a nitrogen atom; if I removed two of each, a carbon atom would be hovering over the H-PAS. And, if I added 18 of each subatomic component, we'd have an iron atom. Isn't it interesting that the basic difference between elemental atoms is the *number* of protons, neutrons, and electrons and not

something more complex? But elegant simplicity isn't the only thing that's amazing about elemental atoms."

"Take a good look at *this* oxygen atom," I continued. "With electrons continuously buzzing around a glowing center, it seems illogical to conclude that the atom is dead. But it isn't alive, either; nor was it ever alive. Amazingly, this oxygen atom, along with all the other nonliving atoms on the H-PAS, made up Mrs. G's body while she was visiting her friends and family this morning. Because this distinction is so crucial, I'll say it again—but much simpler: Mrs. G and everyone listening to me right now are living beings comprised of nonliving building blocks. To add a different perspective, that would be like assembling a squirrel out of Legos on your front lawn and then watching it snatch an acorn and race up a tree. If that isn't mind-blowing, I don't know what is!"

I paused and waited for the audible gasps and frenetic murmuring to die down. Even the children were leaning toward each other and talking in hushed tones. Bruce appeared to be the only person not gushing over my latest revelation. Instead, he was giving me the rotating finger motion, prompting me to speed things along. I looked down at Carlos,

who seemed quite comfortable in front of the cameras, and asked him if he had any idea where the oxygen atom came from.

“From Mrs. G,” he replied.

“Yes, of course, but where do you think it came from originally?”

“I don’t know.”

Two hands shot up, but I chose to call on Amy again, hoping to get back in her good graces.

“Oxygen comes from trees,” she answered matter-of-factly.

“Whoa! It seems we have someone here who knows a thing or two about photosynthesis. Excellent, Amy, but trees and other green plants don’t actually *make* oxygen atoms. Using the power of sunlight, they break down water and carbon dioxide into glucose (a form of sugar), which plants use to grow, and oxygen, which is released into the atmosphere. Believe it or not, the oxygen atom you see floating over the H-PAS was

created billions of years ago inside a star through nuclear fusion. When the star finally ran out of fuel and collapsed under its own gravity, it exploded, ejecting all kinds of elemental atoms, like oxygen, into the universe. This particular oxygen atom may have attached itself like a barnacle to a meteorite for five billion years before crashing into Mars. From there, the lonely atom could have bonded with a couple of hydrogens and spent another 500 million years in a Martian sea. Then, due to climate change, the oxygen atom might have been blown hundreds of miles into the red planet's atmosphere following a massive eruption of a seafloor volcano."

"Are you still with me?" I asked, hoping everyone was enjoying my geeky version of an epic tale.

"Keep going!" shouted the same baritone voice I recognized from an earlier exchange.

"After hitching a ride on an icy comet headed toward Earth, the little cosmic traveler settled into the jet stream, eventually landing in Ancient Egypt five million years later, where it bonded with calcium, carbon, and other oxygen atoms,

becoming part of the polished limestone encasing the Great Pyramid of Giza over 4,000 years ago. Of course, as the limestone aged, it released carbon dioxide gas, sending our intrepid oxygen atom back into the atmosphere. After a thousand years of cycling through every weather pattern imaginable, the little atom, still within its carbon dioxide confines, was finally pushed deep into the earth, underneath a bed of sedimentary rock in Eastern Idaho. As erosion peeled away layers of earth for hundreds of years, exposing the underlying rock, the pocketed carbon dioxide returned to the skies, where the needles of a nearby 100-foot Douglas-fir tree quickly absorbed it. Okay, can anyone tell me what happens next?"

From the last row of desks, I saw a hand waving for attention. It was sticking out of a brown corduroy sleeve. The little professor was checking back in. "Alex, let's hear it," I said.

Without being told to do so, nor was it expected of him, Alex slid off his chair and stood next to his desk. In a high-pitched prepubescent voice, he said, "The fir tree made sugar and oxygen from the carbon dioxide and water through that 'photo process thing' you told us about."

“Terrific job, Alex,” I said. “It’s called photosynthesis. But try to remember that the tree uses sunlight to *make* sugar from carbon dioxide and water while *releasing* oxygen as a by-product. Don’t forget that all the elements you see on the periodic chart—except for really light elemental atoms like hydrogen, helium, and lithium, to some extent—are made inside stars. Okay, so where do you think the story goes from here?”

“I don’t know,” Alex replied. “Mrs. G breathed in the oxygen?”

“Works for me!” I shouted.

I thanked the little professor for his participation and turned to the audience in front of me. “I imagine Mrs. G as a little girl not quite old enough to start school, making mud pies with her brothers and sisters in the backyard of their family home in Blackfoot. A gentle breeze kicks up from across the adjacent river and serpentines through a grove of mature Douglas-fir trees, carrying with it freshly released oxygen atoms. Mrs. G—better known as Baby Ruth back then—lifts her head to feel the light wind caress her face and blow her wild blonde

hair away from her eyes. She takes a deep breath and recognizes the scent of pine cones, totally oblivious to the fact that an almost six-billion-year-old oxygen atom just entered her lungs and quickly made a temporary home within her circulatory system."

"So, it's been with her since she was around four years old?" asked a parent, who immediately threw her hands over her mouth for having interrupted the live broadcast. "Sorry," she added apologetically.

"It's okay," I said. "I actually love the question. The answer is: it isn't likely. We recycle more than 98% of all our atoms from normal biological functions and from what we eat, drink, and breathe within a year of acquiring them. The bottom line is that we literally *rent* these non-living, everlasting Lego pieces for the same amount of time as an annual Amazon or Costco membership."

Litterbug

After a quick nod at Bruce to turn the lights back on, I walked behind the H-PAS, ensuring that the holographic oxygen atom

wouldn't be excluded in the frame of the center camera's lens. While gesturing at the translucent blue sphere, I said, "I just offered an epic tale of how this particular oxygen atom found its way to Mrs. G's body, but as you've probably already figured out, there's an infinite number of possibilities. Maybe it didn't hitch a ride on a meteorite or a comet? Maybe it wasn't stuck on a massive Egyptian tomb for a thousand years? Maybe Mrs. G didn't even breathe it in? Instead, the almost six-billion-year-old oxygen atom may have been blown toward Earth 65 million years ago by either an intergalactic wind or an extragalactic cosmic ray, where it attached itself to a grazing velociraptor before being dug up as a fossilized dinosaur bone in 1960. Mrs. G could have simply acquired the atom from a kiss she received from her daughter this morning."

"Now that you're aware that this everlasting oxygen atom was created billions of years ago inside the belly of a massive star that no longer exists and that it's no more alive than the chair you're sitting on, we can move forward and talk about where its story goes from here. But instead of morbidly talking about how *bodies* decompose, I'd rather talk to you about something much more appealing—like a banana *peel*. See what I just did

there? But this was no ordinary banana peel because it captured my attention and imagination for almost three months in the summer of 2017."

During an early production meeting with a room full of Comcast and MSNBC executives, there was concern over how I would approach the topic of body decomposition. After all, they understood that Mrs. G's atoms would continue to exist indefinitely—long after her death was broadcast on their lucrative network—and that my presentation would, no doubt, have to account for how those same atoms would return to the world at large. Understandably, it isn't a very pleasant topic for anyone, especially when it involves the dearly departed.

"I hope you're not planning to talk about rotting corpses," grumbled the silver-haired top dog of the head honchos. He was seated across from me at the other end of a long conference room table in Comcast's opulent headquarters in Philadelphia—a city I called home through high school. "I don't think I have to explain to you why that would be disastrous for business, Dr. Trunks," he added. Within the first few minutes of meeting Brian Roberts in his office that morning, I could tell the CEO of Comcast was a fast learner,

open-minded, and not one to miss out on an opportunity. “No, you don’t, Mr. Roberts,” I replied. “You make perfect sense. That’s why I’m planning to talk about a discarded banana peel instead.”

“I was late for work one morning,” I began while picking up my water bottle and sliding my posterior on the stool. I scanned the room and saw that the parents were as riveted as the students. I secretly hoped they weren’t expecting a tale about a magical banana peel. I forged ahead with my story anyway: “So, I grabbed a breakfast bar and a banana from the kitchen before rushing out the door. I parked my truck in the parking garage and began the four-minute walk to the Department of Health and Welfare in downtown Boise. I pulled the banana from my coat pocket, thinking I’d eat the breakfast bar with a cup of coffee once I got settled in my office. Halfway through the banana, I realized my access badge was still in my backpack, forcing me to shove the rest of the banana in my mouth before discarding the peel on the sidewalk. What can I say? I typically don’t litter; however, I’m a terrible multitasker.”

I upended the water bottle and swallowed what was left, resisting the urge to squash it in my hands like I do at home to conserve space in my recycle bin. I looked at Bruce, who was behind the center camera quietly talking to his two video technicians. If he wasn't paying attention to me, I knew I wasn't more than a minute off our timetable. For now, I was safe.

"When I walked from the parking garage the following day, I had completely forgotten about the banana peel until I saw it again. It was where I had dropped it the previous morning. Half of it was on the sidewalk; the other was resting on some bark mulch underneath a shrub. It was still yellow, but it was wet from an early morning shower and gooey like you'd expect it to be after 24 hours of exposure. 'I'll pick it up after work,' I told myself. A week or more had passed before I noticed it again. I guess it was easy to miss after turning black. On closer inspection, I noticed it was oozing a substance the color and consistency of phlegm. *Yuck*. Whatever was left of the peel's bright yellow color was long gone. By the end of the first month, when it looked like a failed piece of dry origami, I wondered how the landscape maintenance guys managed to keep overlooking it. But I didn't mind. I was

getting an up-close, real-world example of a physics principle known as entropy."

Officer Entropy

"Phyllis," I asked, "do you think time has a direction?"
The little girl tilted her head and gathered her straight blonde hair behind her ear. Her pixie cut and purple T-shirt dress made me think she'd grow up to be a White House correspondent for Fox News. "Yes," she replied.

"And why do you think that?"

Without any hesitation, she answered, "Because we go from young to old."

"That's a terrific answer, Phyllis, and I agree with you," I gushed, "but please show me the direction of time by pointing your finger."

When she paused, I pounced on her logic: "But you said 'Yes' when I asked you if time has a direction."

“Not *that* kind of direction,” she explained. “We get older as the days go by.”

“Wow. I’m impressed. Between you, Amy, Carlos, and Alex, it’s fair to assume the world will be in good hands when the torch is passed on to you kids. Time not only has a direction, but it also has a name; it’s called entropy, and it moves from order to disorder—just like what happens to your bedroom soon after you spend all afternoon straightening it up or to a completed jigsaw puzzle that’s disassembled and put back in the box. And a tossed banana peel is no exception. After another month, half of the crusty husk was gone, with ants and other insects munching on what remained. By the end of the third month, there wasn’t a shred of evidence that could prove a discarded banana peel spent the better part of a summer on that sidewalk.”

