

CHAPTER ONE

Our honeymoon took in a visit to the Museum of Old and New Art, an impressive space, well worth a few hours when you're next in Tasmania.

The owner, David Walsh, fascinated by art and annoyed by organized religion, is a man with strong opinions, an old school shit-stirrer as we say in Australia. At one exhibit, hung alongside a popular quote from *Julius Caesar* – “the fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars” – the local boy who made a stash from gambling, offered a few thoughts on what it's all about. Life on Earth is without a goal. Evolution just “makes stuff” and forces species to respond to each other. In this random universe, human beings are no more important than any other creature, a slug or a monkey. And according to Walsh, those who believe otherwise, idiots who gaze to the heavens longing for an intelligible response from an imaginary Creator, have a status lower than that of cockroaches. The provocation reminded me of a popular YouTube clip narrated by the prominent atheist Stephen Fry:

Some people think that there should be a single meaning of life. They think that the universe was created for a purpose and that human beings were part of some larger cosmic plan. They think our meaning comes from being part of this plan, and is written into the universe, waiting to be discovered.

The humanist view of the meaning of life is different. Humanists do not see that there is any obvious purpose to the universe, but that it is a natural phenomenon with no design behind it. Meaning is not something out there, waiting to be discovered, but something we create in our own lives.

On the return home I saw the cultural impact of this reigning ethos, what I call a Secular worldview.

A well-attired man with quality luggage – let's call him Stuart – was nearby when checking in for the flight, again in the departure lounge and then finally on the Boeing 737-800 back to Brisbane. In all that time, he paid scant attention to his wife – her chunky diamond ring was very hard to miss – and small daughter, engaging them perhaps once or twice over a lengthy period. Our fellow traveler looked lost and lonesome, condemned to a superficial and loveless existence, devoid of passion and humor.

I'd hazard to say most of us know a Stuart or two, someone who grew up in an upper-middle-class family in the 70s and 80s to liberal-minded, baby boomer parents committed to a practical, do-unto-others morality, hard work and a first class education. After a carefree childhood, he ventured out into a world of boundless promise. Anything was possible. Life was urgent and responsive, meaning found instinctively with very little conscious effort, as there wasn't much to think about. Generate a sizable cash-flow, be charming, get laid often to a variety of women, and luxuriate, unabashedly, in the wealth and technology of the Western world, an

astonishing bounty centuries in the making and now bequeathed to him and his generation.

At some point, circumstances got more complicated. Greater awareness, of himself and others, upset his rhythm. You perform *Bohemian Rhapsody* in your head a couple hundred times without assimilating the lyrics. Then, one day, for no discernible reason, you pause and contemplate its opening verse:

Is this the real life?
Is this just fantasy?
Caught in a landslide
No escape from reality

Newspaper columnist and author David Brooks describes the ensuing crisis:

There is a part in each of our souls that is like a reclusive leopard. This is the part that doesn't care about money or status or Facebook or any of the everyday things. The leopard is the part of us that feeds off transcendence, that seeks an awareness of one's place in the cosmic order, a feeling of connection to unconditional love, truth, justice, beauty and home.

For long periods the leopard is up in the forest high in the mountains. You may forget about him for long stretches. But from time to time out of the corner of your eye, you glimpse the leopard, just off in the distance trailing you through the tree trunks.

Then there are moments, inevitable in every life, but maybe more toward middle or old age, when the leopard comes out of the hills and he just sits there in the middle of your doorway. He stares at you, inescapably, eye to eye and face to face, implacable and unmoving. He demands your justification. What is your purpose? What is your mission? For what did you come? There are no excuses at that moment. Everybody has to throw off the mask.

Awoken from his slumber, Stuart set out on a spiritual quest.

Concrete things, what is known to the senses, are not the whole story. You and I, words on a page, a rock, the planet Mars, all exist within a bigger setting. What truly matters in this larger scheme is beyond anything that can be seen or touched, its essence glimpsed only when we're present, simply Being in the here-and-now, free of envy, fear, anger and any type of expectation or guarantee. Friedrich Nietzsche called it the true world. It's also freedom, love, happiness. Or God, if you want to use *that* word. Naming conventions aside, the experience harkens to an intimate relationship with what is more vital and satisfying than the material world and its crude biological necessities. It's more real than real, eternal and unchangeable. At a late-afternoon drinking session, Stuart once told work colleagues it's like in *Star Wars* when Luke trusts the Force or that scene from *The Matrix* when Neo, beginning to understand that Nothing Matters other than this connection, is so in the zone he can dodge bullets.

