

Thank you, oh Creator, for the gift of today with everything it entails.

Welcome back, my friends.

Sufi poet Hakim Sanai said, “Words cannot be used in referring to religious truth, except as analogy.”¹ Words are limited, yet in unfolding spiritual metaphors, we can glimpse the deeper truths to which words can lead us. Words, used with contemplation, introspection, and meditation, offer tools on our path towards the divine.

There’s an interesting and recurring metaphor I’d like to unfold about childhood and the innocence of children. Multiple chapters in the Tao te Ching reference returning to the innocence of childhood, a place of unspoiled essence. The book sees wholeness, virtue, and spiritual integrity as embodied in newborns. In Taoism, the sage (a person of profound wisdom), both embodies and encourages in others the quest for initial wholeness, of childlike wonder and openness. We see this in the final paragraph of Chapter 49 of the Tao te Ching, which weaves in cooperation as it states:

Wise people merge with all others
rather than stand apart judgmentally.
In this way all begin
to open their ears and hearts,
more prepared to return
to the innocence of childhood.²

This spiritual notion of childhood is echoed in the Bible. Matthew 18:3 says, “...Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”³ There’s no physical transformation, so as a spiritual seeker, what does it mean to become or “behave” as little children, and how does that offer a doorway to the divine?

The inquiry reveals many layers and the interesting ways they interrelate. The more I learn about the unfolding of the human animal — biologically, cognitively, culturally, and spiritually — the more I see how there is a place of intersection in the divine realm. To contemplate the essence of being a child is also to consider how we weathered what the Enneagram of personality⁴ would call the shock of embodiment — being separated from the protective comfort of the mother’s womb to enter the bright, cold, loud, chaotic, new reality. Its aftereffects are seen in the way we relate to and move through the world. Our personalities, relative to that ancient Sufi system, can be seen as a measurement of how far we have moved away from an original state of pure being and potential.

¹ Hakim Sanai, *The Walled Garden of Truth*.

² Translation by Ralph Alan Dale.

³ New International Version.

⁴ The Enneagram is an ancient Sufi spiritual teaching that describes nine personality types and their interrelationships. It became integrated into modern psychiatry through the work of Chilean psychiatrist Claudio Naranjo and has become a complex and sophisticated personality system. All references herein will be from Helen Palmer’s book, *The Enneagram. Understanding Yourself and the Others in Your Life*.

A contemplation of human nature invites questions about our potential, coded biologically into our beings. A consideration of how to achieve the full expression of our physical, cognitive, social, and spiritual possibilities then adds the notion of care and guidance that would have to come from parents, both biological and spiritual. It also invites us to consider anything that possibly could “stunt the growth,” and any correctives or remedies.

Along our inquiry into the essential being of children, let us remember to be mindful of word-prisons, since the way we define our terms puts limitations on our ability to see, think, learn, and accomplish. This is true in our daily lives and more so in the spiritual realm, which requires subtle distinctions in its perception. In learning to see what is hidden in plain sight it is useful to shift our angle of view regularly and see with a different perspective. So, let’s have a little wander together.

In his book *A Universe From Nothing*, theoretical physicist Lawrence Krauss said, “The job of physics is not to invent things we cannot see to explain things we can, but to figure out how to see what we cannot see — to see what was previously invisible...” One day I played a game of scavenger hunt with some friends, and part of the game was to find clues, secret messages that helped to guide us. They were written with yellow highlighter, which was invisible in the room light but glowed brightly if illuminated by a “sleuthing device,” which was an ultraviolet LED mounted to a magnifying glass. Yes, playtime is for all ages and can be made more fun with science. The otherwise invisible spectrum of light revealed the messages hidden just beyond our perceptual threshold. In figuring out how to see what we cannot see, remember that clues are in plain sight but not necessarily available to the eye without assistance.

The Church of Inquiry is an inquiry-based religion that unifies science with faith to assist in seeking the Creator. Let’s add to that a playful and creative childlike spirit. We believe the universe has a creator, that we exist for a purpose, and that the Creator is knowable to us using the methods and practice of science. Science, let’s remember, is both an intellectual and a practical activity — a thinking as well as a doing. It uses observation (an ability to see) and experiment, yet often starts in the imagination. Albert Einstein said, “Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world.” We’re a church at the intersection of science and faith, which brings a new set of tools to a multi-millennia quest. Words freed from their prisons can help us to understand how faith can include both the physicist’s pursuit of an imagined “god particle” and a religious person’s pursuit of the Creator. It also reminds us that imagination is an ally for scientific inquiry.

