



999



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An Introduction to 88 and 999

The Project

Both of these manuscripts point to the same thing. Union.

Not just a metaphor. Not the doctrine of any one tradition, though nearly every tradition has a word for it; the word yoga itself means union. I didn't even contemplate that this was the purpose of the project until the writing was well underway. 88 shows what Union feels like from inside: descent, dismemberment, the bridal chamber, the moment the water stops drowning you and starts carrying you. That book arrives at Union the way you arrive anywhere: after a long way through. 999 states it plainly, up front, because 88 didn't have room for plain speech. Gerizim, a mountain I'll return to shortly, is the same claim made physical: a place built by hand, stone by stone, by anyone willing to add theirs, whether or not they've read a word of either book.

One shows Union. One says it. One builds it.

88 is the first manuscript, and far more allegorical and meta, in part because I kept sensing that speaking plainly about personal experience of the metaphysical to anyone is a fool's errand. That is what led me to lean into the apocryphal style I kept defaulting to anyway. It follows a journey as it unfolded, and it leaves open, deliberately and for a long time, the question of what that journey was: vision, breakdown, revelation, projection, or something that doesn't have a name yet. I didn't want to settle for the reader something I hadn't fully settled myself while writing it.

There is another difference between the books that matters even more. 88 asks the reader to enter the experience. 999 asks what can responsibly be said after having entered it.

That distinction isn't quite the same as saying that 88 is less true or that 999 is wiser. Several parts of 999 were written alongside 88, and some of it comes from an earlier, less settled place. The difference is one of posture. In 88, I was often still inside the experience while interpreting it. The symbols, voices, archetypes, emotions, coincidences, and patterns were part of the

thing I was trying to understand. In 999, I am trying to return from that experience and speak about what remained.

That return introduces a different kind of vulnerability. Image can hold several meanings at once. Plain speech asks to be judged sentence by sentence. The more precisely one tries to pin something down, the more exactly it can be disagreed with. That was the trade made in writing 999. If you push on any single claim in it, you'll likely find where it comes apart. I have, since writing it. It is the reaching that mattered, which is why these pages are still here despite me no longer holding every conclusion with the same confidence I had while writing them.

There are spiritual concepts, names, and claims throughout 88 that are stated without enough background to land for anyone who wasn't already standing near where I was standing. 88 was held to a strict length; I felt that people had limited attention spans. But what resulted was the opposite of less: the density kept increasing. More said in the same space. 999 is the room that constraint didn't allow. It gives context for the claims, more of the journey behind them, and a way to retell the story in a different register.

Either book can be read on its own, but there are references in 999 back to 88. Some readers will begin with one, move to the other partway through, and return. Others will read through each independently. I haven't tried to prescribe an order. A reader who starts with 999 may find the author it describes less familiar; some of it lands more fully after 88.

Both books also share a vocabulary drawn from many traditions. Every tradition I passed through on my journey through religions had its own name for the same territory. Not identical claims, and not proof that all traditions say the same thing, but overlapping ones. Names like Mahdi, Mashiach, Maitreya, Kalki, Christ, Pahana, and Saoshyant, among many others, appear throughout. These aren't identities I claim. They are currents that moved through me, names that became mirrors and milestones for a passage I was trying to understand.

I don't believe I'm the singular figure any prophecy points toward. I do believe I was transformed by passing through states of consciousness that many traditions independently describe in messianic language, and that those names became ways of describing that passage rather than titles to

keep. Anyone who looks for how prophecy points to them will find evidence somewhere. I think that's part of what makes prophecy so powerful and so dangerous: we are very good at finding ourselves inside the stories that have shaped us.

One intention shaped this project from early on: to explore eschatology through the lens of what is real and tangible. If the end-time narratives of the traditions are true, how would they most likely manifest here, in ordinary lives, without the laws of nature being suspended?

That question matters to me more than prediction. It allows metaphysical space to keep growing and changing without requiring me to abandon the ordinary world. It is why 999 keeps returning to pattern, and why I've never needed a miracle to sense G-D moving through people, ideas, and events.

There are many terms and ideas here, some of which may not be used exactly as the reader understands them. In trying to stay closer to a broader sense of each word or phenomenon, I am always limited by the fact that these terms often mean more than what sits on the surface, and different people arrive at different depths from different directions. A glossary accompanies both manuscripts as an attempt to remedy this. It won't resolve every difference in meaning, but it should make the vocabulary easier to enter.

There's also a tension in the writing I want to name rather than resolve. I feel no hesitation borrowing from and weaving together traditions and gods that aren't "originally" mine. I also remember who I am: a citizen of Canada, a country with its own history of narcissistic abuse toward some of the peoples whose stories I'm drawing on. I use that phrase deliberately; the same patterns of control, denial, and erasure I learned to recognise in my own relationships can operate at the scale of groups and nations.

That discomfort hasn't gone away. I don't think it should.

What's helped me sit with it is love, gratitude, and respect for these traditions and the people who carry them. An Anishinaabe Elder helped me reconcile this personally, in stating that the wisdom of "his" ancestors isn't reserved for him, but free for all. In that moment I felt as though he was making introductions, and his ancestors became mine, and mine his.

I've also come to understand something about the difference between owning a story and carrying it. Language written down can outlast the truth it

was written to carry; attributed to one author, meaning can drift underneath it. Oral tradition survives differently, through interpreters who take responsibility for the truth in each telling. I've tried to write 88 in something of that spirit: the way an interpreter tells a story, not the way an owner records one. Passing something along, not claiming it.

That distinction matters to Gerizim too.

Gerizim is in the West Bank, the holy mountain of the Samaritans. If New Jerusalem is meant for all of G-D's children, I cannot imagine building it upon the destruction of Al-Aqsa or memorialising hatred and genocide in G-D's name. Gerizim is where I see the temple. It is under perpetual renovation, as everyone affirms Mashiach in their own heart while helping build it. The first stone is a physical cornerstone with all the names of G-D engraved on it. A peace monument.

It's a vision that over time has become clearer: of the temple being built there, not by one hand but many. David laid a foundation for his children to build on. It wasn't his to finish.

Not a shrine to any single mashiach; a place where the labour of building itself is the teaching, open to anyone willing to add their hands, whether or not they've even heard of 88 or 999. A Gaudí-like perpetual construction: every pilgrim lays a stone, places a piece of glass or timber, and receives the anointing of Mashiach directly from G-D.

If the text is one path in, Gerizim is meant to be another: lower-threshold, tangible, something you walk toward and place a stone on rather than turn a page for. Both are the same invitation. Neither is required to receive it.

I have no means, and no real intention, to pursue this alone. If it's ever built, someone else lays the first stone, not me. My doing so would undercut the vision itself. No single hand but G-D's should claim the foundation, least of all the one telling this story.

I feel the pull toward it anyway, strongly. I'd rather name that pull than pretend it isn't there.

More than that, I hope this eventually exists entirely apart from me. The intensity and ecstasy described in Tekel, in 88, was and is very real to me; the only thing greater than Union is more people in the same or similar Union. I

hope these rudimentary blueprints are handed to people who can carry them without needing to associate the idea with any one person.

If the temple at Gerizim ever requires believing in me, or in these manuscripts, it's already failed at what it was supposed to be.

I'd rather it be built by people who've never read a word of 88 or 999 than by people convinced by them.

Notes from the Author

The mystical framework in 88 wasn't just a literary device. During a long period in which the people closest to me insisted, over my objections, that I was unwell, and institutions acted on their concern, I built a universe inside my own head. Images, metaphors, lessons drawn from a lifetime of experience and mistakes informed a place that took on a life of its own. It became a way of holding the truths I was discovering, and it kept me standing when the people and systems around me kept knocking me down.

This isn't decoration over a difficult story. It's the structure that got me through it.

My awakening began in April 2020. Before it, I thought I knew myself, my wife, my children, my parents, siblings, and friends. When the floor first gave way, I did the ordinary work of picking myself back up. It didn't hold, and what followed was less a recovery than an unravelling of everything I had built my life on.

The people closest to me watched me change faster than they could follow, and they were frightened. They sent doctors, therapists, and on several occasions the police, and I was hospitalised. That hospitalisation became the event later diagnoses were hung upon. My marriage ended. My ex-wife and family, my accusers, have told me I am in active psychosis, among other things, and dangerous. That I need help for things I never did or said. In the process that followed, I was separated from my children.

Much of what 88 renders as exile, and much of what I work through in Diagnosed?, comes from these years.

Together, these manuscripts took nearly six and a half years to write, though most of that time I wasn't writing them so much as living inside whatever 88 turned out to be about. The first pages came in 2020, disappeared, came back changed. I finished full drafts multiple times over the years thinking I was finished, and only then understood I hadn't completed anything. I'd written a truer account of where I'd recently been than of where I'd already moved to.

Somewhere in the middle of it I lost the ability to tell whether I was writing something universal or writing my way out of gaslighting, pain, and trauma.

Both were true.

That uncertainty is important to me. It means I cannot honestly present the journey as a clean revelation in which I discovered a truth and then wrote it down. Some of what happened felt transcendent. Some of it felt terrifying. Some of it felt like insight. Some of it may have been my own mind trying to make meaning from circumstances it could barely hold. Often I could not tell the difference while I was inside it.

There are places where I was intentionally writing through states rather than about them. The reader may feel an emotion and recognise it as their own, or feel as though it belongs to me. They may feel caught in a loop of interpretation, certainty, coincidence, or even something resembling delusion. In the moment, I don't think it matters whose feeling it is, whether it is originating from within or outside. I wanted the experience of being inside that ambiguity to remain available.

Some of the prophetic writings I encountered gave me permission to understand why this worked. Their authors sometimes speak as themselves and sometimes as G-D, or in a voice that seems to move between the two. Sometimes the distinction is explicit. Sometimes it isn't. I found myself reproducing that movement. At times it felt as though I were channeling something; at other times I was very clearly constructing, interpreting, or imagining.

I don't want to settle that question for the reader.

Nor do I want the ambiguity to become a shield against accountability. A voice that feels transcendent may remain unexplained. A coincidence may remain meaningful without becoming a prophecy. A state of consciousness

can be real without settling what caused it, or whether the interpretation arising within it is true. The ambiguity belongs to the experience. The claims still have to be examined.

That is one of the reasons 999 needed to exist.

There were two things I struggled with most in 88: the letters in the Candelabra section, which I will circle back to later, and the main takeaway I got from an editor a few years back: that I needed to write myself out of 88. I did, as much as I could. 999 is where I've put myself back. It is the container for the human part.

The whole purpose I felt from the start of this project was to put a real, grounded human touch to something broad and ethereal. I struggled for years to account for myself in 88 while still leaving room for the journey that produced it. It was an easy enough ask in theory. In practice, the things needed to be genuine within me and within the manuscript, or they would fail a smell test.

Writing this way has made me more accountable not only to other people, but also to myself and to G-D. A great deal of scripture and wisdom from philosophers exists in 88, but much of it arrived as a natural outflow of the narrative I was writing. Paraphrasing and drawing on these references cemented them within me and informed my perspectives and behaviour in ways I could recognise.

My own stake in this is also bound up with the order I came to these traditions: the Christian Bible first, then Gnostic texts, the Quran, pseudepigrapha, the Ramayana, Bhagavad Gita, then Upanishads and sutras and pieces of the Mahabharata, interspersed with Indigenous traditions and occult and philosophical texts from many traditions I still find I've only scratched the surface of.