While life is necessarily lived in the physical realm, one does not have to be *of* it, beholden to its cause-and-effect rules and illusions. For a time, perhaps fleetingly, we can elevate, lose ourselves in the Flow and, in so doing, discover our True Self, what is at one with an ultimate reality, a higher source of order that permeates and binds all things.

Such dualism seemed to Stuart to be a common trait.

Madonna got it right in *Like A Prayer*. Life is a mystery and so we must each stand alone. It's all too personal and immediate to articulate properly, let alone be reflected in an all-encompassing system of knowledge. If there is a common answer, it is to be found in how we play the hand we've been dealt, the creative doing that aligns our inner world with Freddie's inescapable landslide of reality.

Human beings are also social animals, of course, endowed with mind and language, exceptional faculties with the potential to illuminate and express sensations and desires. It's Tuesday morning in early-April, the week of the Masters at Augusta. A slight westerly is blowing. You step up and smash the perfect drive off the 7th tee at your regular course. No-one has ever done that before, felt that way before and no-one will ever again. In spite of this, we attempt to convey what it *means*, as if the inimitability of it all had happened before and will happen again. The same is true of less trivial matters involving love and morality. Social bonds existent regardless of our uniqueness, arousing in us a desire to collaborate, co-operate and strive for a universal brotherhood. However separate and particular it may be, life has a universal texture to it. We're in this together, even if the exact nature of "this" is mysterious. History is a morality tale of some kind with a common narrative grounded in the promise of salvation. This visceral inter-dependence has driven human civilization forward for thousands of years.

Stuart laid out the logic. All that can be seen and not seen, explicable and inexplicable, has the same origin, whether you're a fan of the Big Bang or creationism, whether you think you're made of billion-year-old star dust or in the image of God. Shared start; shared finish. While life may be, strictly speaking, meaningful in a subjective way, this meaningfulness is contingent on our choices, big and small, contributing to a Hollywood Ending, a shared redemption when all is finally Put Right. Human endeavor is thus goal-orientated, focused on a final destination where each and every journey – good, bad and ugly – bleeds into one.

It further stands to reason this longed-for return Home requires the whole human race to be of a Single Mind, united in thought and action.

Bewildering stuff. There are no literal answers. Ultimate success lies inward, contingent on the individual living life large and free. On the other hand, we have a common destiny. The political impulse is embedded in human nature, our unique experiences spoken about and shared in the hope of promoting a sense of belonging and to confirm we are each a factor in a cosmic drama that will one day be brought to

a satisfying end. The material world has inherent structure and is encoded with purpose, yet it's also true that anything can happen, and usually does.

How does the mind balance the opposing elements in life? Is our primary allegiance to a physical, lower realm of appearances, or should our hopes always be directed toward an other-worldly domain that is metaphysical, more real than real? Do we have free will or is life pre-determined? It is about order or accepting uncertainty? Universal or the particular? Collective cause or radical individualism? A random universe or one with a destiny and purpose? Nothing Matters ... or is it, in fact, that Everything Matters?

How can Man stand for something and be held accountable – to God, the leopard or himself – under such paradoxical conditions? Surely something is at stake, in a literal sense, that provides a middle ground between extremes. There has to be a Plan, a big picture solution applicable to all of humanity that isn't overwhelmed by permanent mystery. Could it be possible to live life as a verb by yielding to the Flow, while at the same time interrogate it as a noun, something finite and conceptual? Maybe Belinda Carlisle had the answer. Put love first and we can make heaven a place here on Earth.

Perhaps it's all a deft joke and there's wisdom in the Yiddish proverb: "Man thinks, God laughs."

Either way, thought Stuart, there's got to be more to it. A way to reconcile competing demands. Halfway to nowhere, he decided to press on, invigorated, wanting to seize the day.

Religious friends were few and far between. It irked him when they invoked Jesus or brandished a crucifix. What, doesn't God already know you're a believer? He felt the self-importance somehow cheapened their humanity, which was then compensated for by practicing a subtle form of spiritual snobbery, signaling to others their status as I'm-saved-and-you're-not. Instead, he tracked down his grandmother's embossed King James Bible from childhood (he couldn't bring himself to buy one) and mined it for insight. He also began wandering into bookstores, picking up by chance a Buddhist or Kabbalist text, letting it fall open at a random page expecting the contents to hit him between the eyes with a final thought, an epistemic closure to quell his doubts.