I got up from the stool and walked toward Willow’s control panel. After a few keystrokes, the holographic oxygen atom disappeared. I stepped back and watched while the misty white light as thick as a futon mattress slowly retracted from the H-PAS’s tabletop, revealing, once again, the 58 piles of Mrs. G’s elemental atoms.

“You see,” I began, “entropy is essential for the universe’s need for randomness and unpredictability, which ensures the availability of atoms to become a part of whatever might happen on Earth, in our solar system, in our galaxy, or anywhere in the cosmos. I like to imagine entropy as the universe’s traffic cop stationed along a one-way street. He sits in his little cruiser with his tiny radar gun, making sure the flow of *everything* travels in only one direction: from order to disorder. Obviously, his union job would be pretty easy since natural laws prevent anything from going in reverse. As dishwashers, houses, bicycles, people, plants, and whole worlds inch along the entropy highway, their complexities are slowly reduced to the simplistic, eventually releasing recycled atoms whose attachment-avoidant behavior reminds me of commitment-phobes, who grow antsy when they’re in a relationship for too long.”

“Now that you understand,” I continued, “we are comprised of recycled, non-living atoms that have been a part of countless living and non-living matter over billions of years, and that these same atoms were created inside stars that exploded before our planet was even a twinkle in the universe’s eye, you no longer have to guess what’s to become

of the clothes you're wearing, the TV cameras in this classroom, the chairs you're sitting on, or the trees you see outside the windows. Even the Earth will succumb to the inescapable power of entropy—either after the sun runs out of fuel in five billion years or from our own shortsightedness in 50. But I'm not here to discuss the plight of the human race; I'm here to talk about us—you, me, and Mrs. G."

A sudden rattling noise from the back of the classroom jarred me from my monologue, which had been gaining momentum ever since I started talking about entropy. Bruce's video technicians were wheeling in a Sony 116-inch 4K Ultra HD monitor in preparation for my next segment about the human body. Once the disruption came to an end, I returned my focus to the spellbound children and parents in front of me.

"I don't think it's a surprise to anyone that our lifeless human bodies, whether they're buried in the ground or at sea, or cremated for that matter, are broken down and reabsorbed by the Earth. Who hasn't heard of someone spreading a loved one's ashes around a recently planted sapling so they can stand under it for years to come whenever they feel the need to visit with them? They do it because they believe the tree will

naturally absorb some of the ashes, thus making it an extension of someone who's passed away. Everlasting life, if you will. It's a beautiful thought as well as a beautiful image. But it isn't a new one. Even as far back as thousands of years ago, people have understood this concept. In Genesis 3:19—the first book of the Bible—it says, 'For dust you are, and to dust you will return.' And if you've ever been to a funeral, hearing the phrase 'ashes to ashes, dust to dust' is practically a guarantee. So, why would I spend so much time and energy talking about elements, atoms, subatomic particles, and entropy when Sister Mary Agnes of Our Lady of Sorrows already knows what I'm talking about? It's because the whole dust-to-dust premise is not only true, it's also supported by sophisticated science that takes the concept to a much higher level."

I looked over at one of the video techs, signaling that it was okay to begin setting up the nearly 10-foot display monitor in front of the H-PAS. Tim was wearing a Boise State football sweatshirt and an old-fashioned headset like the ones Janet Jackson used to wear on stage in the early 90s—the kind I still wore while driving because my pickup truck is older than Bluetooth technology.

Since I was still holding the empty water bottle, I continued to use it as a makeshift pointer. “We’ve discussed the transient nature of atoms when we’re young like the students in front of me, when we’re old like me, and after we’ve passed away like Mrs. G, but we haven’t talked about how these atoms come together in the first place—like when we first come into the world.”

“You mean like when we’re born?” interrupted Phyllis.

Although parents and students alike weren’t obeying the “wait until you’re called upon” rule, I was open to the new dynamic—especially since the natural interaction made the presentation more relatable to a television audience larger than the one that watched Neil Armstrong take man’s first powdery steps on the moon more than 50 years earlier.

“Oh, no, Phyllis. It happens a lot sooner than that.”

A Ballet of Sorts

“It’s only a matter of time,” I mumbled as I half-listened to Bruce explain his creative vision for the televised broadcast to

the Comcast and MSNBC executives, “before they’d get around to asking about Mrs. G’s body after I’d finished with it.”

“So, you’re telling me that you’re going to leave her on the H-PAS for the entire time?” asked the incredulous CEO of Comcast, a company worth almost 100 billion dollars. His question was directed at me and not Bruce. The man responsible for acquiring NBC Universal and starting Peacock abruptly sat up in his chair and said, “We’re taking a big chance here. If public opinion goes south on us, AT&T and Spectrum will use that as leverage against us. You’re not sitting in a university lecture hall, Dr. Trunks. You’re swimming in a shark tank where the first whiff of blood signals a feeding frenzy.”

“With all due respect, Mr. Roberts, if public opinion does go south, *I’ll* lose my career and credibility. What’s the worst thing that can happen to Comcast? Your stock price dips for a few months after you’ve apologized to America for your insensitivity? Don’t tell me you’ve already forgotten what Wells Fargo did to their customers 10 years ago? Wells Fargo’s CEO only had to apologize for both the cross-selling

and bogus auto insurance scandals during a 2016 Senate hearing, and the company is doing just fine in 2026—up 34%, or 75 billion dollars, since then."

"Who does this guy think he is?" asked a red-faced Mr. Roberts, directing his question at Bruce. "If the money wasn't so tempting, I'd pull the plug on this after-school special right now!"

Bruce glanced at me with an exasperated expression that said, "Let me take it from here." He proceeded to explain to Mr. Roberts and to the rest of the suits that the H-PAS was incapable of reversing the atomization process and that it would be better to conceal Mrs. G's elemental atoms behind a huge flat screen rather than forcing billions of people to watch us vacuum her up. Of course, I winced at his phrasing, but he was successful in defusing Mr. Robert's growing tirade.

After Tim finished setting up the jumbo monitor in front of the H-PAS, he handed me the remote as he made his way to the rear of the classroom. It looked like your standard remote, but it had been expertly modified, allowing me to control every aspect of the video feed without having to worry about

messing anything up. Using various combinations of video, still shots, graphics, and animation, I quickly ran through a PG-rated account of the human fertilization process, emphasizing that a male reproductive cell, known as sperm, fuses with a female reproductive cell, commonly referred to as an egg, combining their genetic material to form a single cell, called a zygote. I pointed out that the single-cell zygote (or fertilized egg) contains the genetic code (or DNA) of a completely unique human being—one unlike *any* of the estimated 110 billion human beings that came before them.

"What's even more amazing," I teased, "is what happens to the zygote as it travels from the fallopian tube to the uterus, a distance of about four or five inches that takes between three and four days to navigate. During that time, the zygote will divide into two cells, then four, then eight, then 16, and finally 32 cells before attaching to the uterine wall as a blastocyst to initiate pregnancy. Somewhere along the line—maybe at the four-cell stage, or perhaps the 16-cell stage—the tiny ball of uniform cells will somehow *decide* which cells will become the embryo and which will become the placenta. Even stranger, after about three weeks, the cells will once again *magically* differentiate themselves, where some will become

the brain, heart, or eyes, while others will gravitate toward becoming the skin, bones, or lungs. That in itself isn't very astonishing. But what *is* astonishing is that these early cells are identical to one another—with the exact same copy of the complete genetic code—and yet they somehow are instructed to translate only a certain section of the code while their neighboring cells are assigned to different parts of the same code."

Stepping toward the first row of desks, I asked, "How big do you think a book would be if it contained the entire genetic code for one human being written across its pages?" Looking for someone new to call upon, I selected an exceptionally diminutive student wearing a brightly colored orange blouse. A trio of metallic bracelets too large for her outstretched arm collected above her elbow and jangled as she waved it from side to side. "Asha," I asked, "what's your guess?"

"It would be the size of a big dictionary," she replied confidently.

"Wow. That's a terrific answer, Asha, because dictionaries are certainly big books. However, you'd need about *800*

dictionaries to contain the DNA sequence of just one human being. That comparison alone is truly remarkable, but I'm more enamored with what signals the uniform cells within the blastocyst to start translating different parts of the genetic code. If you're still not blown away by that, I'll explain it in a different way. Let's say I wanted all of you kids to participate in creating a dinosaur out of green construction paper that we could display in front of the classroom. Each student is handed the entire list of all the different dinosaur parts that would need to be drawn, colored, and cut out. The number of dinosaur parts would equal the number of fifth-graders in this classroom. Next, you'd be asked to select one body part to work on without knowing what any of your classmates chose. Of course, you'd be wondering if they chose the same body part you did. Maybe four kids chose the same eyeball? Maybe nobody chose to make the big spike at the end of the dinosaur's tail? Then, after everyone had completed their work, we'd piece everything together and find that we'd assembled a dinosaur without a single missing part—which means every fifth-grader chose a different body part without having checked with the rest of the class beforehand. To me, that isn't luck; it's an exquisite microscopic ballet perfectly choreographed against a musical score we can't hear."

Body Conscious

Since I had promised to return the six index cards and their respective blue envelopes to Mrs. G's daughter, Norma, after the presentation, I made sure to collect them from the children after we'd finished with the earlier exercise. Now I was holding the same cards, absently shuffling them in my hands as I repositioned myself atop the wooden stool. In some ways, the stool felt like a safety zone—a place where I could physically fold into myself to collect my thoughts and deliver them with an air of sincerity, humility, and deep conviction. I kept my focus on the children and their parents; otherwise, I'd feel the crush of at least four billion pairs of eyes boring into me.

Years earlier, I had created and honed a rationale that offers an explanation behind the how and why of human existence. In it, I harnessed the power of atomic physics, quantum mechanics, human biology, and genetics—and tempered it with logic and reason. But at the same time, I'm aware that the vast majority of the audience, including most of the parents in this room, won't accept my version of the grand design. After all, who am I to these people? To them, I'm an unrelatable,

multi-degreed, intellectual white man without a wife, kids, family, pets, a permanent home, or a regular nine-to-five job, who has the audacity to stand up and proclaim that he can see a fundamental truth about our universe—one that unites and separates the mind-body continuum. But I'm certainly not the first or the last who will be shouted down and marginalized for divergent thinking. Thousands of years ago, Jesus was quoted by Mark in 6:4 as saying, "A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown, among his relatives, and even inside his household." Today, we simply refer to it as "familiarity breeds contempt."

I shifted on my three-legged perch and held up the index cards, saying, "When we were first introduced to the words written on these cards—'funny,' 'compassionate,' 'nurturing,' 'dependable,' 'honest,' and 'generous'—I demonstrated that these superior attributes of the late Mrs. G were not only undetectable on the H-PAS but also that they carried no weight or mass, and yet, they were the most memorable aspects of her. As wonderful as these descriptors are, they're merely a handful of the many quirks and traits that added to Mrs. G's overall personality; however, personality is an *expression* of

consciousness, not the consciousness itself. Let me say it in a different way by revisiting my hidden driver-car analogy."