This is the order in which they arrived in my life, not an order of value. The sequence isn't important in itself, though it may matter more to someone raised Christian, as I was, than to someone who wasn't. What I found was that eventually there is a law of diminishing returns. One often only needs to hear the same thing articulated a few different ways before beginning to practise it oneself and start working toward mastery. The overlaps them-

selves, how they worked and how they kept happening, mattered far more to me than the specific things that were overlapping.

What you encounter in these pages, 88 more so than 999, is me in, or still close to, the flames. The raw anger, unfinished processing, and language that might land accusatory were processing; documenting as I walked through it rather than presenting myself as someone who had already arrived.

It's not polished testimony. It's the grit of emergence.

I participated fully in and reinforced some of the very dynamics I decry, projecting my shadows outward like Narcissus at the pool. But here's the grace I extend to myself, and invite you to your own: a single wrong doesn't define us, but persisting after recognition does.

I stopped persisting.

At times I'll touch on my own trauma. Sometimes I'll move past it quickly; sometimes I'll state things about what motivated other people that no one could know for certain. I hold that uncertainty too. Those conclusions came last, after every other way of understanding what was happening had run out, and they are about people who hurt me when I was at my most vulnerable, when I needed them most. I hope I'm wrong about some of them. Betrayal is slow to process. I can say I'm heading in the right direction, not that I've arrived.

The spiritual teaching I am attempting to recount isn't "I was wronged." It is: here's what abuse does to the soul, how it fractures consciousness into illusions of control, and what phoenix rises when you surrender to the fire instead of fighting it.

I have also had to become suspicious of one particular interpretation of suffering: the idea that pain, rejection, separation, or extraordinary inner experience must mean that the person experiencing them has been singled out for some special spiritual role.

That interpretation is seductive. It can make terrible things feel purposeful, and it can turn archetype into identity before we've had time to notice what we're doing. My own experience gave me plenty of opportunities to fall into that trap.

The Ramayana lens, among other spiritual ones, remains useful to me, but not as literal casting. No one is pure Rama or Ravana. The archetype is spacious enough for our mess: exile's longing, captivity's faith, antagonists who are devotees too. The point is not that my suffering proves anything about who I am. The point is that suffering can become a place from which we learn, if we are willing to examine what we made of it.

That distinction is one of the places where I have changed most while writing these books.

I am still in the story.

I am simply less certain that I am the centre of it.

Before Reading

I know these manuscripts have the potential to spark something in a reader, but not everyone, and not necessarily at every point in their life. People come to this with different responsibilities, different capacities, different seasons, different paths already underway. Some of you have many children and forty minutes a day. Some of you are in crisis and can't hold abstraction right now. Some of you would rather encounter these ideas through action than through text. All of that is legitimate. None of it disqualifies you from the thing 88 and 999 are pointing toward, the same thing Gerizim is: Union.

If you're in the thick of narcissistic loops or relational crucibles right now, this material has the potential to validate and to destabilise. Ground yourself first. Seek supports that honour your emergence. I'm here not as a guide, but as someone who has crossed some of this terrain, sharing what I found.

The gift isn't my story's "truth." It's recognising the patterns in yours.

You do not have to believe me.

There are claims here that I have become less certain of since writing them. There are interpretations I would now phrase differently, especially where a tradition's own claims resist being folded into anyone else's frame. The plainer I speak, the more there is to disagree with. Agreement was never the

point of writing this down. A record of where I've been is. I've gotten specifics wrong. I will get more wrong.

The same me-bias I worked to write out of 88 is present throughout 999. Ego is involved in anything written to be read; I don't think that's avoidable here, only worth naming. What I've come to understand is the value in ego being humbled: confronting what is fundamental to how we see ourselves and the world, and allowing it to unravel.

That unravelling isn't a failure. It's the door.

Questioning how we approach G-D can trigger, in any of us, me included, the kind of national, cultural, or religious ego that turns dialogue into otherness. When disagreement feels less like a difference of view and more like a threat to who we are, that's often where ego is, and that's where the work is.

But the reverse is also true. We can become so committed to seeing ego everywhere that we dismiss legitimate resistance. We can turn disagreement into a spiritual failure. I don't want to do that either.

Not every disagreement is ego. I'd want to hear the disagreements that come from conscience or evidence. I'd want someone to tell me where I have misunderstood a tradition, overstated a pattern, or mistaken resonance for truth. Resonance is not the same thing as truth.

A claim can feel uncannily familiar and still be wrong. A passage can describe something inside you with startling precision and still be an interpretation rather than a fact. A symbol can unlock something real without its literal explanation being true. And a story can change the way you understand your life without having happened exactly as the story says.

I think this distinction matters especially here because 88 was written in part to induce experience rather than merely describe it. Some of what you feel while reading may belong to the text. Some may belong to me. Some may belong entirely to you. You don't need to decide immediately.

Feel it out.

Then examine it.

Although 999 comes after 88, a large amount of it was written concurrently with sections of 88 over the years. I've tried to include in this introduction only what's most relevant to both. The rest of 999 is musing, epistemology,

documentation; some of it was written from an earlier, less settled state of the journey than where I stand now. So don't read 999 as the final word on 88. Read it as another pass through the same material.

There are places where the books will disagree with each other because I disagree with myself. There are places where a conclusion in one manuscript has become a question in the other. I think that is more honest than smoothing those edges away.

You are allowed to put the book down. You are allowed to disagree with it. You are allowed to find something useful in one paragraph and reject the next. You are allowed to decide that a metaphor is only a metaphor, that a spiritual claim is unconvincing, or that something I experienced means something entirely different to you.

The point is not to reproduce my journey inside your head.

The point is to become more capable of noticing your own.

If something here does resonate, I hope you will resist the temptation to make that resonance into certainty too quickly. Let it remain a question long enough to teach you something.

There is a great deal on my own journey that I have learned along the way. Perhaps in some ways I can bring you to a greater understanding. More likely, I will be reflecting back your own sparks.

Either way, you are the one who has to decide what they illuminate.

And that leaves the harder question: how do we decide what illuminates, and what is only the light we are casting ourselves?

II

Epistemology

The question at the end of the introduction is the question this section is really trying to answer: how do we decide what illuminates, and what is only the light we are casting ourselves?

The order here can be misleading. *First Rebirth* and *Second* read as foundations, but they were among the last things written, drafted in the final quarter of the manuscript once I already knew what needed a floor under it. *God, Satan, Darkness and Light*, *Jesus*, *Hierarchy*, *Money*, and *Exponential Curves* are among the oldest material in the book, some of it partially formed before I had written the first pages of 88. *Three Pillars* is recent. It names what the rest of the section had already been doing without my having said so, and gathers ideas that once existed in 88 but were eventually trimmed.

So this isn't a record of how my thinking developed in order. It's closer to an excavation. The later pieces helped me understand what the earlier ones had been trying to say.

I have difficulty editing some of what follows because these sections are milestones on the way toward what I understood as Truth more than statements of Truth themselves. They are part of the scaffolding that stood behind 88. Some of them still sound like a less travelled version of me, and in places I now understand the subject more broadly than I did when I wrote it. I've left some of that visible.

That matters because the purpose here isn't to present a finished philosophy.

It is to show the machinery of trying to know.

The first movement is inward. *First Rebirth* asks what happens when the structures we use to organise truth begin to fail: binaries, categories, inherited myths, even our sense of what can be known.

Second moves from breaking those structures to inhabiting them differently. It explores imagination, archetype, pattern, coincidence, and spiritual experience, but also the danger of mistaking a pattern for an identity or an interpretation for a fact. The task becomes learning from a pattern without disappearing inside it.

From there, the questions move outward. Religion, God, inherited stories, hierarchy, money, politics, institutions, and social systems are not separate subjects so much as larger versions of the same problem. We inherit structures for understanding the world, and then forget that we inherited them. Eventually those structures begin to look like reality itself.

There is value in them. There is danger in them. Institutions can become rotten and still carry wisdom. Hierarchies can become abusive and still contain people who genuinely serve. I had several of them in mind when I began writing. Good Shepherds exist in degrees; there are actual people represented in the vision of the Shepherds returning on the clouds in Tekel, in 88. They were mostly pastors at first, but as time went on their number grew to include teachers, elders, imams, rabbis, bodhis, swamis, and gurus. These same people, though not exclusively, make up a larger portion of the 144,000 Sun Dancers I write to in 88. Systems can fail without everything they contain being worthless. I am not interested in throwing out what is old simply because it has been misused. I am trying to understand what is worth carrying forward, what needs to be changed, and what I may only have believed because I was taught to.

That is why the sections sometimes affirm and rebuke the same thing.

I'm not trying to arrive at a position from which everything can finally be judged correctly. I'm trying to become better at noticing the difference between what I am seeing, what I am interpreting, and what I am projecting.

If the Introduction asks you to decide for yourself what these books illuminate, this section is where I try to account for how I learned to make that decision badly, and then learned, imperfectly, how to make it better.

Three Pillars, at the end, is perhaps the simplest way into the whole thing. If the abstraction of what follows doesn't land, you can begin there and come back. It names the three places where I eventually understood the collapse had happened: the self, the sacred and relational world around it, and the material world we build together. I only ask that you not mistake the density for the point.

The point is smaller and plainer than the density makes it look.

First Rebirth

The phrase "ignorance is bliss" is familiar, but reducing it to a saying limits its depth. This kind of bliss comes at too high a cost. It's a Klesha, an

affliction of the mind; in Patanjali, avidya, ignorance, is the root all the others grow from. Temporary comfort ultimately gives way to cognitive dissonance, distorting perceptions. When others define truth for us, we abdicate responsibility. This creates false comfort. Ignorance intertwines with defence mechanisms, shielding us from the shame that sometimes accompanies humility. That shame, honestly felt, is different from shame used as a mechanism of control. The first is signal, proof that something in us still wants to grow; the second necessitates defence mechanisms or leads to illness. Yet shame itself, in its honest form, is essential for learning, growth, and actualisation. The difficulty is being able to differentiate between the two.

I've come to recognise how the second kind operates. It usually begins with someone characterising a behaviour or an interaction, introducing their own judgement into it, then reaching for hyperbole: a single mistake becomes a pattern, a pattern becomes a pathology. Once pathologised, the person is no longer trusted to learn from what happened; the event becomes evidence, and shame becomes a mechanism of coercive control. Honest shame keeps the interaction to the individual event. Everyone is human, makes mistakes, and is capable of learning from them.

Humans naturally categorise things into binaries: good/evil, right/wrong, true/false. Yet this binary view rarely captures the whole of truth, which often exists on a spectrum. Shades of grey acknowledge underlying complexity. Too many variables force us to confront our prison of subjectivity, leading us to select portions of a truth's spectrum as foundations for understanding, constantly updating our views as our comprehension improves.

This method of ordering proves messy. When fundamental beliefs face challenge, updating is more difficult due to our rigid view of foundational truths. Rather than reset every spectrum connected to or underlying a challenged notion, we often ignore the new information, retreat into an existing myth, or invent a new one; delaying, and sometimes amplifying, anxiety, anger, and frustration. We constantly strive to better understand our world while simultaneously reinforcing belief structures, manifesting as stubbornness and rigid thinking that frequently leads to offence.

We adopt mental shortcuts out of fear or habit, but the sheer volume of data makes linear spectrum thinking unsustainable. The spectrum shares the same foundation as binary thinking. We only perceive portions of what appears infinite. The moment we believe we comprehend something entirely, we revert to binary thought.