It wasn't long before his positive attitude came under pressure and the awe and mystery started to feel like a cruel taunt. Why is rationalistic inquiry into our most important questions so difficult? Surely his search was not unreasonable. As with the race of hyper-intelligent, pan-dimensional beings in *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, who build a super computer, Deep Thought, all he wanted was a straight-forward response to the question of, you know, Life, the Universe and Everything. The answer they received, "42," was patently absurd. Yet Stuart could unearth nothing better.

Longing to be loved, he also, increasingly, needed to know, like Foreigner, what love is. Alex, his wife, was frequently unhelpful, her mixed messages adding to his confusion and growing unease. One day, money and status are tremendously important; the next, they're not. And in between, as far as he could tell, nothing of note had changed. She'd urge him to be strong and virulent, caring and sensitive. Protect me, but don't resort to violence. Be rugged and cosmopolitan. Never, ever lie – have I put on weight over Christmas? A man should appreciate all women for who they are – did I tell you what that bitch said about our daughter at childcare last week? Funnily enough, Stuart still felt at the center of her world, most of the time. Any acknowledgment of such by him, however, usually resulted in unwarranted hysteria. To paraphrase a recent incident: “No, you self-centered dick, I did not make myself look pretty just for you.”

Women, it appears, are purveyors of contradiction. Why can't they be frank about their wants, needs and expectations, without the vagueness and contingency? They hammer men for equivocating, for being non-committal. We'd happily follow orders and practice thoughtless worship ... in return for pre-emptive forgiveness of our frailties and boys-will-be-boys foibles. Along with a commitment to fulfil a catalogue of elaborate sexual fantasies. For Stuart, such a bargain would include the woman second-guessing what this might entail, as any civilized bloke is too ashamed to make explicit the predatory character of his carnal mind. She'd not cope. She wouldn't empathize with the depravity, our “jungle of horrors,” as writer Howard Jacobson called the male psyche. Stuart attempted to facilitate matters a few years back, before he became a father, when a specially-created Gmail account, complete with cunning alias, was used to send Alex a link. The submissive girl in the porn clip, blonde hair in pigtails and retaining a short, pleated tartan skirt throughout her erotic ordeal, knew instinctively what to do and what to say. So in the Now and unattainable was she, Stuart forgot young Sindee was working to a script drafted by men.

In any event, Alex didn't take the hint and never mentioned it. And he was too terrified to bring it up.

On Earth, as it is in heaven.

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.

Though more willing than Richard Dawkins to give the benefit of the doubt, Stuart nonetheless labored to make sense of the history of God, as we know it today. It is written – and he couldn't think of a credible reason why people would concoct such fantastical stories – God revealed himself as a burning bush to Moses, after which he perpetrated various atrocities so his chosen people, the Jews, could escape bondage. In Act II, he changes things up and fully pierces the veil between realms. The divine takes human form. The deity of the New Testament elects to be born in a manger to a

virgin, after which he lives, for the most part, a very non-descript life as a carpenter called Jesus. Having conducted a few miracles, he then, one day, heads into town on a lowly donkey to rightly stick it to his own priestly class, who have become corrupted by power, and needle Pontius Pilot about the nature of truth. Our savior advises the punters that his kingdom is not of this world and to repent, for God is about to judge the living and the dead, though he doesn't say precisely when. The saga comes to a head when the almighty Creator of the entire universe forsakes himself on a cross, endures a humiliating death and leaves an empty tomb a few days later.

Some centuries on, the same God decides to initiate a rival fire-and-brimstone monotheism by speaking, through an angel, to an illiterate shepherd on a mountainside somewhere in what is now Saudi Arabia. Islam is born. In the meantime, other civilizations miss out entirely. No faith-inspiring revelation for the Indian, African or Japanese children of God.

Seriously! The judgement, the drama and intrigue. The indiscriminate movements between the material and spiritual. What are we to interpret from this? Why the selective use of prophets, special covenants and supernatural occurrences? Why let the Jews be enslaved by Pharaoh to begin with? Why the favoritism and competing religious cults? And why didn't he, when prayed to as a 9 year old, help out with that 3rd grade bully? Here's a novel idea, thought Stuart, something that may have slipped the Big Guy's very busy mind. The entire globe is now totally networked, with just about everyone in the loop. So let's make Act III about putting things straight. Sort out the conflict and misunderstanding. How about you, God, step one last time into the province of concrete things, put the mystery about your existence to bed and make a short public service announcement, à la Stephen Fry? Spell out, in very plain terms in English, current day lingua franca, what is at stake and how it translates into a job description for us poor saps down here trying to figure out WTF it is you want done.

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