On our path towards the Creator, we believe in the existence of a divine “language” — one that may not fit common expectation — that can be used to learn from and possibly communicate with the Creator. Whatever that language is, we believe it is woven into the fabric of nature. Why? Because the methods and practice of science have revealed endless wonders of structure and interrelationship that create beauty and suggest intention.

Is our observation proof of anything? No.

It's based on patterns. It's an accumulation of data. It's a valid basis to form a hypothesis *which must be tested*. We believe that the creation reveals everything we need to help us along our path towards the Creator. In unifying science and faith, we become hybrid spiritual beings, thus offer both a hypothesis — there is a divine language for us to discover — and a prayer in that we seek the spirit of guidance in its discovery. Invoking our science mind, we look at and make sense of the patterns we perceive aided by empiricism. As people of faith, we follow our intuitions with hearts softened by childlike wonder and open to the spirit of guidance, whatever form that takes. When we, as a church, add the methods and practice of science to our prayer, we free them from a limiting word-prison, allowing wondrous new things to be revealed. To us, our search for answers about the divine — our ultimate path of inquiry — is itself the highest form of prayer.

Continuing our thought experiment of being “as children,” language is something we typically learn from our parents. If we contemplate within our metaphor a “heavenly Father,” as is found in many religions, then silence from a parent is inconceivable and inconsistent with all we understand as parenthood. If there is a Creator, then there is true guidance yet to be discovered; there is a divine “voice” we must learn to hear. As with the hidden scavenger-hunt messages, once we know to seek, what tools do we need to access what we suspect is there?

Sufi teacher and philosopher Hazrat Inayat Khan said, “There is one Holy Book, the sacred manuscript of nature, the only scripture which can enlighten the reader. Most people consider as sacred scriptures only certain books or scrolls written by the hand of man, and carefully preserved as holy, to be handed down as divine revelation... To the eye of the seer every leaf of the tree is a page of the holy book that contains divine revelation...”

If the language of the divine is woven into nature, then it's reasonable to consider human nature as having something to reveal, as well. In a separate thought experiment/inquiry, I was pondering the purpose of our existence and wound up thinking about our biological unfolding. I like the word unfolding, as you might guess, which is an act of revelation or disclosure, because it also gives a visual understanding of a path of inquiry: an opening up or a peeling back to see what is there. Unfolding or unpacking an idea in the realm of science is called a thought experiment. To artists or children, it is called daydreaming. To the spiritual community, these are meditations, and we use them to guide our inquiry. As you adjust the word, as you redefine intention, as you change the lens or shift the focus, new understandings become available.

To unpack or unfold is a process of sequential revelation that leads to deeper understanding over time. At some point, we must spin the turret on our metaphorical microscopes, change magnification, and experience the thing we already see well in a completely different way, on a completely different level. To make that shift it is important to remain malleable and open to entering those other levels, very much like in the spirit of play. My contemplation of our biological unfolding took me along a consideration of intention, potential, beauty, purpose, and a union with the One. Although, to continue along this particular inquiry, my friends, I'll need to unfold a single word which not only ties all these thoughts together, it offers additional tools.

What is art?

Let's set aside the philosophical or aesthetic debate to focus on the part that relates to creative skill or its application, or work exhibiting this. Baked into the definition is an understanding of communication, at some level, since art is an embodiment of a creator's idea. At the core is "the conscious use of *skill and creative imagination*, especially in the production of aesthetic objects.⁵" Suppose we apply that to the creation of our world and ourselves...?

Frank Wilczek, a Nobel Prize winning physicist, wrote a book called *A Beautiful Question* as a long *meditation* — his word — on a single question from the viewpoint of physics: "Does the world embody beautiful ideas?" He expands this to ask: "Is the world a work of art?" He then adds: "If an energetic and powerful Creator made the world, it could be that what moved Him...to create was precisely an impulse to make something beautiful." Wilczek gives us physics, meditation, art, and religion — all invoked in service to science. When freed from a limiting word-prison, there is no conflict in envisioning science in service to faith in service to science. Molecular motion, chemical reactions, mathematical equations, all can exhibit beauty, balance, symmetry, and "artistic properties" whose nature offer pathways of prediction and facilitate inquiry into truth.