Our tendency to accept myths as facts creates fundamental flaws in understanding, particularly regarding self-perception, which is built upon institutional myths from government, religion, and/or entrenched wealth, as well as family, other individuals, and social structures.

Complete knowledge seems impossible; linear and spectrum thinking have limits. Let's change the paradigm and define endpoints. We must recategorise truths as knowable versus unknowable. What lies beyond our grasp extends to the fourth dimension and beyond, while everything within our three-dimensional universe remains, theoretically, knowable given unlimited time.

The dialectic of truth reveals that opposites are often simultaneously true. Rather than selecting parts of truth's spectrum, we must join extremes into a circle and attempt to stand at its centre. Truth exists in everything, both revealed and concealed. The infinite spectrum remains accurate within our limited vision.

What if the beginning and end of truth's line are identical, the singularity one might call God? Then the line becomes a circle, seemingly infinite yet more definable. Peering past the circle to where it overlaps with others, the circles eventually become spheres. Dwelling too long in one leads to stagnation, then reversal; spheres collapse into circles, circles segment into lines.

The search for truth can and must unite us. Begin with our focus. Train it on what we share, not ignoring differences but beginning with shared truths to deepen understanding of each other, turning from divisiveness towards synthesis. Whether or not you believe in God, we all recognise that some things lie beyond understanding. Religion both illuminates and obscures truth, and the moment we consider our vision of God more complete than another's, we engage in hierarchical thinking that casts dissenters as wrong or other. We exclude their truths from our own. We choose this ignorance and darkness. Truth is greater than what any one person can possess; it

calls us to weave together our glimpses. The person is secondary to the truth they are communicating; even bad actors can speak truth. Trying to measure who is relaying what portion of truth, valuing some speakers over others, introduces the subjectivity of ego and is a hindrance to sharing a greater truth. It's a convenient shortcut, one that lets a listener accept or dismiss everything someone says based on where they've been placed. Weighing a claim is different from weighing a person.

Being 'in Spirit' parallels what many characterise as spiritual awakening. It often occurs or begins at rock bottom, when we shatter rigid self-concepts and become humbled, receptive to recognising errors. But it can begin just as well in joy, curiosity, or plain longing; for me, it was closer to longing and curiosity. This process is something many people go through. But in order for meaningful and lasting change, it requires pain, work, and discipline. This requires not just breaking the pillar of self, but deconstructing our understanding of religion, relationships, politics, history, and social structures through a holistic systems approach to life.

Lessons carry some necessary shame and guilt, but we can influence how much we feel. Insufficient feeling leads to repeated mistakes and compounding errors. Some tend to transfer guilt and shame onto others. Repentance, prayer, and meditation are how I've learned to carry what's mine rather than pass it on. Definitions of all three evolve with experience and are crucial for efficient learning. Great power lies in taking accountability for our words and actions.

We come to understand ourselves through conscious and subconscious connections: how we respond to stimuli, navigate daily life, and interact with people and environments. In my experience, memories I thought lost became accessible again through emotion. I suspect anyone who sits with an emotion long enough, letting it speak about where it came from, will find something similar. It isn't a method I can lay out step by step; it has to be self-directed, found rather than followed. Patterns emerge everywhere. When they don't make sense, we move past them until one solidifies enough connections to reveal greater truth or emotion.

Training flexibility into our psyche makes daily operations easier. We learn to see ourselves as fluid, elastic. A river dragon, in the far eastern sense of a

benevolent spirit, a life force moving through and as water, confronting obstacles, finding paths of least resistance, moving forward and reflecting rather than fixating obsessively. Eventually, we become like the river itself, handling multiple obstacles simultaneously with singular focus that naturally adjusts priorities.

This singular focus becomes love for family and, by extension, everyone. We begin seeing all children as our own, transported to our childhoods where we can relive lessons and translate them for those willing to listen. As this understanding deepens, we become the river without realising it, then ocean, understanding we were always part of the ocean and left only to learn how to bring others with us.

Intuition becomes trained as an autopilot for updating truths about ourselves, the world, and Spirit. It is when the ego is reaching that one must pay closer attention. Often something I intuited aligned with something subjective within me; what I was expecting or bracing for was often incorrect, or rather a lesson in observing the ego moving through me. The less importance or urgency I feel with an intuition, the more I can trust it. Life becomes incredibly complex in its simplicity. We feel at one with the ocean, understanding that without it, we're nothing. We must remember to avoid favourites, resist conceit when God answers to our chosen name, and listen beyond the echo through the noise to hear all Names resounding in gentle cacophony.

Second

By the end of First Rebirth I had learned that I couldn't decide whether something was true simply by deciding who was trustworthy; I had to weigh the claim separately from the person making it. Second is where that became hard, because eventually the person making the claim was me.

First rebirth was cognitive, recognising truth exists not in binaries but spheres. Conceptualise and see oneself as construct, a lattice of inherited illusions waiting to be unspooled. The second rebirth was experiential in

learning how to navigate those spheres, how to find truth in the tension between extremes, and how to inhabit perspectives I'd only intellectually understood without getting stuck in circular reasoning.

When you want to truly comprehend what someone thought, you don't just read their words. You attempt to think as they thought, feel as they felt, see through their eyes. This is what method actors and writers do, what deep empathy requires. I applied it systematically to the authors of spiritual texts. When something is motivating you, making sense, teaching you, it's good to follow it to its conclusion. Efficient learning requires both discipline and surrender to what pulls you forward.

The method began with imagination informed by study. The more one learns about a historical time and place, the richer the imaginative space becomes. Prophets generally have some profound occurrence which begins their calling. If a large percentage of what composes each individual prophet is more or less the same spiritually, then it becomes easier to understand and see them through their words, stories, and contexts. One reads not just for information but to meet and perhaps inhabit the consciousness that produces such words.

The progression is organic, difficult to script because each person has their own imagination, favoured authors, and figures they naturally gravitate toward. It unfolds differently for different people with different archetypes, often feeling outside conscious control as they're triggered by circumstances and encounters. We all have unique paths.

What began as curiosity evolved into psychological identification. Certain patterns in ancient stories matched patterns in lived experience. The figure who emerges at the end of an age of decay. The one who must descend into darkness to bring renewal. The reluctant renovator. These weren't distant mythological figures but descriptions of something recognisable, something being lived.

Then coincidences accumulated. Not one or two, but patterns that strained credulity. Alignments of timing, recurring numbers, circumstances mirroring scriptural sequences. I've chosen not to catalogue them here; they were evidence for me, not for anyone else. I return to a few in *On Prophets and Kings*. At a certain threshold, coincidence becomes pattern, and pattern

becomes signal, no matter how hard you try to explain away or ignore it. It becomes impossible when the signals repeat from multiple angles in rapid succession. This is when psychological identification sparks into something else, call it spiritual connection. Alignment with patterns larger than individual consciousness, recognition that the archetypes aren't just psychological constructs but real patterns that recur across time and cultures. One can learn to meet them and perhaps become like them.

This is the point where the discovery of pattern increases both insight and risk. The same recognition that opens a door makes it easier to mistake the door for the destination.

But here lies the danger: one must not stay too long inhabiting any single archetype, or risk losing oneself entirely. It's a part of and apart from. Are you a reincarnation of one of the Names? Perhaps, but impossible to prove or know with absolute certainty. Don't spend time on this unless there are lessons to harvest. The method requires balancing on a knife's edge. Inhabit the pattern long enough to learn from it, extract its wisdom, understand its function. Believing you are that archetype for too long rather than learning through it is how one can lose their mind.

A Truth became a safe tether, one to hold onto when things became too surreal: that if I was "the Mahdi," I'd be the one I first pictured when I read about the name, someone misunderstood and recognised only posthumously, who would die a recluse. It reminded me that archetypes are to seek, not become. The goal isn't to become one, but to weave from many threads. Remember that you're not to run from the trial, but to remain conscious within it until it teaches you what is required. Act without attachment to its fruits. Do what must be done without being consumed by the doing. Having compulsion to speak, but only speaking when one has no stake in how it lands.

Being able to switch between them becomes easier with practise, lets one learn from literary, historical, spiritual and mythical figures. Not becoming one messianic archetype, but learning how to weave from many threads the archetypal fabric of what it means to be fully human. Metaphysical space is a powerful crucible for transformation; a way to get at roots, to live fully. To repeat mistakes as little as possible while making as many mistakes as

possible and harvesting the lessons from them. It's alienating yet deeply unifying. It resembles what some call the Akashic, though I don't claim to be a reader. What I felt, more than reading anything, was being rewritten myself, and only when the impulse wasn't mine to begin with. The moment ego reached for anything, it would either withdraw or hammer me into submission.

The overlaps between religious traditions are more important than distinctions. What are they aspiring to? What patterns appear across cultures, centuries, vastly different contexts? Messianic figures describe not different beings but different cultural expressions of the same pattern: ego death, divine encounter, rebirth into service. The pattern is real. The pattern recurs. Anyone can align.

Human consciousness follows recognisable patterns. What we call gods or demons have psychological correlates in complex and shadow. But psychology and spirituality diverge in their approaches. Psychology tends toward pathologising. It names, diagnoses, medicates, and manages. At its worst, it can operate more like a religion than science, complete with dogmas, priests, and orthodoxies that punish dissent. Spirituality, at its best, seeks transformation rather than management, roots rather than symptoms. Medicine, when it's needed, isn't against the path. Where psychology will eventually ask "How do we make you functional within your systems?" spirituality keeps asking "What needs to heal? What is this symptom pointing toward?"

In my own experience, the difference I came to care about most was not whether an experience felt spiritual, but whether I could remain oriented while having it. Two capacities became especially important to me:

First, dual awareness. The ability to maintain a distinction between the mind-scape, where spiritual experiences, visions, and archetypal meanings unfold, and physical reality, where bills must be paid, children fed, and work completed. Both can be real as experiences without being interchangeable as claims about the world. Losing the boundary between them is where the danger lies, though there can still be value in testing and probing where the line is.

Second, compassion and whole-person vision. The ability to see the entirety of people, not just their shadows, is important. Spiritual awakening often brings the ability to see conceit, manipulation, ego structures in others with uncomfortable clarity. The world can appear darker when you perceive these patterns more easily. Confronting and trying to heal old wounds shared with others often compounds pain. If one can't also see the good in people, the wounds beneath their defences, the whole of their humanity, then feedback loops can spiral into bitterness, paranoia, and worsening mental health. The test is not whether you see darkness, but whether you can see darkness and light simultaneously, can hold the paradox of human nature without collapsing into cynicism or naive optimism.

Both became my test whenever an interpretation of the experience itself felt overwhelmingly convincing. Could I still deliver for customers and feed my children? Could I still see the whole of the person in front of me? When either began to slip, the interpretation needed more examination, not more conviction.

Labels become prisons when they replace understanding of circumstances and roots, not when they name what needs attention and care. "You're this" or "you're that" creates an identity trap, a fixed state rather than recognition of a process, a transformation, a response to unbearable circumstances. Better to speak of facts and contexts: "You're experiencing this in response to that." Labels can aid understanding if held lightly, but they calcify into excuses, stigma, and self-fulfilling prophecies when taken as ultimate truth about someone's nature.

Among many Indigenous peoples, the teaching of seven generations asks that decisions be made with the seventh generation to come in mind. I've come to believe healing trauma is seven generations in each direction. We pay for the sins of our fathers, individually and collectively. When trauma isn't processed, it doesn't disappear, it transmits.