"Earlier in the presentation, I said we could see the outside of the vehicle but not the driver due to the car's tinted windows. Since we can't see inside, we have no idea what the driver is thinking, feeling, or what they'll do next. But we *are* able to see how courteous, cautious, law-abiding, and particular they are. Do they let someone in who's merging? Are they tailgating aggressively? Are they camped in the passing lane with their cruise control set to the posted speed limit? Do they park in Egypt to avoid door dings? Does their car look like it hasn't seen a sponge in years? Do they lay on the horn if they're delayed for more than one second? Can you hear bone-jarring bass thumps emanating from their car? I could go on, but I'm sure you get the point by now. Whereas consciousness is a hidden awareness of self, others, and the world at large, personality is the visible product or expression of said consciousness."

While keeping my train of thought, I hopped off the stool and walked toward the counter with the open water bottles. I grabbed one and quickly took two big swigs. I walked across

the front of the classroom, fully aware of the sound of my footsteps, and stopped in front of the side camera.

“Let’s return to our discussion about human fertilization and early development,” I began. “After approximately two months inside the uterus—when human features start to become recognizable—the embryo is officially referred to as a fetus. Evidence suggests that at this point, the fetus will have also begun showing early signs of sensory processing, signaling the beginning of consciousness. Since the expression of personality traits relies on an underlying consciousness, it’s no surprise that core temperaments begin to establish themselves two to three months *after* the onset of self-awareness. Both consciousness and personality will continue to develop well past life in the womb. Once the fetus is born, environments, experiences, interactions, and culture will expand awareness and further characterize personality traits. Although consciousness and personality are distinctly different from one another, they are as intertwined as the human genome’s double helix and as interdependent as bumble bees and flowers, forming a feedback loop where our sense of self and understanding of the world (consciousness) directly influences who we are (personality) and vice versa.”

I walked back to the stool, but instead of sitting down, I set my water bottle on top of it and continued toward the large screen. It still displayed a detailed diagram of the enigmatic blastocyst I introduced earlier.

"In the first part of the presentation," I continued, "we discussed the separateness of mind and body. In the second part, we've been talking specifically about the body. But before we move on to the mind, let's review what we've learned so far. From what you've heard, you now understand that the human body, although a living, breathing, and thinking entity, is comprised of octillions of non-living atoms that were created billions of years ago inside stars that no longer exist—and that these same atoms have been recycled countless times, making it entirely possible that you might have acquired atoms that were once inside of Julius Caesar, King Tut, a seashell, a dinosaur, or even a neighbor. Within days of our conception, while en route to the uterus, we're amazed at how uniform cells within the blastocyst can precisely organize themselves, preparing for pregnancy and beyond. As cells further differentiate and multiply within the embryo, amassing more and more atoms from the womb, early consciousness arises."

“When I look around this room at all of you, I see people of different ages, genders, and ethnicities in varying shapes and sizes. I see human beings who are both alive and conscious despite being assembled from an infinitesimally tiny Lego set. Throughout the afternoon, I’ve witnessed fleeting facial expressions and subtle behaviors that not only reveal an assortment of personalities sitting before me but also varying levels of self-awareness. Obviously, it’s impossible for me to know what each of you is thinking, feeling, or what you’ll do next. However, I can predict with great certainty what kind of person you are based on how you move through and interact with the world, which means, ultimately, the hidden driver isn’t so hidden.”

Chapter 3: Mind over Matter

Intermission

“Are you happy with everything so far, Norma?” I asked while handing her the six blue envelopes containing the index cards.

A planned 10-minute break at the conclusion of part two of the presentation allowed me to find her among the MSNBC production staff. The typically stoic and confrontational older woman appeared contrite and resigned. She was busy receiving condolences from Bruce and Tim while dabbing her eyes with a white handkerchief when I approached her.

“Yes, I am,” she replied, “but it’s still overwhelming for me. She was my mother, you know? And now she’s gone forever.”

I felt Norma’s shoulders shake as I embraced her. She may have been a thorn in my side for the past week and a half, but that was in the past. Now, she was a heartbroken woman who had just lost both her mother and her best friend.

“I’m so sorry for your loss, but you and your mother did a heroic thing today,” I whispered in her ear. “We’ll talk more after the presentation, okay?” I pulled away feeling guilty for being so abrupt, but Norma’s daughter was there to quickly replace my arms with her own.

I caught Bruce’s eyes and pointed toward the classroom’s one and only door—indicating I was on my way to use Principal Reid’s private bathroom. He nodded and returned to whatever was on his iPad screen. I could feel the eyes and energy of the parents directed at me as I angled toward the exit. Like so many instances over the past decade, it felt like a mixed bag of judgment, curiosity, and suspicion. If I wanted to use the restroom *and* get back in time, I avoided making eye contact. But that wasn’t the case with Connie, my hair and makeup girl, who boldly blocked my path.

“What happened to your hair?” she demanded. But before I could answer, she added, “And what’s with your face powder? It’s all clumpy.”

Never one to pass on an opportunity to be self-deprecating, I replied, “If I were a baby orangutan, these fine wisps would

make for an awesome head of hair, and as for the clumps, I think I stood too close to the H-PAS during the atomization process. So, I might be mutating at this point."

"Stick to your nerdy day job, Dr. Trunks, and leave the comedy to the professionals, okay?" she teased.

"I'll find you as soon as I get back from the restroom, okay?"

"Promise?"

"I promise."

As soon as Connie stepped aside, I entered the hallway where some of the children had gathered to horse around and let off some of their pent-up energy. It was refreshing to see them without phones or screens—just normal kids doing things adults stopped doing at some point in their lives: running, jumping, talking, laughing, and touching one another. Their activity, which paid me no attention, made me think of a Charles Bukowski quote. In it, he said, "We're all going to die, all of us. What a circus! That alone should make us love each

other, but it doesn't. We are terrorized and flattened by trivialities; we are eaten up by nothing."

The door to Principal Reid's bathroom matched the paneling of her spacious office, making it look like the entrance to a closet. In fact, it was labeled as such, featuring an official-looking brass tag stenciled with the word "closet." *Well played, Principal Reid*. Inside, there was one of those tall, comfort-height commodes, which I can't stand, a white pedestal sink, and a mirror with an ornate wall lamp mounted above it. As I washed my hands, I thought about the Comcast CEO, who was probably sick to his stomach at this very moment.

"This is a joke, right?" huffed Brian Roberts in yet another earlier production meeting in Philadelphia. It was clear that the media mogul wasn't a fan of mine.

"No, it's not," I insisted.

He picked up his copy of the script, turned it around, and held it up for me to see. "You want to put a 70s-era TV test pattern

on a billion television screens for 10 minutes?" he asked incredulously.

"Yes, that's the plan," I deadpanned.

"Do you have any idea of the amount of money you're passing up on? It's November, and we've already sold a hundred commercial spots during the Super Bowl in February at $8 million a pop! Do you know why we can? It's because we're broadcasting to over 130 million viewers. Just imagine what your 10-minute break would go for with an audience of over four billion."

Before I had time to think about my response, I blurted, "Not everyone worships at the feet of the god of profit, Mr. Roberts." I tried to soften the indirect accusation but made things worse. "What I mean is that you're already making an obscene amount of money, including my fee, which I relinquished in lieu of having to stomach any corporate sponsorships. So, why can't you be happy with the terms we agreed upon?"

At that moment, Bruce decided it was time for me to leave the conference room so he could better explain my intentions in a language they understood. I simply liked those old TV test patterns because they came on late in the evenings, signaling the end of the broadcast day. They basically told viewers, "That's it, folks. There's nothing more to watch." Today, around-the-clock TV programming is 45 years old, with seemingly nothing preventing it from becoming 100 years old. Personally, I walked away from the TV 11 years ago, knowing that any *important* news will find me as fast as if I were sitting in front of a live CNN broadcast. I simply could no longer bear to sit through 13-minute segments of dumbed-down shows sandwiched between three- to eight-minute blocks of even dumber commercials.

"They agreed to letting you have your test pattern," said Bruce after the meeting had adjourned.

"Thanks, Bruce." To clarify, I asked, "The old-school black-and-white one, right?"

"Yes, that one," he answered. "After I explained your intentions, they disagreed, saying that the test pattern won't

inspire viewers to talk to one another about what they saw and heard during the first two parts of the presentation. Instead, they said, 'They'll just go back to looking at their phones.'"

I retraced my steps to the classroom and immediately located Connie, who was standing beside an empty office chair pilfered from the teacher's lounge across the hallway. Like Bruce and the rest of the TV crew, Connie was adept at communicating without saying anything. As soon as she saw me, she held up her watchless left arm and acted like she was assessing the time while pointing at the seat of the chair with the other. I sat down and noticed for the first time that she had a flower of some kind tattooed on the side of her neck and a delicate-looking eyebrow ring.

"I have to admit," she said while gently wiping my face, "I'm blown away by what you've been talking about, and I'm not just saying that."

"So, in other words, you're telling me that you're a groupie now?" I joked.

“Let’s just say I’m intrigued,” she countered. “I can’t wait for you to talk about the mind.”

I wanted to say, “Be careful what you wish for,” but thought better of it, thinking she had a right to make up her own mind without me corrupting it with my defeatist attitude. Deep down, I knew my take on human existence was well thought out and solid—beautiful even. However, I couldn’t forget what I’ve learned about people over decades of observation, experience, and research: they’ll cling to illusions at all costs, dismissing science, common sense, and their inner voice to avoid the life-altering unpleasantness of realizing they’ve been programmed to believe in lies.

Consciousness, Personality and Free Will

As I was about to begin the last segment of my presentation, I was surprised to see that none of the children were absent. Privately, while walking back to the classroom from Principal Reid’s office, I predicted that at least three of the little desks would be unoccupied after the break, imagining their parents handing them their jackets while saying things like “10-year-

olds shouldn't be listening to such adult topics" or "It's obvious Dr. Trunks doesn't believe in God."

"Let's imagine that the atoms on the H-PAS were mine, instead of Mrs. G's," I began while gesturing toward the other side of the Sony flat screen. "Barring the fact that there would be a larger number of atoms (because I weigh considerably more than her) and a few extra piles of not-so-good elemental atoms that came from being exposed to radioactive material—a downside from having worked in genetic and nuclear engineering labs early in my career—there wouldn't be much difference between her atomic makeup and mine. After all, she and I are both constructed from the same Lego set, right? However, if we compared index cards, you'd quickly realize the divergent nature of our two personalities. Whereas her family and friends saw her as upbeat and contented, mine would likely describe me as aloof, overly cautious, and disagreeable. If we lived in the same subdivision, Mrs. G would be the neighbor offering you freshly baked cookies, while I'd be the ill-tempered old guy telling you to get your dog off my lawn."