Freed from encumbrance, *all of this* belongs in the toolkit we call the "methods and practice of science" and becomes part of our spiritual art. Long before there were scientific tools and techniques, artistic temperaments and passions studied patterns to see what could be revealed. Interpreting patterns — a function wired into our brains — is aided by using our creative and playful sides, something children do intuitively. In our practice, we embrace science but aren't working under laboratory conditions. One can use skill and creative imagination as an artist while simultaneously maintaining a scientist's rigor and commitment to empirical data. Scientists searching data for patterns equally invoke the artistic, creative, and playful. The worlds and the tools overlap.

Art is "seeing" (which can be unpacked in various ways), understanding, and communicating that vision/experience/understanding with others in a meaningful way. Science does the same. It is also the same with our path of inquiry into the divine: we hope to see, understand, and communicate with the Creator. Our pursuit of the divine is an art and the techniques we employ belong to the methods and practice of science, which has an underlying creative imperative. Our choice of tools and techniques, which we will delve into as we continue, are individual yet all relate to seeing, understanding, and communicating in a way that is unencumbered.

I'm exploring the word *art* because words can be surprisingly messy and prone to misunderstanding. We know of their multiple meanings, oppositional emotional contexts, and competitive metaphor frames. I've often heard artists framed as dreamers who aren't "serious" like doctors and lawyers — Don't let your kid marry one! Yet art is crucial, underlies discovery based on pattern recognition, and could even be what compelled the

⁵ Per Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Eleventh Edition.

Creator. To disparage it is to discourage its use and deny us the tool. It gets placed into a restrictive word-prison.

Separate from the tools of modern science are the expectations of how to use them and where they are applicable. What happens if we postulate that “art” is the arena in which all science is conducted? Art requires skill, learning, creativity, and is facilitated by an open heart. It is also facilitated by embracing curiosity and the playful impulses common to children. Children are born pre-programmed with the structure of scientific thinking. They are also born as artists, with many experts seeing creativity as innate.⁶

Contemplating all of that innate capability brings me back to our biological unfolding and, perhaps, our purpose. Children don't *have* the learn to walk, but they are compelled to by design. We don't *have* to embrace the use of scientific thinking, yet it, too, is part of our design. Is spirituality innate? Once we've postulated a creator, we would have to consider the creation as being structured with form and intention. In that context, the innate tools we humans have been given provide a window into our nature and potential.

Watch a young child and you see the underpinnings of the science mind. At a very young age, all that children have available is cause and effect. They essentially conduct experiments on the objects and people around them and observe what happens. To a scientist, that's model building. Because children are creative and can spontaneously summon flights of imagination, they can invent all sorts of interesting experiments.

Little children are naturally curious about the world and you can watch them connect cause and effect, using repetition to develop physical skills and create pathways of understanding. “Do it again!” becomes the favorite phrase. Children use their innate programming — our “divine operating system” — as they observe, test, and understand themselves and the world. They want to learn about everything, find out as much as they can, and understand physical limits. They want to know why the sky is blue and trees are green, where birds go when it rains and what's under the ocean. It's all exciting! Those questions can lead to wondering how the universe began, why we exist, and what happens after. Children are trusting and early answers can limit later exploration.

If we consider our foundation — physical, intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and now artistic — we know that establishing good practice early has value over a lifetime. Parents want what's best for a child, yet may not realize that some things are time sensitive. For example, children have an innate ability to learn and retain languages, a capacity that

⁶ Pablo Picasso once declared: “Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up.”

Various studies argue that all children are creative by nature. Researchers know that children undergo a stage of constant formulation of questions and divergent thinking between the ages of three and five. This is a phase characterized by a creativity they can maintain for life under an appropriate reinforced environment. Thus, creativity is seen as innate. Unfortunately, many people lose this skill as the years go by. Per Mark A Runco, *Children's divergent thinking and creative ideation*, Developmental Review, Volume 12, Issue 3, 1992, Pages 233-264.

diminishes over time. Research shows babies begin to learn language sounds before they're even born.⁷

A language uses only about 40 discreet sounds, called “phonemes,” and all the world’s languages put together comprise about 800 or so sounds. At birth, the brain has the capacity to differentiate between all 800 sounds, meaning infants can learn any language they’re exposed to.⁸ Modern brain imaging shows that the brains of people who grow up speaking two languages are actually wired differently. Research shows that people bilingual from childhood are better at high-order thinking, called executive function, and suffer less from Alzheimer’s.⁹

Italian educator Maria Montessori demonstrated that complex math is actually easier for younger children, the opposite of when it’s generally taught. Her 100-year-old method teaches math with bead strings that impart a visual and physical understanding of numbers, giving students a superior understanding and facility. Scientific study has shown that learning mathematics helps develop analytical thinking, logic, and order, all of which form the basis of how we understand and interact with our world. Cognitive relationships that children develop in math class carry over into basic life skills from managing finances to understanding if a bargain really is one. Critical thinking facilitates our capacity to see what’s in the patterns. All of these things prepare us to become seekers capable of understanding the transcendent and subtle realms.