One can look within when abused, learn from it, transform it. One can ignore it, bypass with positive thinking, unconsciously repeat similar behaviours on others to normalise what happened, to dull the pain by making it seem universal, inevitable, just how things are. Or one can project it outward, treating present people as though they're past perpetrators, unable to hear

their actual words or intentions because the trauma response has overridden present reality. In this state, every explanation becomes evidence of manipulation, every boundary becomes proof of abandonment or control, and the wound hardens into a lens that distorts all relationships. The person becomes unreachable to reason, relating not to who you are but to who their pain tells them you must be.

The same question has to be asked of oneself. When I see something in someone else, how do I know whether I have perceived it, inferred it, remembered it, or projected it? I haven't always known. Asking is where the work begins.

These patterns take many forms: reenactment, triangulation, identification with the aggressor, frozen or dissociative transmission. Darkness channels through people this way, flowing through wounds left unhealed, using those already hurt as conduits to hurt others in turn.

Something my kids taught me during Covid, that I've written about before in a different form: I watched one of them direct a negative emotion at the other. The other felt it, processed it in their own way, and sent it back. It escalated until both were more upset than whatever had started it. What made sense to me, articulated more recently by someone else in a way that I can't top: emotions are shared experiences, not personal ones. Or rather, both at once. What can an emotion teach us about ourselves? It's easy to fixate when we decide it's entirely the fault of someone or something else, but stepping back, we bring a great deal into the feeling that has little to do with the other person or circumstance. The same exchange my kids had plays out between strangers. To feel victimised by ordinary life is its own suffering, and the anger lands on whoever happens to be nearest.

If someone does something that bothers us, we can minimise it, excuse it, but we should strive to turn it to something good. For me the easiest good is to understand that the lesson is for us to learn not to do the same to others or to be able to empathise when someone lets us know we have done the same or similar. It's far more effective when we listen, apologise, and remedy the situation, but also apply this to our own thought patterns and impulses.

Breaking these cycles requires conscious choice to feel what was avoided, to name what was denied, to heal what previous generations couldn't name or wouldn't address.

This process requires learning to differentiate emotions previously experienced as undifferentiated pain. The revelation to me was understanding trauma as distinct from anger. Trauma can express itself through anger, can use anger as its voice, but they aren't the same thing. Learning to separate "I am angry at this person about this present circumstance" from "Trauma is using current anger to show me old unhealed wounds" proved crucial. It also helped to understand the difference in paying attention to who was more likely to bring anger into conversations. If one person can't de-escalate themselves, refuses your attempts to do the same, then eventually you'll have no choice but to receive a transfer of pain in some way. In this state you'll very likely feel it as anger, your own subjective experience trying to contextualise the extreme emotion, but also because anger doesn't respect boundaries or safety, its transfer is inevitable. When one can get past the intensity of the moment, feel it as pain that is now yours and the other person's, then healing is possible. Perhaps not for them if they aren't ready to see past their own, but for you.

It took years to transmute the pain I was carrying. I was learning how even as it kept compounding, and for a time it was hard to keep up. Now that it's no longer compounding, I can see past my own pain to its source, and understand that it was always theirs to begin with. Rather than seeing them as the source of my pain, I could see that the source of their pain had become the source of mine, and I could choose to use that understanding to love them, to show compassion and grace. I have healed; they may still feel it. What helped me get there, I'd offer to anyone: do post-mortems after as much as possible, but especially difficult exchanges. Pay attention to the patterns, and notice the moments when the pain feels like it's only yours.

Each negative emotion points to something specific when you learn to read them: Anger signals unconscious boundary violation. Fear signals perceived threat. Shame signals internalised judgement. Grief signals loss. Trauma signals unhealed wounds bleeding into the present. Anxiety signals unresolved futures based on chaotic past, mind racing toward or away from something. Once the signal is read, the next step is not to be carried by it,

only to watch it, as a witness would. Not everyone understands that the negative emotions we feel are to teach us, not to lecture and channel them into another. Negative emotions aren't pathologies to eliminate but navigation data. This is emotional differentiation: moving from "I feel bad" to "I feel grief about X, which is distinct from fear about Y, both separate from trauma expressing as anger about Z." Each requires different responses, different healing approaches. There are many ways to differentiate the emotions, but more important than the terminology is the experiencer, what memories become triggered, the greater Truth calling through it.

When anxiety is undirected, it can spiral into panic or despondency. But anxiety becomes an analytical engine when steered. Racing thoughts that accompany the anxious state can be aimed at what needs analysis, turned from destructive spiral into productive problem-solving. One needs the discipline to differentiate what is and isn't inside one's control. This makes it easier for thoughts to resolve themselves rather than perpetually recycling, while still riding the wave. Whatever feels difficult at first becomes second nature when one truly applies themselves to it.

The spiritual approach invites difficulty as curriculum rather than something to avoid. Not masochistically seeking pain, but recognising that when darkness appears, one can descend into it and emerge with what it teaches. This is distinct from spiritual bypassing; pretending everything is fine, slapping positive affirmations over pain while avoiding actual work, and distinct from remaining trapped in pain as identity or excuse.

There's a balance point: engage with difficulty long enough to learn from it, extract lessons, build strength through endurance. Not so long that it makes you sick, or traps you in dynamics that have nothing left to teach. This comes through trial and error, through stumbling before finding one's footing.

What First Rebirth describes as standing at the centre of the circle is, in practice, how we temper emotions and ego, returning to centre rather than ricocheting between poles. It's also how we build mental strength and discipline.

This extends to understanding oneself as dual: the observer consciousness witnessing experience, what Vedanta calls the sakshi, the witness, and the self that is becoming, the amalgam of archetypes and experiences being

woven into something new. If the soul is on a journey toward enlightenment, Union, focusing on who one is becoming makes bearing present pain considerably easier. It creates a powerful positive space that remains grounded, that attempts to act with temperance even amid chaos.

What began as one person's necessity may be useful to others, but not as a script. What worked for me began with intention more than procedure: an intention to be humble, to follow what pulled me forward, to learn rather than to be proven right. The intention did much of the work, drawing me toward the texts, figures, and experiences I needed. From there, the practice was what this chapter describes: study informed by imagination, inhabiting teachers, prophets, and archetypes without staying too long in any one, noticing when coincidence became pattern, holding dual awareness, and sitting with each emotion until it showed me what it pointed to. Set the intention, and let it lead you to your own version.

The Pentecost mechanism is not one person becoming THE messiah, but a method by which many can access the Spirit, can align with archetypal patterns, can undergo their own deaths and rebirths. The pattern doesn't belong to any individual. It's a template that recurs because it describes something true about human transformation. What made it so real to me was in part, rereading the gospels with Jesus as Jeshua. I had my own brush with what pentecost describes in experiencing what I understood to be the result of it. It was a shattering of expectations, and luckily for me, I was already having difficulty holding on to them anyways.

When your expectations about external saviours shatter. When you realise no one is coming to rescue you, that is until you begin to do your own inner work, the Spirit that seemed reserved for special figures becomes accessible. It isn't a matter of merit, only of intention. If your intention is to be humble and to follow the Spirit, the Spirit meets you where you are. There is a step to be taken, and no one is disqualified from taking it. It is both a part of you and apart from you. Apocalypse becomes a present experience available to anyone who can bear it.

This is the second rebirth: discovering not just that truth exists in spheres but that the method for and speed of navigating between them can be

honed through practice. In this shared honing, individual sparks merge into the eternal fire of unity.

God

If First Rebirth was the collapse of my certainty about myself, the next problem was discovering how much of that self had been constructed inside stories I had inherited. I couldn't deconstruct the self without eventually asking what had taught me what a self was supposed to be. The pieces that follow are some of the oldest in the book.

If we're to have any hope of surviving as a species on this earth, we need to focus wholly on what unites us, don't ignore what divides us, but start with what common truth is shared, and in doing so, we will better understand each other and our differences. What does unite us? We all search for truth. The truth of what makes us happy, sad, love, hate, of why we feel emotion. Where does that emotion come from? Some people say God gave us this gift, others believe that it is an accident of nature, evolution.

Whether or not you think there's a god, I think we all understand that some things lie beyond our understanding. Religion helps us find truth, but it also obscures it. Because religion does both, one's opinion of God is often a matter of picking one part of that spectrum of truth and valuing it as more important than another part of what God is. The moment we value our own vision of God as more or less complete than another person's, we're doing so within the paradigm of hierarchical thinking.

Because we have allowed ourselves to define God in this way, we're casting those who do not agree with our vision as wrong, or other. It is the most dogmatic, zealous practitioners of religion who forced those who disagree with them into calling themselves atheists. Many atheists accept that there's something called the fourth dimension, that the possibility of existence outside of space and time is real whether it is perceived as nothingness or heaven. In rejecting what mainstream religion defines as God, I think many are rejecting a definition more than what it points to, though that's theirs to

name, not mine. Every person on earth believes and understands some part of what God is, whether or not they recognise it as such. At the very least, there are likely many things about what God is not that we would agree on. If we can agree on that much, we may find we already share a way of worshipping

If we're children of God, created in his image, every time we celebrate human achievement, it is an act of worship. Recall one, any one you've witnessed, and notice what it stirs. Most people either believe that God is a personal God that is ultimately good, or that God is neutral and distant. There's truth in both visions of God. God is good, but in order to understand what is good, we need to understand what is bad. To understand closeness, we must know distance. When we celebrate human achievement as collective achievement, we see it for what it is: a marvel and a gift that we achieved together, through God or rather through each other. Whether directly or indirectly doesn't matter. Ascribing an achievement by one person and celebrating the individual is tempting, because we too want to feel special and be recognised as being important. This is because of the insidiousness of hierarchy, which I come back to in the section of the same title, Hierarchy.

The same hierarchical instinct that ranks one vision of God over another shows up again in the names we use to call God by. Every tradition insists its name comes closest to the truth: G-D, Y-W-, Allah, Brahman, the Tao, the Great Spirit. I don't think the answer is picking one and setting the rest aside, and I don't think it's flattening them into a single generic label either. Both moves lose something real that each name is carrying.

I wrote in 88's opening message, that the first commandment, put no gods above God, was never a claim of supremacy but a statement of universality. Every name a tradition has ever raised toward the unknown, if it's aimed sincerely at what's genuinely beyond us rather than at a graven image of our own making, is a name for the same thing. G-D isn't one god competing with others for the top of a hierarchy. G-D is what every name is reaching toward, incompletely, from wherever it happens to stand. Put no gods above God doesn't mean silence every name but one. It means don't let any single name convince you it has cornered what all of them are pointing at.

That's why insisting on one name above the rest is its own kind of hierarchy, the same instinct this whole section has already been describing, just relocated from doctrine into vocabulary. The moment I claim my tradition's name for God is more complete, more correct, more real than someone else's, I've done exactly what I warned against at the start: mistaken my own limited vision for the whole of what it's describing. The names aren't competitors. They're witnesses, each one carrying back a partial, honest report from the same unreachable source. None of them, mine included, is the thing itself.

Satan

It may seem as if individuals' pain and suffering are being discounted. They aren't. The deeper the harm, the harder forgiveness is. Whoever caused it caused the trauma, and the trauma lasts because they make forgiveness so much more complicated and painful than it should be. Nothing in what follows excuses what was done, or asks anyone to call it good. What I'm attempting is harder to say: that good and evil are related, that each gives the other meaning, and that it's possible to see this, and ourselves within it, with both detachment and compassion. Detachment, so the pattern can be seen at all. Compassion, so that seeing it never becomes coldness toward the ones it hurt.