I picked up the stool amid the snickering at my last comment and carried it toward the side camera. I set it down, sat on it, and peered into the dark lens, trying to look as collegiate as possible. “And since personality characteristics,” I continued, “are the *observable reflections* of our awareness of ourselves, others, and the world, it’s rather academic to assume that Mrs. G and I have differing realms of consciousness. And in case you’re wondering when I’m going to start talking about the mind, I already did. When I first tried to imagine how the mind might be visually depicted—an invisible entity without mass or weight—I pictured the Chinese Yin-Yang symbol, representing the complementarity and interconnectivity of two natural forces. But instead of duos like fire and water, summer and winter, or femininity and masculinity, I envisioned consciousness and personality.”

“Before the break, I told you that consciousness and personality begin in the womb. But what I’ve yet to talk about is how genetic factors play an important role in shaping both. As I said earlier, every cell in your body contains an exact copy of your entire genetic code. For example, your hair cells contain the same DNA as your skin, bone, liver, and heart cells. But the DNA doesn’t contain the genetic code for just

any old human being; it contains the code for a very specific and unique person—you. Your genetic code is a blend containing 50% of your mother's DNA and 50% of your father's, which they acquired from their parents, and so on. It's the reason you look like your Uncle Jesse, share the same body type as your mother, exhibit similar extroverted mannerisms as your Aunt Becky, or possess the same quiet nature as your late great-grandfather Earl, who died before you had a chance to meet."

"Just as genetics determines physical attributes like height, eye color, right- or left-handedness, bone density, and dimples, it also expresses a range of inherited personality traits that influence temperament, behavior, and emotion. Similarly, genetics shapes a person's consciousness by assembling the brain's architecture, neural connectivity, and chemical balance, which dictates cognitive abilities like memory, attention, and self-awareness. While our genetically predetermined physical traits like the sound of our voice, skin color, or shoe size can't be altered, we can, however, profoundly reshape our consciousness and personality when exposed to different environments, experiences, interactions, and cultures. But in order for these changes to occur, a third

component of the mind must come into play—the act of exercising one's free will."

I slid off the stool and began walking toward the Sony flat screen. I stole a quick glance at Bruce, who was on his phone in front of the windows, where the sun was soon to meet the horizon, lost behind darkening clouds the color of gunmetal. Connie was further back, sitting in the chair I occupied moments ago. Without access to her phone, she appeared to be having classic withdrawal symptoms: rapid gum chewing and jittery leg bouncing. I reached into my jacket pocket and fumbled for the TV remote. Without needing to take it out, I pressed the large central button, causing the Sony to display a high-tech graphic of the human brain. To illustrate the fact that consciousness, personality, and free will actuate within our brains, I pointed out the various interactions between the prefrontal cortex, orbitofrontal cortex, and anterior cingulate, as well as both the frontal and parietal lobes.

"Whoa . . . That's quite a mouthful, isn't it?" I teased, scanning the faces of the children for smiles. "I certainly don't need you to memorize all the parts of the brain, but I think it's important to know how free will affects both personality and

consciousness. The textbook definition of free will is that it's the philosophical notion that we are empowered to make our own choices and control our actions, independent of fate, divine predetermination, or natural laws, allowing for genuine self-determination and moral responsibility. It's an excellent definition (thanks, Google), but it certainly isn't fifth-grader-friendly. Thankfully, I have a different way of describing it. Since most 10-year-olds are familiar with computers, I believe an analogy that involves hardware, software, and an operating system would better explain the relationships between consciousness, personality, and free will."

With a tap of the remote, a detailed image of an old-school computer appeared on the flat screen. "This is a picture of the very first desktop computer I purchased back in 1995," I said. "The biotech company I was working for at the time used Apple computers exclusively, so I knew what to expect. All I remember of my Mac Performa 6400 was that it collected a lot of dust. But I digress. Let's get back to the analogy." I gestured toward the screen and continued the lecture. "The computer's hardware represents a person's brain—a three-pound neurological mass the size of a grapefruit made up entirely of non-living atoms. The computer's software

represents the person's personality. Just as software determines how a computer processes information, responds to inputs, and performs tasks, personality represents the set of traits, behaviors, and patterns of thinking that define an individual's way of interacting with the world. The computer's operating system represents the person's consciousness. The OS is the fundamental platform that allows the software to run and interact with the hardware. Consciousness is the underlying awareness and subjective experience that makes all mental processes—including personality traits, thoughts, and feelings—possible. It's the "background process" that provides the environment for all of your individual traits to manifest."

"But the most satisfying part of this analogy is where free will comes in. Free will is the computer's user—the entity that exercises agency and makes choices using the software (personality) running on the operating system (consciousness). The user (free will) can either follow the default settings (predetermined dispositions) or intentionally act in ways that go against those defaults (emotional, mental, and spiritual growth). In this way, the user is an external, independent force that directs the system's (person's) actions

and stores the resulting data (outcomes) in the computer's hard drive (memory) for analysis. In other words, it is free will that dictates which keys are pressed."

Suddenly, as if he'd been waiting for the perfect moment, Alex, the resident professor of Pine Branch Elementary, raised his hand. The discrepant look on his face told me that something wasn't adding up for him.

"Yes, Alex, what is it?" I asked, thinking he was going to ask me about one of the brain parts or challenge my computer analogy.

This time, he didn't get up and stand next to his desk before he asked his question. "Why would you think of the Yin-Yang symbol when you just explained that the mind is comprised of three parts, not two?"

At that moment, I wished for nothing more than a second priceless moon rock—one that I could give to Alex for asking a not-so-obvious question at the most perfect time.

“Unbelievable that you’d ask that, Alex, because I was just about to explain that the Celtic Trinity Knot, a three-part symbol composed of three interconnected arcs, is a much better representation of the mind than the popular Chinese symbol. It’s based in the Christian faith and refers to the Holy Trinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but I liken it to consciousness, personality, and free will.”

While still looking at Alex, I concluded my response with a gesture that emphasized my point, saying, “And there you have it.” He met my eyes with a look of vindication that reminded me of prosecuting attorneys who end their cross-examination with a “No further questions, Your Honor,” which rattled me for a moment.

“I guess I was trying to build up some element of surprise when I introduced the free will aspect to the mind’s high-level componentry,” I reasoned. “You can either remember the trio of consciousness, personality, and free will through an ancient, archaic symbol or recall the nifty computer analogy. Which do you prefer, Alex?”

“The computer.”

“Yeah, me too.”

Mushrooms and Amoebas

The swaying evergreens caught my attention, momentarily breaking my concentration. Outside, a gentle breeze had kicked up as the sun began to descend in earnest. The low ceiling of gray clouds reflected a pleasing pink shade, making me think we were missing out on a gorgeous sunset. Ironically, the scene in the sky was similar to what was going on inside the classroom. Like the wind, I, too, hoped to clear billions of cloudy minds of life-limiting indoctrination to reveal an out-of-this-world possibility that offers a rationale for our existence. Looking at the clock above the windows, I realized I had only 15 more minutes to change the trajectory of the human race. *No pressure!*

Secretly, I was happy to see Phyllis’s raised hand when I asked if there were any volunteers to assist me in closing out the presentation. She exuded a kid-like enthusiasm tempered by a calm and collected nature. Bruce liked her because she smiled a lot and suggested that I try to end the lecture with either her or Alex. By the time she reached the front of the classroom,

one of Bruce's stage managers handed me a second stool. I placed it beside mine and invited her to sit down. It was then that I realized how old Regis Philbin must have felt sitting next to a young Kathy Lee Gifford every morning. All that was missing from the *Chuck and Phyllis Show* was a couple of coffee mugs with our names on them and signature bumper music. I was tempted to inquire about her opinion on the relationship between Taylor Swift and Travis Kelce, but I settled on asking if she was familiar with "show and tell" instead.

"Yes, I know what that is," she replied.

"I thought so, Phyllis. Can you remember something that you brought to school to show your class?"

"Yes, but I only showed my friends."

"And what was that?"

"My mom taught me how to make soap that smells really good," she beamed.

“A fifth-grader who makes soap? Now that’s really different!” I gushed. “Phyllis, you’re so unique that for the next few minutes, you’ll be my ‘show and tell’ for the class, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Like everyone who has ever lived, Phyllis began her life as a single-cell zygote—a fertilized egg upon her conception. Few, if anyone, could argue that Phyllis wasn’t a living entity, even in that initial stage of development—sort of a no-brainer if two living, breathing, biological parents were involved in her creation, right? Yes, it’s truly miraculous that the universe produced a soap-making fifth-grader, but what’s more amazing is that Phyllis is alive. But is it really *that* amazing? Mushrooms are alive. Coral reefs are alive. Even the plaque buildup on your teeth is alive. And when you add insects, plants, animals, birds, reptiles, fish, microorganisms, etc., to the list, it seems like *everything* is alive.”

“Don’t worry, Phyllis,” I teased. “Personally, I find you much more fascinating than a mushroom, but you’ll be in trouble if it learns how to make scented soap.”

Everyone in the classroom, including Bruce, laughed at my comment, reminding me of the times when Regis would drop one-liners on Kathy Lee, making everyone in the studio audience crack up.

“However,” I continued, “clouds aren’t alive. Sand isn’t alive. Water isn’t alive. Sugar isn’t alive, and neither is the baking soda in your refrigerator, and yet human beings contain the very same atoms that constitute clouds, sand, water, sugar, and baking soda. So, what separates a living entity from non-living, inanimate objects? I bet Geppetto would know the answer. He’d say, ‘For my beloved wooden puppet, Pinocchio, to be considered a living boy, he would need to be made of cells requiring energy to grow, develop, reproduce, respond to the environment, maintain a stable internal state, and evolve.’ I’m just glad nobody told him that even a lowly single-cell amoeba meets the criteria of a living organism. Sorry, Geppetto.”

“So, according to my calculations, Phyllis, here, is on a list with mushrooms and amoebas,” I joked.

I looked at my mini co-host, who appeared to be enjoying the good-natured teasing, and whispered, “Thanks for being such a good sport.”

“The smallest unit of matter,” I began, “is the non-living atom—but you already know that from the earlier demonstrations on the High-Performance Atomic Spectrophotometer. Similarly, the smallest unit of life is the cell—yet cells, including the DNA within their nuclei, are made from these same atoms, which leaves me to conclude that it’s the *arrangement* of certain atoms that creates life; it’s nature’s version of a Rubik’s Cube.”

