MIND OVER MATTER

Chapter 3

Chuck Trunks

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 gave up to cover the costs of not accepting 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. On occasions, when I want to steer the conversation to a more satisfying subject, I like to answer questions such as 'Who are you?', 'What do you do?', or 'What have you been up to lately?' 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 first person, nor was she the last, 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."

The End (of Chapter 3)