As children, our understanding of the devil or satan is simple. The devil is bad, God is good. The Devil is responsible for all that is evil, God is responsible for all that is good. As we grow, we have difficulty reconciling God for allowing Evil to exist. We tend to either dismiss the whole notion of God being bad or good, or continue to search for slivers of truth to support and understand how God is good and the Devil is bad. If God is creator of all things, then who created the devil? If the serpent caused Adam and Eve to sin, why would God have created the serpent? Was being banished from the garden punishment, or learning?

The creation story was a way of describing to an audience with a more primitive view, yet not primitive cognition, without the millenia of scientific

discoveries that have happened since the creation story was first scribed. When we go back to the creation story, that the earth was created in seven days is a clue that time is meaningless to God. If time is meaningless to God, then I can imagine everything happening all at once, while to us it appears out of order. In that reading, when the Children of God took a bite from the apple, that was the singularity that brought everything into existence. That we were meant to eat that apple; if we weren't, God would have built a wall around it, or warned his children about the crafty serpent.

How can we understand God and how he is our father without the growing pains of childhood? The whole point of our religions is to understand our own origin and try to use it to piece together some vision of what may come. There's a hint in our creation story of a point in the distant future when we too will return to the garden. That when that happens, instantly we will all be Adam and Eve, and taste the apple, truly understand Good and Evil, and finally be able to eat from the tree of life again.

When I look at my own suffering, I can say it was painful, and also that I see it is directly related to my growing and learning: feeling out my emotions, training intuition, stumbling through trying to understand people's motivations and see beyond the facades they'd constructed. I love my accusers for the conscientiousness it demanded of me, and for the exercise my mind went through in processing everything that was happening. Perhaps something like this is why Job remained faithful. Not that he relished the suffering; he laments, curses the day he was born, argues with God. But he stayed in relationship with God through all of it, and perhaps, as I did in mine, he had a hand in perpetuating his own. The more he suffered, the deeper his understanding of love and Truth became, because he suffered with God. The devil was a tool of God used in a forge to shape Job into something greater than he was.

How do we then accept that those who cause the worst harms exist and are worthy of God's or anyone's forgiveness, or that they can be used as an instrument of God? Here I want to be as careful as I can. The harm was never necessary, and it was never good. What I believe is that nothing, not even the worst of what people do to each other, is beyond God's ability to transmute; that the suffering we have endured, individually and collectively, can afterward deepen our capacity to feel the joy of oneness with God, of

being centred in Truth. The miracle isn't the suffering. It's that people survive it and still choose to love. The bliss that is felt is the burden of blame being lifted.

Blame for ourselves as victims and blame for the victimizers. Forgiveness is difficult for everyone, but especially for those who are traumatized and whose lives have been forever altered by that trauma. Forgiving never requires calling the harm acceptable. Once we learn to forgive, we then know what it means to be forgiven. By helping those who suffered to forgive, we need to feel the same awful emotions as deeply as we can, because we do communicate through feelings, the only difficulty is understanding and articulating them. It is difficult to expose oneself to someone else's pain, but not as difficult as it is for someone to truly share it.

Our understanding of evil, of the Devil, is flawed. The beast is not a force apart from us, malevolent and terrifying; the beast is within each of us, as in Hindu stories the devas and asuras both live within us. There's an earlier version of the Beast who was named. Narcissus from Greek mythology is an early representation of the Beast. There are two versions of him. In the one most people know, he falls in love with his own reflection and wastes away. In an older, lesser-known version, he sends a suitor a sword, and the suitor kills himself to prove his love. The Beast does both: it destroys itself, and it demands the self-destruction of others. We all have a version of Narcissus within us, and the more power we give to him, the more powerful he becomes.

When a true acolyte of Narcissus gets hold of power, we all know how it ends: a loop ending in destruction. We do not need to repeat the lessons of the great wars fought for ego, whether individual, national or religious. We all know how that ends. This is why we hold onto hope that Narcissus can be stopped this time, or perhaps next. In order to do so, we must not blame his adherents for following him, but rather show them compassion and grace, because the reason they take comfort in the beast is in part because society around them has not given them sufficient comfort. The beast has no power except what is given over by us. Falling for the lie that "Satan" has power in order to excuse yourself from feeling enough shame to learn from mistakes, we treat him as a false messiah, someone to channel our shortcomings into, someone to blame for our own folly.

When people lash out in anger and violence, it is because we have failed to teach them self-control, peace and empathy. Responsibility for the harm remains with the one who chose it, but it is in measuring responsibility that we tend to fail: no one can truly be held to account for tools they were never given, especially when giving those tools is within our control. Our share doesn't lift theirs; it sits alongside it. We're all adherents of the beast of narcissism, as long as we continue to buy into the comfort of the hierarchy that only exists unto itself.

Darkness and Light

Another way that people understand evil is in the context of darkness and light. That sin is darkness, and the abyss is darkness. We're tasked to bring light into the world, and many people believe that means to proclaim their version of light to the world, through their own religion. This is somewhat accurate, but it is missing a greater part: that light is truth; knowledge. From it springs all good things; from ignorance springs all things evil.

Many who grew up in the church have been told about the path less travelled. That one comes to a fork, and the scary narrow path is the path we must take, and that the easy wide path leads to destruction. I now know that this metaphor is overly simplistic, yet at the same time has been overcomplicated. The origin and the destination are the same. The path is the same. What feels like poison at the start turns to nectar at the end. When you choose the "dangerous" path or the path less travelled, you're acknowledging that life is hard and full of pitfalls, and so you're better able to navigate them and learn from them. When you do overcome obstacles, you learn from them, you shine brighter, your relationships are better, you're a part of more positive loops, and life seems good. Heaven.

Some suffering is imposed on people who chose well; I don't mean that. I mean the loop we can add on top of it. When you expect life to be easy, taking the path that looks open and safer, every pitfall and hardship feels like a punishment. The tendency is to lash out and blame those around you for how you perceive them as making things harder for you. Relationships

break down, you push away those close to you. You begin to devalue yourself, and the more you devalue yourself, the easier it becomes to devalue those around you. Your life becomes harder and more painful than it needs to be, those around you feel it and are less likely to be able to maintain closeness. One becomes more and more lonely and angry and enters feedback loops of pain. Hell.

Jesus

Every religion has myths or mythology. It is largely their mythologies that distinguish them from one another.

We today all believe in myths, and they do have a purpose, for whether or not one claims to believe in God, we all believe in them. They have always been used and will be used to explain something that cannot be explained rationally, or rather rationally for a wide audience. The difficulty is that in order to support our own view of the truth behind the myths, there's a tendency for mythology to grow into other myths to support some original one(s). Many religions believe in prophets or people like them who have received revelations from their deity. The words of these prophets contain undeniable wisdom weaved through their particular religious, cultural and or national mythology. These myths have developed and changed over time as we begin to rationally understand the truth behind them. As we understand them better, they no longer are myths in the same way; the difficulty is that the entire house of cards is supported by other myths. It is nearly impossible to extract one myth without being confronted with another myth.

Why, if the words of prophets are inspired by God, is there so much difficulty understanding? Disagreement about them? This is where they revert to mythology, because there's no better way to communicate their revelation to the people receiving them. The words were limited by our ability to process them. How does one describe seeing God other than that he is a whisper, every word spoken at once, light, love, powerful; these are all accurate, but these could all be describing a forging of the conscious and subconscious.

The mythology enters in when there's no other way of communicating the message in a way that the intended audience can understand.

They understood their audience, as they were a part of it. They were limited by their own understanding, and at some point, they would need to accept some myths themselves. They too were overwhelmed by having to process every word spoken at once and try to present a shape of them; they were, after all, human.

Look at the early church, at the chronology of the Bible. In the first decade or so of writings, there's very little mythology. Look also for the audience of who the books were written for. For the Christians, there's more mention of God not showing favouritism (Acts 10:34, Romans 2:11, Galatians 2:6) than there's about Jesus being incarnate of God. Even in the chronology of the Gospels, which now looks to me like a recruiting handbook, one can observe the mythology around him grow and change. He begins as a Son of Man who barely hints at being the messiah, let alone God incarnate, then slowly over four books is transformed into something superhuman. Mark, the earliest, has no birth story and, in its oldest manuscripts, ends at an empty tomb; Matthew and Luke add the virgin birth; John, the latest, opens with the Word that was God. The early church formed fast, faster than the apostles could keep up with. Churches were forming independent of them. They were also operating within a certain broad acceptance of divinity, spirituality that was based in the Greco-Roman world Jesus lived in as a Jew; individual cities had their own sets of myths and folklore.

Look at the early heresies and the means by which the church codified the divinity of Christ. To me they look like unions between sets of beliefs. The state declared one over the others and enforced adherence by pain of death. The enemy once was assaulting the church from all sides, but now the enemy was within. They didn't do so in the Spirit. When the Spirit speaks through them, they speak truth and violence is unnecessary. Violence comes from those in an argument whose position is untenable.

I was told that faith was believing those myths without questioning them, but the Bible says otherwise, for we're encouraged to challenge the words of the prophets. Many Jews believed the messiah would come in glory to smite the evil and bring his chosen people to God. Many Christians who hang onto

that same myth have thrown their lot in with those who opposed Jesus. By your evil desires, you condemn yourself to that punishment you so desire for others.

If you believe that all it takes is saying a few words about faith in Jesus as the son of God and saviour, then you too condemn yourself, for you too must take up your cross; it will not be done for you.

I confided in a close friend about the difficulties with the myths, that I didn't agree with most of them, and he asked me why I continued to go to church. I couldn't give a reasonable explanation other than Jesus, not God. I don't question that God exists. It was not Jesus as God that kept me going to church, rather it was Jesus the man.

I was warned not to question his divinity, yet it was precisely in questioning it that led me closer to him and by extension, God. For those of you reading who are beginning to feel darkness, those who believe unwaveringly in the divinity of Jesus, in the holy trinity, let me remind you that if you knew it to be true, if your faith left no room for doubt, there would be no danger in discussing it. Your resistance may come from a careful reading of Scripture, and if so, I'd want to hear it. But if what's sensed is darkness, one must discover its root to remove it properly; if the darkness returns, you have not gone deep enough.

If Jesus was a man, born of parents, conceived out of wedlock, treated as a bastard, if he was no more son of God than anyone else, would it take anything away from the power of his message? If he did die and was raised in Spirit instead of body, if the miracles he performed were more demonstrations of excess knowledge of the physical world, of the healing power of love to heal broken souls, explainable by natural phenomenon, and he was just another prophet in a line of them, would it take anything away?

For many Christians this would change a great deal, and I don't pretend otherwise. It was in contemplating this that I understood it didn't matter to me, and more than that, if he was just a man, it makes him and his journey more remarkable, not less. A man who became a living facsimile of God through will and surrender rather than birthright. I don't need the divinity to be literal for the message to hold. If anything, a Jesus who got there without a supernatural head start is the harder, more useful proof of what's possible

for the rest of us. And a faith that survives the shedding of its myths is, to me, a stronger faith than one that needs them. If he did indeed start a cascade of people living in Spirit with God, he is still the messiah to me, because accepting him as a human forces us to contemplate how we learn to love as he did, to sacrifice as he did. It was not some supernatural force that only he has access to; rather he showed us all a way to the Father, and the Father does not show favouritism, for we're all sons of Adam and daughters of Eve, the "firstborn" of God. What a terror that we're called to lose ourselves and submit to the Spirit as he did.