“If we zoomed in on a single skin cell from, say, Phyllis, we’d see a bustling city of various organelles going about the never-ending work of a healthy skin cell. We’d also come across a coiled strand of DNA containing her entire genetic code inside the cell’s nucleus. After further study, we’d once again confirm that the strand consists of carbon, oxygen, hydrogen, nitrogen, and phosphorus atoms. Unsurprisingly, a closer look at any of her other cells—whether from the heart, hair, brain, etc.—reveals the identical DNA strand, composed of the same elemental atoms. In each case, cells adhere to a very specific

set of instructions encoded on the strand. For example, Phyllis's skin cells ignore the instructions for the brain and heart cells while following the portion of the code to do things like producing keratin in response to a scraped knee or melanin to avoid a sunburn."

"Atoms, like carbon, hydrogen, and oxygen, combine to form molecules like water, glucose, and amino acids. Molecules combine to form macromolecules like proteins, DNA, and lipids. Macromolecules combine to create organelles such as nuclei, mitochondria, and ribosomes, which form the basis of life—cells. I hope you're amazed as I am at the innate complexity and precise functionality of a living cell. Not only are cells built upon an atomic Lego set, but they also dutifully take orders from a genetic code that's also comprised of the same set of lifeless Legos. Although Phyllis is comprised of living cells that behave similarly to cells inside mushrooms and amoebas, that doesn't mean she isn't special. First, her parents had to meet—that's miracle number one. Then she became a living entity that grew and developed according to her specific genetic code—that's the second miracle. But it's the third, most perplexing miracle that separates Phyllis from

mere mushrooms, amoebas, insects, plants, animals, birds, reptiles, fish, microorganisms, etc."

She smiled when I looked at her, making me think it thrilled her to hear her name mentioned in front of her classmates and their parents. I had no doubt that this experience would stay with her long after the TV cameras were shut down and shipped back to New York.

"The third miracle," I said, "is that Phyllis's consciousness allows her to *know* she's alive."

The Gift of Consciousness

"Think about it," I continued. "We, as human beings, not only have the cognitive ability to understand how our bodies work at the intracellular level, but we also know we are comprised of around 60 of the 118 elemental atoms on the periodic chart, which, by the way, came into existence in the 1860s and was last updated in 2016. The human mind has also figured out when and where atoms came from, allowing us to cheekily remind ourselves that you, me, and everyone around us are nothing more than vessels of primordial nuclear waste—

stardust if you prefer a more palatable term. Incredibly, astrophysicists and astronomers specializing in cosmology have mapped the observable universe and even have a little sign on it that reads, 'You are here.' That's like figuring out and pinpointing exactly where you are on Earth without ever getting up from your desk. But here's the real kicker: these same wildly intelligent scientists, who are capable of unveiling astonishing secrets about the universe, can't begin to tell you what's on the minds of their fellow researchers."

"Take Phyllis for instance," I teased while looking at my beaming sidekick. "We haven't a clue of what's going on in her mind right now. She might be imagining all the people who'll recognize her tomorrow after having been a big part of today's broadcast. She might be hoping her parents pick up a pizza or KFC for tonight's dinner. Or, she might be thinking of a show she wants to watch, a new batch of lavender soap she's planning to make, or an upcoming birthday party. The point is no one—not even brilliant cosmologists—can explore, let alone map, Phyllis's or anyone else's mind. I don't know about you, but I find that very interesting."

“We can see, touch, weigh, and measure Phyllis because she’s comprised of an extraordinary number of recycled atoms, making her an extension of the universe itself. But that only accounts for her physical presence. More importantly, we want to know who she is as a person—the part of her not composed of atoms or limited by the laws of biology, genetics, chemistry, or physics. To do that, we need only to experience Phyllis’s personality—her thoughts, feelings, emotions, and behaviors—to gain insight into the depth of her consciousness and the conviction of her free will. Consciousness is indeed a gift, but what good is it if it merely leads to the realization of our existence among a mostly lifeless universe? For years, I’ve pondered the fact that everything I know—everything that’s ever happened—has taken place on this planet. People are born. People die. Empires rise. Empires fall. The cycle continues as sure as the sun rises and sets each and every day.”

“But what if your consciousness isn’t confined to the day-to-day trifles of life on Earth? What if it instead permeated beyond our solar system and galaxy and encompassed the entire universe? Years ago, while staying at a cabin along the south shore of Lake Tahoe, I was treated to an astonishing late-night view of a star-filled night, overwhelming me with a

feeling that both moved me and inspired me to begin searching for answers to the most important why-question of all: Why do I exist? However, once I began my newfound quest, I soon learned that I live in a society that forces most people to focus on a much more urgent question: How do I survive? It doesn't have to be this way, but it is. What does a ruling class gain from a population of slaves pondering existential questions when there's around-the-clock work to be done? Early in life, I, too, was brainwashed into believing that incessant productivity and achievement were virtues, taking me away from the joy of living and tricking me into trading my precious time for overly taxed paychecks and doctor visit coupons."

"As I look around at the adults in this classroom and imagine the enormity of the television viewing audience, I believe many of you can provide me with answers as to why you think you exist—most of them earthbound and likely centered around religion, legacy, duty, and pleasure. If you've read any of my books, follow me on social media, or saw my interview on *60 Minutes* last week, you know that I'm a big fan of the late Alan Watts, a British-American writer and orator who famously interpreted, repackaged, and popularized Buddhist, Taoist, and Hindu philosophies for Western consumption in

the 1950s and 60s. Occasionally, to shift the conversation toward something more profound, I'll answer common questions like 'Who are you?' or 'What have you been up to?' with an Alan Watts-inspired response."

"Hi, there. Aren't you that guy I saw on *60 Minutes* with Anderson Cooper?" they'd ask while pulling out their iPhone for a selfie at LAX.

"Yes, but in reality, I'm just a nobody going nowhere in the absurdity of life," I'd respond.

"Hello, Dr. Trunks," you'd ask while sipping a gin and tonic at the Met Gala in New York City. "How long has it been? A year? How are you? Can you believe what Trump said to that reporter last night?"

"I didn't," I'd answer, "but did you know that the feeling of being a lonely, isolated ego inside a skin is a mere illusion? In reality, an individual is not separate from the universe."

"Needless to say, I'm rather unpopular at social gatherings. Most times, an awkward silence would ensue, followed by an

excuse to exit the conversation; however, every once in a while, I'd hear a response like, 'No kidding? It's funny you should say that because ever since the pandemic, I've never felt so disconnected from my family, friends—everyone.' And, depending on their level of interest, I'd give them a shortened version of what I've told you here today, ending with what I'm about to tell you right now. Human beings, like all other life forms on Earth, are not only extensions of the universe but also its greatest accomplishment. We are not given the gift of consciousness merely to contemplate our existence, elevating us to the highest tier within the living world; we are given it so the universe can experience itself."

A Leap of Faith

While I excused Phyllis, thanking her for her helpful assistance, I sensed a more-than-subtle change within the classroom. Even the stage manager looked at me curiously as I handed him the second stool. It didn't faze me; it wasn't the first time I dropped a New Age axiom on an audience—but not one numbering more than 75, and certainly not one as large as half the Earth's population. The children were still with me, but I knew that was most likely due to their hopes for pizza

following the presentation. I'd be lying to myself if I expected any fifth-grader to understand the magnitude of what I had just revealed about human consciousness. Principal Reid wasn't the only person to discourage me from presenting such deep philosophical content in front of a bunch of 10-year-olds.

"They're not going to get any of it, Dr. Trunks," she warned. "With two Ph.D.'s, how do you not know that?"

When I first saw Principal Reid, I liked her immediately. She was standing at the front entrance of the school wearing a brightly colored dress and saying "Good morning" to every student walking into the building. Some of the children embraced her; others exchanged high-fives or fist bumps as they ducked beneath her arms on their way to classrooms. She had charm and grace, and it was obvious she loved all of her students at Pine Branch Elementary. Later, I came to find out she was also extremely protective of them—a quality I greatly admired, especially one that put the welfare of children before the financial windfall that would benefit her school after the broadcast.

“I’m certainly not going to challenge your professional opinion,” I replied, “but I, too, have experience with 10-year-olds. I don’t expect them to comprehend all of the material, but I believe they’ll leave the presentation with an understanding of the key takeaways. In the end, all I’m hoping to accomplish with the children is that they know it’s okay to question everything.”

As I prepared to launch into my closing statements a la Jerry Springer-style, I surveyed the expressions of the adults in the room. Two-thirds of them appeared somewhat agitated and ready to leave as they gathered their jackets and fumbled for car keys. Since phones weren’t allowed on the premises during the broadcast, checking their text messages and social media accounts would have to wait. The remaining third seemed ready to hear more, but I knew at least half of them were just being polite. Thankfully, I hadn’t lost Bruce, Tim, Connie, Norma, or Principal Reid, as each met my eyes with supportive glances. I moved to the center of the room and remained standing.

“If I started off my presentation by telling you that our extraordinary gift of consciousness—the rationale behind our

existence—is so that the universe can experience itself, most of you wouldn't still be sitting here. Had you left, I wouldn't have blamed you for doing so. It's too big a leap of faith. If I had told you in the first few minutes that atoms inside of you were once part of a pterodactyl, Cleopatra, or Abraham Lincoln, you might have pulled your kid from the classroom or simply turned the channel. But I didn't go that route. Instead, I took the long way, reducing the distance of the required leap with well-understood scientific facts about biology, genetics, chemistry, and physics. It's easier to show that we are physical extensions of the universe, but proving that human consciousness is woven into the fabric of the cosmos is much harder."

"Years ago, I read how Alan Watts likened human life to waves on an ocean, but his analogy only half-resonated with me. I prefer to compare our lives to tiny water droplets that spray forth as a result of waves crashing into one another. To me, the always-churning ocean represents the mysterious and unpredictable nature of the universe—mysterious because so much of it hasn't been explored and unpredictable because randomness, as you know through our discussion regarding entropy, is a default setting that ensures an ever-changing

world. Phyllis, despite facing an astronomically low statistical chance of being born, managed to pull it off. I know that because she's sitting right there. Waves somehow crashed in just the right way, catapulting a precious new water droplet into an arcing trajectory that'll last her entire lifetime. As she shoots upward, she becomes aware of herself as one of many droplets—some near her, some far away. She notices that some of the droplets are going up like her, while others are falling. And some droplets—like Amy's grandpa and Mrs. G—have been reclaimed by the very ocean she, too, came from. Throughout her distinct trajectory, Phyllis will marvel at the ocean's complexity and vastness, wanting to discover all she can until it's her turn to be reclaimed."

"Everyone in this room," I continued, "is a living, breathing, conscious miracle—a precious water droplet located somewhere along its given trajectory—that knows it will, no doubt, return to an undiscerning ocean of obscurity. It seems strange, wasteful even, that the universe would create us out of itself, never make the same person twice, assign us to unique combinations of personality, consciousness, and free will, and allow us to grow and learn as much as possible, only to tell us, "That's it for you," after 70 or 80 years of life.