Learning how things work informs decisions. We live in a time where we can use functional MRIs and PET scans to watch thoughts and experiences activating different parts of our brains. We can look at the design of our naturally-curious children and the way their minds unfold to see what we believe is the intent of the Creator. We have the technology literally to peer into the workings of the brain to understand this *organ* (an understanding of function) and *tool* (which requires technique and skills) that determines our perception of and interrelationship with the world. Together, they give insight into our potential.

Deprive a plant of light and its growth will be stunted. What illumination allows for *our* full development? We have innate capabilities, which we see as a gift from the divine. Whatever our endeavor — sports, music, and other fields — we also see that children who learn and train early are more likely to achieve success. In our spiritual lives, however, we don’t really train the young beyond the learning of stories and rituals. Religion isn’t something we truly embrace by choice, versus imposed routine, until our adulthood. Adults could facilitate this process by studying and understanding biological development with an acknowledgement that it serves the spiritual realm, as well. They can help both

⁷ *Why the baby brain can learn two languages at the same time.* Naja Ferjan Ramirez, Research Scientist, University of Washington. Also, *Babies Pick Up On Language Before They’re Even Born*, Popular Science Magazine, by Colin Lecher, published Jan. 3, 2013. A new study shows how newborns can tell the difference between their native language and a foreign one.

⁸ Early Language Acquisition: Cracking The Speech Code. Patricia K. Kuhl

⁹ <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2013/01/10/169066535/speaking-more-than-one-language-could-prevent-alzheimer>

themselves and children to develop potential, embrace the ongoing unfolding that lasts a lifetime, and achieve the fullest expression of our innate capabilities.

We understand the importance of taking care with the development of new humans. We're obligated to help them discover, develop, and use the tools they have been given. We're also obligated as seekers to examine *ourselves* regularly to consider what we have or haven't yet embraced in our own development, in our own unfolding. Introspection is a pathway. If we have been divinely endowed, then the better we understand innate potential, the better we understand divine intent. Know yourself and you will begin a path towards the Creator. This is part of our practice.

If we return to physicist Wilczek's question of whether the world is a work of art, seen as beautiful to the Creator, then patterns take on great significance. Human unfolding — our individual potential — would have structure, purpose, and intention that would be revealed incrementally only when a function/activity/tool is removed from our human toolbox and played with. Art, science, and faith have overlapping skills to learn that can be added at any time, even if mastery isn't the intent. The skills that come easily to children are still possible for adults.

Stephen Hawking said, "We are getting close to answering the age old questions: Why are we here? Where did we come from? Does the universe, in fact, have a beginning or an end, and if so, what are they like? If we find the answer to that, it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason. We would know the mind of God."

The human mind, the thing we use to contemplate the divine, is a miraculous organ and lifetimes have been given to its study. That legacy of discovery is available to us, which is comforting since *cooperate* is a Commandment from nature, and complex tasks typically require support and guidance. Learning how to make sense of patterns — the data of our world — and learning creative and critical thinking is important, whatever path a life takes. The world is complex.

As we continue our search for the Creator and add the methods and practice of science, let us be artists; let us be children. Let us play and use our innate gifts, nurture our divine operating system, curiously explore and question, be joyful, open-hearted, and childlike in our embrace of wonder and exploration. I take the admonishment from Jesus to "become as little children" in order to enter into the kingdom of heaven as an invitation to end where we begin, in the child-like state the Taoists had earlier observed. Do otherwise, my friends, harden yourself against the emergence of what's within you, and it may be that the heaven you seek becomes unavailable.

Let me close with the invocation:

Thank you, Creator, for all that is possible and your abundant gifts.

Thank you, Nature, for the forces that formed us and shape our reality.

Thank you, Science, for the path and the tools we use to explore and understand both nature and the divine.

Thank you, friends and fellow humans, for choosing to walk this path.

Keep seeking, my friends. Honor the Creator, honor the creation.