I know the Trinity doesn't confine God to three; my difficulty is with what it has come to mean in practice, a fullness of God reserved for one man. Also how this idea is valuable to reflect upon, but shouldn't be doctrinal. There is a bizarre letter sent from Innocent IV delivered to the Khan by Carpini. It is a high level sermon to someone with no background or context whatsoever to engage with. If we only know how to preach to the choir, we aren't honing teaching those in need. God is three things in the same way God is ten trillion things, you and me included. Isn't God in all things? God does not show favouritism.

It is easy to believe in Jesus' divinity but talk of his divinity as some supernatural phenomenon that we can see with our own eyes, and we venture into the realm of the occult. Why we like this myth, along with other myths we all believe, is that it's used as a crutch to get on with life and feel good about oneself. If Jesus is divine, he will save us and all we have to do is accept it. Easy-peasy. Not everyone holds it that way; for many, belief in his divinity is the very thing that calls them into costly service. But look at the wages of this myth where it's held as a shortcut. It is mythology which is the stumbling block put before the path of the children of God. Sometimes for ill, sometimes to protect us when to stand is to be shredded and maimed. Everyone has different myths that determine and are rooted in their own view of themselves.

Jesus as a facsimile of a boundless fount of wisdom and life or light, or the deity, is what I think he is and why I think Christians are drawn to him. He never claimed any divine right or power or authority to himself. Jesus is an embodiment of God's light on earth. This seems like a distinction without a difference, and why not? The point is that he was a facsimile; he couldn't

contain the completeness of God in human form. We have turned Jesus into a graven image of God. We have many names for God, but when we name him, we aren't recognising that when we call out his name, he reflects back that name to us in our ordering. The name of God is also a facsimile of the light, a piece of it that we try to define the edges of.

I see light at the centre of all religions; the darkness is creeping in at the edges, but we're the ones casting the darkness to define the edges of the light that appears pure, does not burn. We also use our darkness to block out the parts of the light that do burn. This is why Christians continue to fail, continue to sin, because they believe that Jesus will save them from the burn, when he is merely there to keep one from dying. Many would perish if they got a full dose of light before they were ready; he is trying to show us how to become compatible with the Spirit, what some traditions call sadhana, preparing the vessel to hold it.

The difficulty people have is overcoming their own conceit. Many Christians believe that they're now God's chosen people, the new Israel. This is true, but they are ignoring the fact that every single human being is chosen in this way. Christians have become arrogant, used the word and the myths to justify exploitation. Many religions claim to be the one answer, path, or way to God, so Christians aren't alone in this mythology. It is, however, antithetical to Jesus' teaching.

Why does the myth persist?

Imagine a sales strategy: there's this guy named Jeshua, a student of a prophet who preaches repentance. He is the messiah because he will show us, God's children, the way to godliness. We should follow his teachings. Denial of instant gratification. Giving away of material possessions. Denying all of the things that lead to power and influence in the world. What do we get? Happiness, but we will likely be ostracised by our old community, and once we reach a critical mass, we will be hunted down and killed. But it won't matter, because we will already be one with God.

Not an easy sales pitch, but many people still followed him, because they were already denied gratification; they had little material possessions to give and had no power or influence, and the joy in oneness was enough to

sustain them. Anyone who has anything to lose will have a really hard time, and oh yeah, there are no shortcuts.

As I read it, this is why the early church needed the myths, because it needed to hint at a shortcut, and it played well into the existing ideas about hierarchy. As the apostles aged and the church diverged, they needed to refocus people on the way to the light; the journey towards it never ends, and too many were too focused around the edges. They affirmed the most accepted mythology among the Christians, and the followers of Jesus became a religion. This is when Christianity began to repeat many of the mistakes of other religions. It is thinking that faith requires acceptance of myths that both gives religion its longevity and leaves its followers open to predation, allowing people to twist them to their own purposes and to build new mythologies on top to cement their interpretations.

The difficulty of undoing myths is monumental, because the order is different for different people; requirements are different; there is no universal method or order for everyone to use. Look at the state of politics and the myths that exist on all ends of spectrums. What becomes controversial is there to highlight the myths that need to be reconciled.

Hierarchy

The same inherited structures that shaped my picture of the sacred also shaped my picture of the world: who deserves power, what money is for, how far anything can grow.

Hierarchy is a natural state for us throughout our evolution as a species. We used it to build civilisation; before it, we lived in tribal societies that were egalitarian for its members but were always at risk of being wiped out or enslaved by other tribes. By organising our society and structuring it, we were better able to withstand invasion as well as natural disasters. This allowed us to continually feed more and more people, and support the aquisition of more and more knowledge. We used it to bring light into darkness.

Where does hierarchy come from and why do we need it? Throughout our history, we have attributed the unknown to God. We place God above ourselves, as the top of our hierarchy. We naturally apply this same hierarchy to how we structure our society, and have become very sophisticated in our ordering of society in order to propel us forward. We still need a form of it on the way into Truth. We can shift what it means, how it's practised, and who it serves.

Our society is set up to reinforce hierarchy, a hierarchy that is also applied to our understanding of truth. We accept that there are people better than ourselves and that we're better than others. Where does this come from and what are the implications for society?

Our politics are also set up this way, and are on an extreme trajectory: a concentration of authority by authority. Because hierarchy is a natural state for us, we tend to value or defer to the truth of someone higher in the hierarchy more than we do someone lower than us. Our tendency to do this has led to many advancements in technology and material wealth, distributed in the same hierarchical fashion. Those at the top get first crack not only at material wealth but at greater knowledge, light; and material wealth becomes a means to the end of more of it.

We apply this hierarchy to race, class as well as religion. We believe that we understand God and the rules that govern our society within the context of our hierarchy without understanding that our position in that hierarchy is precisely why one understands God and the rules of our society in the way that they do. Hierarchy reinforces itself. When we begin to understand God as a collective truth that we all share, that we're all children of light, we can take stock of what a mess hierarchy and our hierarchical way of thinking is and the unnecessary suffering it causes. That God is above us like our own parents were above us when we were children. Once we become adults, we begin to better understand what our parents instilled within us, and we begin to look at them as our elders. Not lording above us, but alongside us, helping us as we learn to help. It's something I long for with my own parents, and something I try to practise with my own children, and with the people who work with me: the more agency someone feels they have, the less confusion surrounds a lesson or a truth, and the more ownership they take, the easier the next step becomes.

As long as hierarchy exists, race, class and gender will continue to inform and exist within a hierarchy.

Our politics, those we give authority to, is a popularity contest. To be successful in politics, one needs to accept the power structure that exists to be able to understand and navigate it. Its logical end is a more extreme version of what already exists. It attracts people with inflated egos, inflated by their privilege, and that is what primes them for our version of hierarchy. Because they appear larger or better than they are, they are the ones who stand out and are heard. They are also the ones who see themselves as better than most to put up with the roils of becoming a politician. To be able to be elected by peers and to be heard by them, you need the money and influence that our existing paradigm can offer.

What we're all learning now and have been, is that concentrating too much power in one person or position encourages narcissism. In order to make it to the top of the hierarchy, it must be because one is special. They are smarter, more experienced and knowledgeable as well as morally superior. When we understand God as being at the top of a hierarchy, we accept as normal having one person at the top of the hierarchy, and we're often too tempted to let them answer only to God, not to us, because we're unworthy to question God, we're unworthy to question those who claim to speak for him.

Democracy in name gives us the chance to remove a leader, but that's not the same as shifting where power actually sits. Real power doesn't move with an election when the people running for office already bought their way to the starting line. As long as that arrangement holds, democracy stays a word rather than a fact.

Look at what leadership has laid bare, again and again: power sustaining itself through the same loop it uses to grow. Once a genuine narcissist sits at the top of that loop, it accelerates, and the acceleration ends in suffering. Convinced of their own specialness, the people running the loop find it easy to write off everyone beneath them as lesser, uneducated, beneath real consideration. This leads to contempt, hate, then murder; whoever hates his brother, scripture says, is already a murderer. The one who hates may never

lift a hand, but the weight they add to the hate can be enough for someone else to.

What they need to understand, and what we need to stop granting them, is that there was nothing special about how they got there. Power handed down through inheritance, connection, or capture isn't earned, whatever story gets told about merit. The claim that we're all created equal collapses the moment we admit hierarchy is still doing the sorting.

Look at the worst of them, the ones who cause the most damage. When people with power behave like children, it's partly because no one taught them otherwise, and partly because we built a system that rewards the behaviour. Treating people as lesser than yourself means missing the basic job of leadership, which is putting other people's needs ahead of your own; it also flattens your own relationships into transactions. The more wealth someone accumulates, the more everything around them starts to look like a deal rather than a bond. Seeing people as instruments is a learned habit, not a given one. We deprive the wealthiest among us of the meaning that comes from working for what you have, and in turn they deprive the rest of us of health, home, and enough to live on.

We know, most of us, what it means to actually understand someone we love, to find comfort in that closeness rather than a transaction. It's a kind of sadness that when the powerful see us as lesser, it's because some part of them feels lesser too, and what we're receiving back is their own pain, amplified by every bit of authority we've handed them. They bear responsibility for the damage; so do we, for continuing to hand over that authority. The bigger the walls we build for ourselves, the more it says about how much our own egos are compensating, inflating to fill them.

Money

We live in a time of heightened inequality. This is perfectly understandable within our current paradigm and structure. It shouldn't shock us when we have allowed money to be more than what it was intended to be. Money is a

tool used to exchange for goods and services. This is the simplest understanding of what money is, and we all understand this. Money, however, is no longer that simple. When we listen to those who have money, we're giving power over to money and those who have it. We believe that if we listen to those who have greater knowledge of money, and if we apply that knowledge and work hard, we will get our share, and if we're lucky, possibly more than our fair share.

When people trust in markets to be free and fair, they are ignoring the fact that money equals power.

What we have also done is allowed money to value more than the barter value of goods; we use it to value virtue and self-worth. We assume that because someone has more money, that something about them is special that allowed them to acquire more of it. Wealth is good at teaching people how to rationalise the harm it causes, and we tend to admire whoever's best at that rationalising.

We need to remember the original purpose of money. That when we begin to hoard money, it is a symptom of a sickness in how our system now works; capitalism is sick, but it isn't the sickness itself.

Capital has now become the mainstream religion of those who have it and want to acquire more of it. Many of us worship at its altar. Economists and businessmen are our priests; billionaires are favoured by God; stock exchanges, banks, and stores are our temples that we worship at, allow to run our lives; and the violent arm of our governments are the temple guards and also the crusaders who go into the world to convert the heathen. Net worth is equal to self-worth, and those who have money are inherently better.

Before we think about what should change, we need to understand how capital is both a curse and a gift. When a system breaks down, we get to see what was wrong, and what needs fixing or tweaking. That isn't something to welcome. When systems fail, it's rarely those at the top who suffer first; it's the vulnerable, the people who depend on them for food, care, and basic stability. If it comes, it's something to survive and learn from, and to carry one another through.

If we only nibble around the edges in an attempt to stop these loops from becoming uncontrollable, we risk delaying the inevitable and continuing the same cycles of civilisational rise and fall that we have seen throughout history. Eventually the same destructive loops of the past will begin, and because they grow at a different pace, or out of order, they will likely gain critical mass and lead to more destruction and suffering before we're able to understand them anew.