However, one only needs to look at ecological succession to understand why our lives aren't designed to be everlasting. The cycle begins with an event such as an abandoned field. Grasses and herbaceous plants sprout and colonize, adding nutrients and organic matter to the soil. Shrubs and fast-growing trees move in, creating a young forest. And finally, a mature, self-sustaining forest is established until the next major disturbance occurs, causing the entire cycle to begin anew."

"In numerous writings and lectures, Alan Watts promoted the concept that human consciousness is the means through which the universe experiences itself. Just as our consciousness expands as a result of numerous and diverse experiences, so does the universe's. It is believed that early forms of consciousness emerged with *Homo sapiens* around 300,000 years ago, meaning the universe has experienced itself through an estimated 110 billion people since then. But that only accounts for less than one one-thousandth of the Earth's estimated 4.5 billion years. So, with 99.99% of Earth-time unaccounted for, maybe that number is well over 110 billion conscious souls. Who knows? My point is, where

consciousness is concerned, the universe appears to employ a form of ecological succession on the grandest of scales."

"For the past 90 minutes, I've led you down a path—enticing you along the way with fascinating, decades-old scientific facts from biology, genetics, chemistry, atomic physics, metaphysics, quantum mechanics, cosmology, and even ecology—to present you with an answer to the deepest existential question there is: Why do I exist? Whether you strongly agree, disagree, or don't know what to think of what I've shared with you this afternoon, I plan to explain why you feel the way you do when Anderson Cooper interviews me for a second time on *60 Minutes* this coming Sunday. What I've revealed to you using NASA's High-Performance Atomic Spectrophotometer and Google's quantum computer, Willow, is nothing compared to what I'll open your mind to while discussing the higher meaning behind today's broadcast with my new friend, Anderson. It's literally impossible to dislike the guy. Am I right?"

And with that, I ended the presentation by thanking Mrs. G's family, Comcast, MSNBC, Bruce, Principal Reid, Pine Branch Elementary, St. Luke's Hospital, Google, NASA, and,

of course, the children and their parents. Then, while looking into the center camera for the last time, I said, “And Godspeed to all of you watching around the world. Thank you and goodnight.”

Chapter 4: Conclusion

A Reluctant Hero

Conflicting emotions were rattling my nerves as the limousine came to an abrupt stop on West 59th Street. Although stop-and-go traffic is the norm in Manhattan, I instinctively leaned to the left to see what the holdup was. From the backseat, I could practically feel the frustration of the driver of a grimy box truck, whose face appeared flushed despite the frigid New York weather. He was in the middle of what appeared to be a 10-point turn, requiring the patience of annoyed drivers across three lanes of traffic, including my driver, Muhammad, whom CBS had sent to my hotel 20 minutes earlier. His English was excellent, but his heavy Middle Eastern accent made me think he hadn't been in the country for very long.

"Thank you for your patience, Dr. Trunks," he said at the rearview mirror, "but don't worry. The studio is only a few blocks away."

“I’m not worried,” I lied. “Besides, this gives me a chance to look at Central Park. I’ve never seen it covered in snow before.”

That part was true. The last time I was in Manhattan during the winter was a few months after the Twin Towers were leveled in 2001. I leaned back into the soft black leather and tried to focus on the winter wonderland just steps away from the idling limo. But my mind kept returning to the same thoughts that plagued me since the televised broadcast from Idaho. I never set out to become famous. I was less like media darlings Jordan Peterson, Jon Stewart, or Tucker Carlson and more like J.D. Salinger or Harper Lee, who disappeared from public life soon after writing *The Catcher in the Rye* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*, respectively. I admire those who choose to put themselves in front of cameras, microphones, and audiences with the best of intentions, but even they would have to agree that their efforts have little impact. Instead, the Western Hemisphere, especially the United States, is like a runaway train en route to its inevitable demise against the proverbial brick wall. Like Peterson, Stewart, Carlson, and others, I, too, want to help slow the train’s momentum—

maybe even reverse its direction—but not at the cost of destroying my inner peace.

Suddenly, the limo lurched forward, yanking me away from my thoughts and dumping my Starbucks coffee onto the floor between my feet.

“My apologies, Dr. Trunks,” said Muhammad. “We’re moving again.”

I scooted forward and bent down to retrieve the white paper cup. “No worries,” I replied. “The lid was still on it, but it looks like some coffee spilled on the seat and carpet. Do you have something I could wipe it up with?”

“Don’t worry about it, but thank you for offering. I’ll take care of it later,” he said. “While we were waiting, Sharon texted me and said she’ll meet you at the front entrance. We should be there in about 10 minutes.”

Sharon Shillingford had only been an executive producer for *60 Minutes* for barely a month when my 15 minutes of fame was reaching its crescendo two weeks earlier. From what I

could tell, she was paid to herd cats, meet deadlines, and worry about everything. If I had a month of vacation to give, I'd give it to her. For someone in their early 30s, she looked exhausted, stressed, and in dire need of whatever made Bruce Warner of MSNBC so calm and easygoing. Despite her indefatigable demeanor, I liked Sharon. Based on her current choices in life, I felt that she, more than most, could benefit from the message I was offering the world—at least that's what I thought when I first worked with her and Anderson in Los Angeles.

"Hello, Chuck," she beamed from in front of the reception counter. "It's so good to see you again. Can you believe this weather? I was hoping we could have you come back to LA for the second interview, but as you're well aware of, Coop's schedule is cray cray."

Sharon wore a heather gray blouse underneath a black jacket that matched her high-waisted black pants. Even in flats, she was still only slightly shorter than me. Her blonde hair was pulled back into a loose updo, revealing much of her pale, angular face. Makeup, accessories, and jewelry weren't part of her morning routine. She held an enormous coffee in front of her chest with both hands. It was white and lidded, but it

wasn't from Starbucks. From her ringless fingers and the short white hairs stuck to her jacket, I could tell the love of her life was a dog—probably a Husky mix that hated men.

"Are you kidding? And miss out on walking the hallowed hallways of CBS, where Walter Cronkite, Dan Rather, Katie Couric, Mike Wallace, and Ed Bradley made history every week? This is a real honor, Sharon," I said without extending my hand, knowing she didn't like to be touched. "It's great to see you again, too."

After signing a few autographs and turning down an equal number of selfie requests, I followed Sharon as she walked from the lobby toward the elevators. Two armed guards separated us from the looky-loos gathering at the end of the hallway. We stood side-by-side while waiting for an elevator.

Sharon turned toward me and asked, "How are you handling your new celebrity status?"

I saw her notice my hesitancy in walking over to the fans behind the ropes in the lobby, so I knew what she was going to ask before she asked it. "To be honest, I'm hating it," I

replied. “I’m planning to do what Salman Rushdie did after he published *The Satanic Verses* in 1988: disappear from the public for a while. Whatever Anderson is made out of—I don’t have it.”

“I know what you mean,” she said. “I haven’t worked with Coop for very long, but I’m already impressed with him. The guy is world-famous, yet he’s so approachable and down-to-earth.”

A pair of shiny gold doors opened to the left of us. I followed Sharon into the spacious elevator, noticing her skinny frame and poor posture. She pushed the button for the 22nd floor. After the doors closed, we continued talking.

“So, if you’re hating the notoriety,” she began, “why did you do it? I recall you referring to yourself as a ‘nobody going nowhere in the absurdity of life.’ If that’s the case, why put yourself through all of this?”

“I love the question, Sharon,” I replied. “Have you heard of my book *Being Happy: The Pursuit of You*?”

Sharon took a sip of her coffee and said, “I think so. The ladies from *The View* were talking about your books earlier in the week. By the way, they don’t like you.”

“That’s hilarious,” I laughed. “A lot of people don’t like me—including my own family. I mentioned that book because, in it, I write about finding and giving your best gift without worrying about whether or not anyone will accept it. Discovering, creating, and giving your best gift is reward enough.”

“I like that, Chuck, but aren’t you contradicting yourself by agreeing to a second interview with Coop?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You gave your best gift when you delivered your presentation from the classroom, which was amazing by the way.”

The elevator slowed, and the doors reopened smoothly. We stepped out together, but before proceeding any further, I turned toward her and said, “That wasn’t my best gift.”

Not My First Rodeo

I recognized the *CBS Evening News* set as soon as I walked into Studio 47 with Anderson and Sharon. Both he and his producer were reviewing copies of the script, angling toward a brightly lit area with two upholstered chairs without armrests—the kind you'd find tucked underneath your grandmother's dining room table. Beside each chair, two short tables were positioned for quick access, presumably for water, should either Anderson or I need it during the hour-long taping. The chairs and tables stood out against the white reflectors, umbrellas, and diffusers—even the sound and lighting booms were white. In the shadows behind the interview set, I watched at least a dozen people scurrying from one place to another but never leaving the area entirely. As we approached the set, a bald-headed man wearing a headset and carrying a light meter greeted Sharon with a look of concern.

"I'll be right back, guys," she explained. "Go ahead and start your rehearsals without me."

"That's where you'll be sitting," instructed Anderson, nodding his head toward the chair closest to me. "I know this setup is

totally different from our LA studio, but then again, we *are* in the belly of the mothership."

Anderson Cooper, who's a shade shorter than me—probably as tall as Sharon in her flats—wasn't wearing his trademark square-shaped Moscot eyeglasses; instead, he had on a pair of wire-framed reading glasses that rested near the tip of his nose. He wore gray slacks, a white dress shirt, and what looked to be the same pair of blue and white Asics running shoes I saw him wearing in LA. Not only do I share Anderson's empathetic nature, but I, too, have high arches to contend with.

"Alright, Chuck," he continued. "I'll start the taping with a quick review of your presentation in Idaho, which I thought was truly eye-opening. Our *60 Minutes* crew really put together a top-notch montage to showcase highlights from the broadcast. Next, I'll follow up by asking you about the kind of reactions you've been getting since then."

I looked at Anderson, who returned my gaze from over the top of his reading glasses. I'm sure I'm not the only one who would compare his pale blue eyes to Wonder Woman's golden

lasso—they both make it impossible to lie while within their grip.

“The truth is, Anderson, I’ve sequestered myself since the broadcast and stayed away from all forms of media, including the press. When it comes to what I revealed during the broadcast, that wasn’t my first rodeo. Although it *was* the granddaddy of *all* rodeos, I’m sure the results are the same except on a much grander scale: 90% will reject what I’ve said, 9% will act open-minded but change nothing in their lives, and 1% will see me as nothing more than an amusing curiosity.”

“Those are some grim percentages, Chuck. What do you hope to gain from today’s interview if you already know people aren’t going to appreciate what you’re telling them?”

“That’s a fair question,” I replied, ignoring the boom operator hovering over my head. “I know I’m coming off like the King of Debbie Downers, but I’m actually optimistic about how this interview will change those dreary statistics.”

“How so?”

“It’s less about convincing people of my interpretation of the grand design and more about helping them understand their feelings about what I shared regarding the body and mind. I’m not trying to win a popularity contest. I’m trying to kick-start a billion or more internal conversations so that they, too, can discover the last remaining escape route.”

Anderson put his script down on the short table next to his chair and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “What do you mean by escape route? Are you implying that people are in danger?”

“Absolutely—”

“Hey guys,” interrupted Sharon, who startled me from behind. “You two look like you’re really getting into it. That’s great. Dress rehearsals start in 45 minutes, so I’ll need both of you in wardrobe in 20, ‘kay?”

Anderson nodded while checking his watch. He looked at me and said, “Please continue.”

I watched Sharon excuse herself to meet a much older woman, who was clearly wearing a blonde wig. It contrasted sharply against the lines on her face and the red coat wrapped around her shoulders. Despite the shadows and only seeing a portion of her face, I instantly knew Sharon was talking to Lesley Stahl.

“I don’t have to tell you, Anderson, how the world has changed for the worse over the past 30 years, especially in the last five—but this has always been the case since modern humans began recording history and most likely since they entered the picture 300,000 years ago. It’s a repeating story that starts out with the best of intentions that ends predictably in corruption, exploitation, suffering, and eventually, complete annihilation. Over countless millennia and empires, the playbook of the ruling class has always been the same: separate the slaves of the working class from nature, free time, independent thought, art, creative expression, families, each other, and most importantly, from themselves.”

“Who is this ruling class you speak of,” asked Anderson, “and how do you think they accomplish their goal of separating us?”

Despite two sound engineers adjusting cables on the floor between our two chairs, Anderson had a way of ignoring distractions and staying focused. It was easy to see why he was the preeminent newsman of my generation.

“First of all,” I replied, “thank you for indulging me with these follow-up questions. I’m sure I won’t be telling you anything you don’t already know.”

Anderson sat back in his chair and checked his watch. “That may or may not be true,” he said. “But I’d like to hear your thoughts.”

“I believe the ruling class, at this point, is a global consortium consisting of individuals, corporations, and governments we’ve all heard from and seen on our phones and TVs; however, they don’t call the shots. That’s left to a cabal of 20 to 30 incredibly powerful men, who operate from the shadows, avoiding microphones and cameras like the plague.”

“So, you think a handful of people are quietly establishing a self-serving global government where nationalities and borders won’t mean a thing?”

“Yes.”

“I like you, Chuck. You’re not afraid to say what’s on your mind. But you do realize that if you say these things during the taping, you’ll be committing career suicide, right?”

“It’s a risk I’m willing to take,” I replied. “It took me quite a while to finally realize that criticisms of how I see the grand design of the universe and personal attacks on my character weren’t, in fact, personal. It’s the natural outcome that ensues after one reveals fact-based truth and genuine authenticity to a brainwashed and disillusioned populace—they’re simply cancelled.

Life and Death

“Geez, Chuck, it sounds like you’ve had more than your fair share of trips to hell and back,” offered Anderson. “Believe me . . . I can relate. I still want to hear how you think the consortium—er, cabal—keeps us separated from all the things you mentioned. But let’s walk over to the hospitality suite. We still have plenty of time before we need to meet Sharon at

wardrobe. Plus, I'm starving; I haven't had anything to eat this morning."

I nodded at the two engineers, who looked up at me from their positions on the floor as I stood up. One of them was quick to reposition the front legs of my chair on top of two strips of blue tape. "Oh, sorry about that," I said, realizing that the sound, lighting, and camera crews needed everything to be exact. I followed Anderson toward a set of double doors, avoiding coils of cable, rolling carts, and eye contact. In the shadows, I noticed his hair looked as white as his shirt. As we entered a long corridor, he said, "So, tell me about the ruling class."

"Let's begin by opening up their playbook and reading the top line," I continued. "It simply says—in bold, all-caps lettering: Divide and Conquer. Underneath the top line, you'll find only two tenets. The first one says, 'Keep them afraid of life'; the second, 'Keep them afraid of death.' Let's begin with the first one."

"Is what you're about to tell me in the script?" asked Anderson.

“No, but we can add it if you’d like.”

“Let’s hear it first,” he cautioned. “We can decide later.”

“The first step of those in power is to create a false doomsday narrative that keeps the slaves in the working class believing that food, energy, housing, medical care, safety, and other basic needs are scarce, while at the same time telling them they have infinite choice if they’re willing to work hard enough. Next, they—”

“Hold on, Chuck,” interrupted Anderson. “Aren’t there other classes besides the ruling and working classes?”

“Nope.”

“So, then, by your own admission, you’d consider yourself to be a slave from the working class, yes?”

“Absolutely—and so are you, Anderson. We’re just freer than most slaves. But we’re still slaves.”

CBS's hospitality suite was behind an unmarked door and reminded me of United's Red Carpet Lounge in Heathrow International Airport in London. It had more than a dozen comfy chairs, six couches, and four high-top bistro tables with sets of four counter stools around each. The room was longer than it was wide, making me feel like I was walking into a giant shipping container. To the right, an alcove led to restrooms, changing areas, and private showers. On the left, a bank of refrigerated cases with glass doors lined the wall. Inside were dozens of drink selections, sandwiches, fruit plates, and salads, as well as microwavable choices like breakfast wraps, burritos, soups, etc. Two beefy, industrial-grade microwaves sat on a long, skinny table against the same wall. Another table hosted a do-it-yourself coffee bar with three large Keurig machines with at least two dozen different coffee, tea, cider, and hot chocolate options. From where I was standing, I could see Times Square through the floor-to-ceiling plate glass window at the other end of the suite.

"What—no guy slicing prime rib in a chef's hat?" I joked. "I thought we were in the mothership."

Anderson laughed and told me to help myself to anything I wanted. I thanked him and asked if we could continue our rehearsal in the sparsely populated suite while he ate. “Works for me,” he replied. I grabbed a raspberry-flavored Vitamin Water and sat at a table with the best view of Times Square. While Anderson waited in front of a humming microwave, I scanned the scene outside, noting that the piled snow was more black than white compared to the snow in Central Park. Despite the traffic, temperature, falling snow, and wet surfaces, crowds of people underneath bulky coats and hats bustled about. Other than the towering neon signs, I didn’t see a color of the rainbow anywhere else. Buildings, cars, streets, trees, bushes, and people were just different shades of black.

“Okay, Chuck. Please go on,” said Anderson as he sat down in front of me with a carton of orange juice and one of the breakfast burritos I saw in the case when we first walked in.

“By keeping slaves constantly focused on survival and imagined threats, the ruling class knows they won’t have time or energy to do anything except sit on a couch in front of distracting screens that make it easy to lose oneself through comfort-, pleasure-, and approval-seeking behaviors. The

ruling class not only defines what success looks like, but they also tell the slaves there's only one path to obtain it. This puts slaves in direct competition with one another, where the pecking order of 'who's winning in the game of life' is decided in the court of social media. Apparently, keeping slaves toiling and competing for basic needs for their entire lives isn't enough for the ruling class. They further strengthen their stolen power base by ensuring that slaves distrust, fear, and even hate one another."

I twisted the cap off my drink and took a sip while looking out the window. I watched a lady step off a bus and into a puddle of black water. Turning toward Anderson, I asked, "Too strong of an opinion?"

He smiled and took a deep breath before answering. "The newsman in me says, 'No,' but as your friend, I think it's an opinion most people won't agree with. From my experience, blunt honesty tends to invite enduring repercussions. It's your call, Chuck."

"But there's more," I said. "I haven't even mentioned how the ruling class promotes prejudice, discrimination, systematic

oppression, and separateness between races, ethnicities, creeds, faiths, genders, voters, and even families through backdoor legislation, rigged economics, proxy wars, religious fanaticism, agendized mainstream media, etc."

I could tell that Anderson wanted to make a comment. I waited for him to clear his mouth of the last remnants of his breakfast. "Chuck, you do know this is *60 Minutes* and not *180 Minutes*, right? I like your reference to a ruling class playbook for maintaining its power base and the two tenets, but you'll have to be more succinct. From what you've described, I can clearly see how the ruling class keeps people—I mean, slaves—afraid of life, but I want to hear why you think they also keep them afraid of death. It can't be too earth-shattering. After all, we *are* talking about being six feet under."

"You're right," I explained. "It isn't complicated at all; the ruling class gets plenty of help from social media platforms and religious organizations. From my experience, I've boiled it down to four fears—the fear of a painful death, dying alone, dying with unresolved issues, and of course, the fear of what happens or doesn't happen after death."

Anderson looked at me with a grin on his face, and with feigned disbelief, he asked, “Wait. That’s it? So, you *are* capable of giving brief answers. I’m shocked.”

As we were leaving the hospitality suite, I saw Anderson tap the shoulder of a man sitting on one of the couches. His phone was pinned between his ear and shoulder while his hands shuffled through a stack of papers resting on his lap.

“Who was that?” I asked while we walked side-by-side down the middle of the corridor toward the studio.

“Tony Dokoupil.”

“Who’s he?”

“He anchors the *CBS Evening News*.”

“Oh, okay. I stopped watching the news more than a decade ago.”

This Way Out

Anderson Cooper's private dressing room was at least five times larger than the one I had just stepped out of wearing a dark green quarter-zip pullover on top of a shirt and tie and a pair of brown slacks. Celeste, a Rubenesque woman in her mid-50s, had prepped my hair and face for a television audience that was projected to break a handful of records for CBS. The plan was simple—CBS would tape the interview this afternoon and broadcast it on Sunday after the Rams and Seahawks game. Anderson was sitting in a black leather salon chair with a dark blue barber cape draped over him. He was having his hair trimmed by a young man named Tyler.

"I'm so sorry about this, Chuck," he said without looking away from the lighted vanity mirror. "I hope you don't mind. We're going to start taping in about 30 minutes, so I want to hear more about the escape route you mentioned earlier. By the way, I like the term "escape route"; it's strong, and people can relate to that kind of imagery."

I sat down on one of two tall director's chairs. Each one displayed stenciling that read, "The Real Housewives of Anderson Cooper."

"Andy Cohen gave me those chairs as a gag gift a few years ago," he explained. "He's the guy who hosts all those housewives shows on Bravo TV."

"Yes, I know who Andy is, and over the years, I've watched the two of you co-host a few New Year's Eve specials in Times Square. You guys are so funny together."

Suddenly, I heard rapid knocking on the dressing room door, followed by the immediate appearance of Sharon, who seemed comfortable with barging into Anderson's private space. He didn't look annoyed, so I relaxed. She was wearing a headset and holding her script in one hand and a can of Red Bull in the other.

"Taping has been pushed back 30 minutes, so we have extra time to prep," she announced. "Where are you guys in the script?"

“Chuck and I are about to talk about his escape route,” replied Anderson, who continued to look straight ahead and remain motionless for Tyler.