There have been moments before when society reached for a great equalizer, a forgiving of debts, a new deal between those who have and those who don't, and each time the effort to reset seemed insurmountable even as it succeeded for a while. If we manage to move more people from the "have-nots" to the "haves," there is no guarantee that we won't be back at the same levels of inequality again, but likely, with the pace of change, we may have to fight for decades to unwind what has already been cast, with no guarantee that we won't end worse off than we are.

How is it that markets keep climbing in the midst of crisis after crisis? It is because the priests and virtuous capitalists have repeatedly dipped into the public storehouse for personal gain, to prop up the institutions that serve our overlords, to perpetuate a system based on their greed, for the stock index is no indicator of economic health, unless you believe that economic health is concentration of wealth at the top. Our system chooses winners and losers: help for corporations is called acceptable and necessary, while help for persons is painted as a moral failing. Stock indexes only measure the best performers; if power is feeding power, if money is concentrating to itself, it is considered good. But if any company does not do well, they get bumped from the list. They have been telling us that they know best, that it is required. It is only required to prop up the broken system. It merely denotes how good the top performers are at exploiting the system.

Those who benefit, and a system whose incentives reward it, have added so many layers of complexity that understanding "monetary policy" has become a confusing task most people don't have the time or capacity to try and understand. Whether by design or by drift, it keeps us compliant and has forced us into the comfort of ignorance, because to understand how we're all enslaved by this system of "money at any cost" is frustrating, enraging and disturbing, especially when we feel powerless to do anything but comply and

buy into the system. Our ignorance is both a comfort we seek shelter in, but it is also encouraged and directed by those who have power in order to be able to seek more of it.

What we need this time is a complete rethink of where all of society's problems are rooted: in hierarchy, our hierarchy reinforced and fuelled by capital/money, the religion of the West, twisted by hubris into a religion of oppression. It is inflicted upon the world, and to add to it, they desecrate God and religion, parading sad representations of them and twisting their memories to their own purposes.

Exponential Curves

Exponential curves: population growth, sum of human knowledge and technology, compound interest, etc. We have a grasp of this, and understand them as exponential curves only as we begin to approach the point where the line goes vertical.

What we need to parse out is that these curves often seem unnatural because they seem to go on into infinity. It is unnatural, because population growth, climate change, resource extraction all have a ceiling, and we're learning more and more and understand in our own way that when any one of these lines hit the ceiling, it will lead to massive suffering and destruction. We do not know exactly where that ceiling is, but things seem more precarious the higher we go up that ever more vertical line.

We also wonder at the curve, because it also shows progression. That we're able to accelerate our acquisition of knowledge, generate more material comforts for more and more people. We see how they represent something good as well as bad, and too often we wonder at the good side and take comfort in it so we can better ignore the opposite effects of the same truth. What we need to understand is that the curves are plots of feedback loops. How does this help us? Feedback loops end in one of two ways: either one or both sides of the loop stop participating or engaging and feeding into the loop, or the loop will continue to cascade out of control and end in

destruction. We're all struggling to understand how to control the loops, because until they end in destruction, they seem to drive society and civilisation to greater heights and greater understanding.

Ending the destructive loops requires faith: faith that ending a negative loop does not necessitate ending the positive ones; faith in our fellow man; faith that selfishness can be overcome and that we will come together; faith that our existing power structure won't be replaced by something worse. When we finish the work on ourselves and help each other, we won't need rules, authority and overseers. They will be replaced by elders, guidelines, best practices, and teachers. This is what we all long for. It sounds idealistic. Elders can be wrong too, and guidance that harms has to stay open to challenge like any other; what changes is that no one's worth depends on their position.

As society appears to be crumbling all around us, this faith will become easier as it feels harder. As more and more curves become recognisable as feedback loops, we can all see that small adjustments at the edges won't reach what is at the core of both what has driven us and what is also holding us back. As the future becomes bleaker and we jump from crisis to crisis, we will begin to understand that the future is only written because we believe it, and that we can end these feedback loops before they lead to destruction. That we can reform society and share our burdens, because once we share them, they are no longer burdens; they are life, sustenance, bliss, lessons in truth.

We have enough food to end hunger. We have the resources to end homelessness. We keep focusing on slivers of the truth when the whole truth is so much more fulfilling and wonderful: the more chaotic things become, the more out-of-control loops there are, the easier it will be to see Truth.

Three Pillars

Think of the self as resting on three pillars, three categories of belief that make up who we are and how we meet the world; loosely, the jnana, bhakti, and karma of the Gita's paths. The first is the pillar of self: who we

understand ourselves to be. The second is the pillar of our understanding of religion, of God, and of the people closest to us. The third is the pillar of the real world: politics, history, the structures we've built to organise a society and to explain what our bodies and our institutions are for.

I started, as most people do, with the first. When I hit "rock bottom", it was more in the vein of a midlife crisis, something that felt a bit more deliberate than imposed. Nonetheless, it was this that shattered the pillar. The rigid self I'd built cracked open, and in the wreckage I was humbled enough to become open to being wrong. This is the part everyone recognises, the part with a name: rock bottom, a come-to-religion moment, whatever a given tradition calls the floor giving way. I set about the ordinary work of picking myself back up; repairing relationships, returning to work, taking stock of what had been blinding me to my own hand in my own suffering. It didn't hold. I felt, at times, like I was play-acting my former self, and the more I performed the return, the more I felt myself drifting back toward where I'd come from, accepting myths I had no real control over. I was treating them as though they were still rooted in truth. This is when I began to believe I was something I was not. Rebuilding only the first pillar wasn't repair. It was set upon a foundation that was still cracked in two other places I hadn't touched yet.

It was only later that I understood being in Spirit meant deconstructing all three pillars together. Not just the self, but the pillar of religion, spirituality and relationships, and the pillar of the world itself: what we accept about politics, about history, about our own bodies, about how a society decides to organise itself. Breaking one pillar and leaving the other two standing isn't transformation. It's redecorating a room in a house whose foundation is still failing on both sides. That's how it went for me. For some, the same work happens slowly, through patient correction and care, without the floor giving way all at once.

This is, in the end, the shape this entire section has taken. First Rebirth broke the first pillar. The self, its shame, its habit of ordering truth into rigid binaries it could defend. Second showed the method for holding what came after, the discipline of inhabiting a pattern without losing yourself inside it. God, Satan, Darkness and Light, Jesus was the second pillar breaking: religion, God, the unexamined myths I'd inherited. And Hierarchy, Money,

Exponential Curves was the third: the world itself, the systems I'd accepted as given rather than built, and built badly by the same ego this whole section has been describing since its first page.

Three pillars. One collapse. Understood in three parts, because that was the only way I could survive understanding it at all.

III All Rivers

This section tries to be more methodical about theological traditions and their overlaps, though it's by no means scientific or comprehensive. In my own journey through scriptures and philosophies, their impact was far more profound when I saw them building upon and augmenting one another from a paradigm I at least had some understanding of. Where I differ from someone arriving at the same ideas by a different path, I hope we both recognise a chance to expand, not replace. The clearest place it comes apart for me is the self, which I come back to below. All Rivers is somewhat the epistemology of the journey in 88, but written closer to the end of 88.

All Rivers was originally something I considered part of 88. I see now that the same ideas need different ways of reaching different audiences. I've had difficulty classifying the writing, though I hope it does some of the work self-help and comparative mysticism books do. There are already plenty of good books in both categories. It would only be the futility of ego to think I could do better than them. I can only do differently.

All Rivers End in the Sea of Fana

This title is not a claim that all traditions are identical. Their differences are real, hard-won, and worth preserving. The differences are outgrowths, the places where the same root pressed through different soils and took the shape of what surrounded it. We mistake the outgrowth for the root. It's a forgivable mistake, because the outgrowth is what we can see and touch and argue about, while the root runs deeper than argument.

This section is not comparison for its own sake. It doesn't seek to flatten traditions into a single undifferentiated spirituality, which would insult them all equally. The journey seeks instead to trace the roots: to show where the rivers rise, how they run, and how they all arrive at the same shore, even when their practitioners at times insist they're going somewhere else entirely. The outgrowths from the same root are the same tree with individual branches producing variations of fruit. We cannot strip away or sacrifice the branches that bear fruit to the perceived or conceived benefit of another. We can only pull away from those producing little to none.

The method is allegorical reading. Not allegory in the diminishing sense, not "merely symbolic," not a retreat from literal truth. Allegory in the original sense: a way of reading that holds the outer garment of a text and the inner body it clothes simultaneously, recognising that the garment is not the body, and the body is not the soul, even though all three belong to one person. The Zohar says it plainly: the narratives are the Torah's garments. One who thinks that the garments constitute the scripture itself will have no share in the world to come. Origen, among the earliest Christian interpreters, said something close: that scripture, like a person, has a body, a soul, and a spirit. Many traditions have a version of this warning. The question this document asks is what the garments, read carefully, reveal about the body they clothe, and what the body, understood deeply, says about the soul within. Read this way, scripture is less a record to be believed than a spiritual technology: something built to do something to the person who uses it

The evidence offered here is not only textual. It is experiential. I didn't encounter these traditions as a scholar encounters archives. I encountered them as a man drowning encounters water; completely, involuntarily, without the luxury of practised detachment. What was discovered, surfacing, was that every tradition I had passed through on the way down had a name for where I'd been. Not the same name, but the same place nonetheless.

This is the witness the traditions themselves have always said is the only real evidence: not argument, not doctrine, but the person who has been there and returned changed.

Begin with what every tradition agrees on, which is also what every tradition finds most difficult to say.

There's something in the human being that is not the human being. Call it the soul, the Atman, the Ruh, the divine spark, the Buddha-nature, the pearl of great price. Every tradition has a name for it. Every name is a gesture toward something that precedes naming. The Upanishads say *Tat tvam asi* (that art thou) and its companion, *Aham Brahmasmi* (I am Brahman), pointing to the identity between the deepest self and the ground of all being. Sufi tradition says the same thing in the language of love: the lover and the Beloved are not two. The Christian mystic Meister Eckhart says it in the language of ontology: there's a spark in the soul that is always already one with the divine. The Kabbalist says it through the doctrine of the divine image, *tzelem Elohim*: the human being as mirror of the infinite. The shaman says it by entering the spirit world and returning: the visible and the invisible aren't separate realms but two registers of the same reality.

The agreement is remarkable. What differs is the diagnosis of why we cannot see it.

For the Gnostic, the obstacle is the Demiurge, the ignorant or malevolent creator-god who fashioned the material world as a prison for the divine spark, who keeps us distracted by the sheer density of matter from remembering what we are. The image is of light trapped in clay: divine prisoners who have forgotten the country they came from. Liberation is gnosis, not belief, not obedience, but knowledge: direct, experiential recognition of one's own divine nature. Direct, experiential recognition of one's own divine nature. The Hymn of the Pearl, one of the oldest Gnostic texts, describes a prince sent from the kingdom of light into Egypt, the land of darkness and forgetting, who falls into a deep sleep, forgets his mission and his origin, until a letter arrives from his Father reminding him who he is. He wakes, retrieves the pearl, returns. This is the structure of every mystical descent and return, in every tradition, stated with such purity that it reads less like myth and more like memory.

The Gnostic diagnosis, that the material world is the problem, is the place where traditions most sharply diverge, and the divergence is instructive. The Christian mystic does not agree. The material world is not a prison but a site

of encounter. The Dark Night of the Soul, John of the Cross's map of the spiritual journey, describes not an escape from embodied life but a stripping of everything within embodied life that the seeker has mistaken for G-D. The consolations that are withdrawn in the dark night are not the world itself but the ego's relationship to it: the need for confirmation, comfort, certainty, and the feeling of being spiritually special. What remains when all of that has been taken is not nothing. It's the soul in naked contact with what was always there.