Sharon dragged the second director’s chair toward the back wall and quickly plopped into it. After setting her drink down, she began scanning her script for the section about the escape route. Meanwhile, Tyler finished with Anderson’s hair and gathered his tools from the vanity counter. Anderson pulled off the cape and carefully rolled it like a yoga mat. He handed it to Tyler, who asked while walking out of the dressing room, “Should I tell Celeste you’re ready for her?”

“No, that’s okay,” replied Anderson. “I’ll call her when I’m ready. Thanks.”

I scooted forward on my chair, putting myself equidistant from both Anderson and Sharon. If someone else walked in, they’d see the three of us huddled close to one another in an almost perfect triangle. “The escape route can be found in a role you’re born with that few could name,” I began. “In fact, you’re born with two others that most people aren’t aware of either—but only one of these roles offers an escape route.”

“An escape from what?” asked Sharon, who decided to sit back and listen.

“I love that you just asked that,” I replied, looking at Sharon. “You just validated why I plan to briefly introduce the notion of an escape route early in the interview, followed by an explanation of what we’re all trying to get away from—which I went over with Anderson in the hospitality suite.”

Sharon looked at Anderson, who nodded back, confirming that we had gone over the material I mentioned. Satisfied, she asked, “So, what are the three roles?”

“I’ll start with the two that aren’t the escape route,” I answered. “The first is your biological gender; secondly, you’re a human being. In my opinion, these roles cannot be the preferred escape route because a litany of evil forces has destroyed them. Personally, I don’t know what it means to be a man or a woman in America anymore—men wear the jerseys of other men and call themselves doggie daddies, while women ink their bodies and exchange pregnancy for promotions. And when it comes to being human, who, in their right mind, could say we are a benevolent species after

watching the evening news? No offense, Anderson. However, among all the dour negativity I've just described, there's still hope. The role of *being* offers a way out of a world that's lost its grip on truth, tolerance, morality, cooperation, spirituality, common decency, etc."

I stopped talking and looked at my captive audience, who were exchanging glances at one another. "What?" I asked. Anderson replied, "This is interesting, Chuck. Keep going." Sharon nodded in agreement while reaching for her drink from atop a stack of boxes.

"When I ask people to name all the different roles they have in life, they invariably list their familial relationships, work responsibilities, and outside interests. Once in a while, someone will surprise me by saying 'man,' 'woman,' or 'human,' but I've yet to hear 'being.' That doesn't mean I'm the smart one and everyone else is stupid. I've been incredibly lucky to have been born with a personality, consciousness, free will, and interests that put me on a path of awareness and enlightenment beginning as far back as the fifth grade. Most people aren't in a position to reject the ruling class's incessant indoctrination to acquire as many earthbound roles as

possible—preferably before the age of 30. How many young men and women—anyone for that matter—do *you* know who have 9-to-5 jobs, families, mortgages, rent payments, car payments, student loans, monthly bills, etc., *and* still have time to contemplate their inner being's relationship to the universe?"

"Selling the lies of the American Dream to an already-exhausted, over-stimulated populace is just another play in the ruling class's playbook for maintaining power and control," I continued while looking at Sharon. "By tricking the working-class slaves into overloading themselves with debt, responsibility, and obligation—while at the same time obliterating what it means to be a man, woman, or human being—the ruling class successfully alienates slaves from nature, spirituality, each other, and themselves. To the ruling class, there's nothing worse than a slave who has profound respect for nature, spirituality outside of organized religion, cooperative and collaborative fellowship with others, and a deep, peaceful sense of self."

I sat back and looked at Anderson and then at Sharon with a quizzical look on my face. “Did you catch the loophole in the ruling class’s playbook?” I teased.

Sharon picked up her script as if she’d find the answer to the question on one of the pages. Anderson, however, looked like he was enjoying the challenge. He sat up in his chair and asked, “What do you mean?”

“Don’t you see?” I replied. “The presentation in Idaho demonstrated that we are all inextricably linked, mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually, to the universe; our existence as beings is the conduit for this cosmic relationship—a role that the ruling class cannot destroy. That’s why it’s the perfect escape route.”

Final Thoughts

I heard a man’s voice emanate from Sharon’s headset. It was too garbled for me to understand what he was saying.

“I can’t come right now,” she said into the suspended microphone. “Can’t you ask Tom or Cathy?”

After more garbled communication, Sharon looked at me and asked, “I want to hear the rest of this, Chuck. How much more time do you need?”

“10 minutes.”

“I’ll meet you there in 15,” she said into the mic. She pushed a button on the side of the headset and removed it before tossing it on the floor like an unwanted leash.

“Imagining the roles of a mother, a project manager, or a hospice volunteer isn’t hard to do,” I began. “A mother rocks her baby to sleep. A project manager facilitates a meeting. A hospice volunteer reads at the bedside of an elderly person. However, for most people, imagining the ‘being’ role is far more difficult. They typically assume it’s an activity like yoga, tai chi, or transcendental meditation when, in fact, it’s simply a knowingness—a conscious awareness of one’s authentic self and their place in the universe. Do you remember when I asked everyone to imagine sitting with me on an asteroid to open the presentation? It offers more than just a glimpse of our cosmic insignificance—it’s the home of my inner being.”

“I don’t get it,” interjected Sharon. “Aren’t our inner beings inside of us?”

“You’d think that would be the case, but it isn’t,” I replied. “Every role—except for the being—is earthbound and vulnerable to any number of events outside of our control. Children can die. Marriages can dissolve. Jobs can be lost. Essentially, the being is above it all and takes comfort in knowing that nothing—not even the lost souls of the ruling class—can cancel your card-carrying membership to the universe.”

“Chuck, forgive me for saying this, but your description of our inner being sounds rather detached, aloof even,” said Anderson.

“I like your comment, Anderson,” I replied. “It’s honest. Whereas the family home, office, and hospice facility are the proverbial worlds of a mother, project manager, and volunteer, the field of vision for your inner being encompasses the *entire* universe—including the worlds of all your earthbound roles. Although an inner being requires a vantage point that an asteroid can provide, it’s not there to merely observe; its

relationship to the earthbound roles in a person's life is similar to the relationship between a quarterback and the 10 other players on the field making up the team's offense. The quarterback can see the entire field and calls the plays, knowing the roles of each teammate. Can you imagine what the on-field success would look like if the left tackle called the plays instead from his crouched position along the offensive line? It would be an absolute disaster—no different than letting our earthly roles dictate our lives."

Sharon tilted her head back and drained what remained of her energy drink. She tossed the empty can into a tall wastebasket beneath a framed black-and-white photograph of a much younger Anderson. It was taken in the 1990s when he reported for CNN as a war correspondent. "So, are you saying we should drop the earthbound roles and focus solely on our inner beings?" she asked.

"No, of course not," I replied. "Nor would it be feasible. In the same way that the love for a child is packaged within the parental role or in the way that duty and honor are integral to the role of a marine, consciousness, free will, spirituality, authenticity, creativity, morality, and wonderment reside

within the role of the inner being. But in today's cold and rudderless society—an intentional construct of the ruling class—the inner being is not only underfed, it is also largely ignored. Have you wondered why there's so much interest in what I'm saying about the body, mind, and the grand design? It's because the inner beings of all these people are starving for something deep, meaningful, and wildly interesting—proof that there's more to life than working to enrich others, paying taxes, and the so-called American Dream."

"But what about the people who are against everything you've been saying?" asked the quintessential newsman. "According to a poll conducted by the Pew Research Center, 65% of adults in the US are against your message, saying you're a do-nothing with too much free time who chooses to spread nonsense instead of contributing to society."

"Well, there goes my chance for an Emmy," I laughed. "I hope you'll use that during the taping."

"I'd like to if you're okay with it."

"I am," I insisted.

“Good,” added Sharon. “Putting our guests on the spot is what separates us from shows like ABC’s 20/20.”

“Just because someone disagrees with me doesn’t mean they’re without an inner being. Years ago, I was the same way, rejecting everything that would challenge the way I saw the world. Believe me, I understand their resistance. Acknowledging, accepting, and feeding the inner being is easier said than done. Typically, I warn people about the enlightenment and awareness that ensues once the inner being is awakened, which catches them by surprise. They’ll pause for a moment before asking why such virtues would be cause for alarm. ‘What you don’t realize,’ I tell them, ‘is that not only will you be crushed by what you’ll find on the underbelly of the society you live in, but you’ll also bear witness to the truth of your own self-deception.’”

“It’s a bitter pill to swallow,” I continued, “but as Friedrich Nietzsche poignantly asked, ‘Is there a price too prohibitive for you to think for yourself, to live authentically, and to own your truth?’ Once your inner being enters the frame, you can easily see that most relationships are merely unspoken, performative agreements to validate each other’s self-worth

and illusions. In a way, the awakening of the inner being is akin to the steps taken to revitalize a failing business. But instead of retooling, downsizing, and restructuring for profit and market share, an empowered inner being will naturally trim relationships and roles, reallocating wasted time and energy into connections and involvements that are more meaningful and fulfilling. Again, the inner being is not interested in seeking approval or self-promotion, but rather a calm knowingness of one's authentic self and their place in the universe."

"Knock, knock," said a female voice from the other side of the dressing room door. I recognized it immediately.

Anderson looked at me apologetically and said, "Come in, Celeste."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Mr. Cooper," she said in a pleasing Spanish lilt. "I didn't know you were in a meeting."

"It's okay. We're almost through. Could you come back in five minutes?"

From the way she dressed and carried herself, Celeste reminded me of the women I was fortunate enough to work with in Puerto Rico in the late 1990s. They took pride in their femininity. She wore a white dress with a colorful, floral pattern with a bright red belt that matched her lipstick. Her white strappy sandals with two-inch heels completed the look of someone who reveled in being a woman. I appreciated her skillful makeup, her blonde-highlighted brown hair, and her youthful shag cut. If I didn't already know she did hair and makeup at CBS, I would've guessed she owned a chain of high-end hair salons in Miami.

After Celeste left the room, I said, "It's too late for America. This country is dying from the same cancer that killed all the empires that came before. If we had detected it in time, we could have excised it or eliminated it via chemo—in this case, a horrific civil war or worse. Now, all we can do is wait for the train to slam into the brick wall. But until then, we can escape through the role of our inner being—the one aspect of ourselves that provides the peace, serenity, and dignity befitting of the universe's greatest accomplishment."

The End

About the Author

Chuck Trunks is a writer and artist who grew up in suburban Philadelphia. After earning a Bachelor of Science degree in Biology from North Carolina State University, Chuck had a successful 19-year career in positions ranging from genetic engineer to software developer to business analyst at Amgen, Inc. in Thousand Oaks, California. During his tenure in the biotech industry, he traveled extensively throughout the United States, Europe, and the Caribbean. For inspiration, he bicycles, runs, and reads whatever he can get his hands on. *A Rationale for Being* is Chuck's ninth book.

He can be reached through his website or email:

www.trunksart.com
chucktrunks@gmail.com

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