This distinction, between the Gnostic escape from matter and the Christian mystical transformation within it, is one of the genuine fault lines between traditions. It's a real difference in how one lives: whether the body and the world are something to escape or the very place of encounter. But look at what both are describing: a process in which the false self must die so the true self can be known. The Gnostic calls the false self the creation of the Demiurge. The Christian mystic calls it the ego's attachment to its own image. The Sufi calls it the *nafs al-ammara*, the animal self governed by instinct and desire. The Buddhist calls it *avidya*, ignorance: the misidentification of the transient aggregate of experience with a permanent self. The Vedantin calls it *Maya*; not illusion in the sense of non-existence, but misperception in the sense of mistaking the outgrowth for the root, the wave for the ocean.

Different diagnoses. The same disease. And the same cure: die before you die, so that dying does not destroy you.

Every tradition has a name for the death that is not death.

The Sufi tradition calls it *fana*, annihilation: not the destruction of the person but the dissolution of the false person, the ego-construction that has claimed to be the self. What remains after *fana* is *baqa*, subsistence in G-D. What remains after *fana* is *baqa*, subsistence in G-D. The mystic does not cease to exist; they begin, for the first time, to exist as they actually are. The Mevlevi describe this as intoxication: at the apex of *fana*, the mystic's actions and speech are no longer their own but emerge from the divine encounter. The mystic becomes a vessel. What was empty is now full. What was opaque is now transparent.

The Christian tradition calls it the dark night, the cloud of unknowing, death to self. John of the Cross maps it in exquisite, almost clinical detail: first the night of the senses, in which exterior consolations are withdrawn; then the night of the spirit, in which interior consolations, the felt presence of G-D, the sense of spiritual progress, the comfort of one's own faith, are withdrawn. In the second night, the mystic cannot pray, cannot feel, cannot locate G-D anywhere. They experience what John calls nada, nothing, what seekers in sadhana know as the dry phase, when nothing seems to happen. This is not abandonment. This is the deepest form of purification, in which the last attachments of the ego to its own spiritual experience are burned away, leaving the soul in naked union with what was always there, unnamed. I knew this night before I had a name for it.

The Kabbalistic tradition calls it bittul, self-nullification. The tzimtzum, the contraction of the divine to make space for creation, is reversed in the mystic who contracts the self to make space for the divine. The The Lamed Vav, the thirty-six hidden righteous ones whose anonymous selflessness sustains the world, are its fullest expression: so nullified in the ordinary ego-sense that they're invisible, their presence felt only in its effects, like the roots of a tree known through the strength of what grows above.

The Hindu tradition, through Vedanta, calls it moksha, liberation, but understands it not as the soul's escape from the world but as the recognition that Atman was always Brahman: that the individual self was never separate from the universal self, that the wave was always the ocean and forgot only in the distraction of its own cresting. The Bhagavad Gita's nishkama karma, action without attachment to its fruits, is the practical discipline of this recognition: to act fully in the world while releasing the ego's claim on the outcome. This is the hardest and most complete description of what the Christian mystic means by dying to self while remaining in the world.

The Buddhist tradition calls this anatta, not-self, and insists that the mistake is not merely psychological but ontological: there never was a fixed, permanent self to begin with. What we call the ego is a verb, not a noun, a process of misidentification happening in real time, observable in motion, capable of being seen through. The Bodhisattva is the one who, having seen through it, chooses not to pass into final liberation, nirvana, but to remain in the world of becoming until all beings have been freed. This is the

most radical eschatological gesture in any tradition: not the individual's escape from history but the individual's voluntary return into it, again and again, out of compassion. The Bodhisattva vow reframes the entire eschatological horizon from personal salvation to collective liberation.

Of everything gathered here, this is the one place where holding both sides at once feels less like synthesis and more like standing at the edge of something that won't resolve. I don't think that unease is a flaw to fix. The other traditions describe a false self dying so that a true one can be found beneath it, however hidden. Buddhism refuses that consolation entirely: there was never a self there to find, and even reaching for a hidden true self is ego in a subtler disguise. I find both of these true at once, not by turns but simultaneously, and the more deeply I sit with one over the other, the more the other makes sense rather than less. This is the sharpest instance in the whole essay of what First Rebirth already names: truth lives not in the binary but in the sphere holding both ends, and that the discomfort of not resolving it is closer to the actual practice than any resolution would be.

Shamanic traditions are many and vary widely, and are among the oldest human spiritual technologies. They describe the same process in the language of dismemberment and reconstitution. Across cultures, each with its own name for the role, the shaman's initiation follows a recognisable pattern: sickness or crisis that cannot be resolved by ordinary means; a descent into the spirit world, often experienced as literal death; an encounter with forces that tear the initiate apart; and a reconstitution in which the shaman returns with knowledge and healing power unavailable before the descent. This is fana and baqa in the language of the body. It is the dark night in the language of the community. It is gnosis in the language of direct encounter. The shaman does not read about the spirit world. The shaman has been there.

Here is where the traditions most illuminatingly diverge, not as contradictions but as outgrowths.

The Sufi tradition insists on the Pir, the living master, the guide who has made the journey and can therefore lead others through it safely. Without the Pir, the path is not merely difficult but dangerous: the seeker who enters the dissolving territory of fana without guidance may lose the thread back

entirely. The Pir holds the thread. The relationship between master and disciple, murshid and murid, is not hierarchical in the ordinary sense but ontological: the disciple annihilates not only in G-D but first in the Pir, the medium through which the divine outpouring flows. This is the tradition's hardest insistence and its most generous gift, the acknowledgment that no one makes this journey alone. This is a specifically Sufi insistence; many Muslims, Sunni readers especially, walk without one. Beyond Islam, too, not every path has a Pir; the Buddha left his teachers and sat alone. I've walked parts of this journey alone, and parts with others. And the caution I raised about elders applies here too: a guide is only as trustworthy as their openness to being questioned.

The Christian mystical tradition insists on grace, the recognition that the union the mystic seeks cannot be achieved by human effort or striving. Eckhart's *Gelassenheit*, letting go, is not a technique but a surrender. The more the mystic strains toward G-D the further G-D seems; the moment the straining ceases, the divine presence that was always there becomes apparent. Ramakrishna put it simply: the winds of grace are always blowing; you only have to raise your sail. Grace meets intention rather than effort; the sail is the intention. This is not passivity. It is the most demanding form of activity: the sustained discipline of releasing one's grip on one's own spiritual progress.

The Vedantic tradition insists on *viveka*, discriminative awareness, the trained capacity to distinguish the real from the unreal, the permanent from the transient, Atman from the ego-process that claims to be Atman. This is the intellectual dimension of liberation, and Vedanta is unashamed of it: the tradition trusts the mind's capacity to see through itself if properly trained. The path is not anti-intellectual but trans-intellectual, reason pushed to its own limit until it breaks open into something beyond it.

The Bodhisattva tradition insists on compassion as the non-negotiable foundation of all spiritual development. Wisdom without compassion is not liberation but a more refined form of selfishness. The Bodhisattva's return, the refusal of final liberation, is the tradition's answer to every spiritual individualism: the awakening that does not turn back toward suffering beings is incomplete, regardless of how profound it feels from the inside.

The shamanic tradition insists on the community as both the context and the purpose of the journey. The shaman does not descend for themselves. They descend on behalf of the community, carrying its wounds into the spirit world and returning with healing. The individual's transformation is always in service of the collective's wellbeing. There's no private enlightenment in the shamanic worldview; there's only the one who has gone further into the darkness and returned with what the community needs.

These aren't contradictions. They're the same truth pressing through different soils. The Pir, grace, viveka, compassion, and community service aren't competing methodologies but different facets of a single recognition: the false self cannot dissolve itself; something larger than the ego must be trusted, submitted to, received. Whether that something is named God, Brahman, Buddha-nature, the Spirit, the ancestors, or the community, the gesture is the same. The hand opens. What was gripped is released. What was always there becomes apparent.

And now the eschatological horizon, where the traditions appear most different and are perhaps most secretly the same.

Every tradition has an end-time narrative. Revelation. Qiyamah. The Day of Judgement. Frashokereti. Kali Yuga's end. The coming of Maitreya. The Seventh Fire of Anishinaabe prophecy, and the Eighth it opens toward. These narratives describe the world's transformation: the burning away of what is false, the revelation of what is true, the gathering of the scattered into a unity that was always their nature. They're written in the language of cosmic events, of armies and angels and the dissolution of the present order.

Read allegorically, not to diminish them but to find their depth, these narratives describe what happens inside a single human being who undergoes the full arc of spiritual transformation. The burning of Gehenna is the burning of the false self's accumulated defences. The Day of Judgement is the moment of unflinching self-knowledge, when every self-deception is seen clearly and the soul stands accountable to what it actually is rather than what it claimed to be. Qiyamah is the standing every soul makes before the truth of its own record, when nothing spoken or hidden remains unweighed. Frashokereti, the Zoroastrian renovation of all existence, occurs

when a person chooses Asha over Druj at every available moment until the choosing becomes their nature. Kali Yuga's end is the close of an age of forgetting within a single consciousness. The coming of Maitreya is the awakening of boundless compassion in a consciousness that has completed the Bodhisattva's curriculum. The Seventh and Eighth Fires are the community's collective arrival at what the individual mystics find in solitary descent.

This reading does not make the literal reading wrong. It makes it incomplete, the garment without the body, the body without the soul. The literal reading preserves urgency, the communal dimension, and the sense that history itself is moving toward something. The allegorical reading preserves interiority, personal accountability, and the recognition that the end-time is not coming from outside but is available right now to anyone willing to enter the fire. Both are true. The question is which register the reader is standing in, and whether they have the courage to stand in both at once.

The traditions that have held both most fully are the mystical streams within each tradition: the Sufi inside Islam, the Kabbalist inside Judaism, the Christian mystic inside Christianity, the Vedantin inside Hinduism, the Zen practitioner inside Buddhism. These are the currents that refused to let the garment become the whole truth. They insisted, often at great personal risk of heresy charges, persecution and exile, that the inner life of the tradition was as real and as urgent as its outer form.

They were right. And, as I hear them, they were saying the same thing.

What is being offered here is not a new religion, only the oldest recognition, dressed in language new enough to be heard again.

Every tradition you stand in has a door that opens inward. As Kabir asks, why search for me outside? I'm right beside you. The door is usually unmarked, often obscured by the furniture of doctrine and institution, sometimes deliberately hidden by those who prefer their followers to remain in the outer courts. But it's there. It has always been there. The mystics of every tradition found it and left directions; clumsy, partial, translated through the limits of their own language and culture and moment. All pointing at the same opening.

The direction is always the same: go in. Follow what burns in you, not what merely warms. When the ground dissolves beneath your feet, do not grab for the familiar furniture, let it dissolve. What you're afraid to lose is not what you think it is. What waits on the other side of that loss is not what you fear.

The traditions disagree about the furniture. They disagree about which guide is trustworthy, which practice is essential, which name to call out in the darkness. These disagreements matter; they're the outgrowths, the particular genius of each tradition's encounter with the same mystery. Do not abandon your tradition's outgrowths. Tend them. Learn their particular wisdom. But do not mistake them for the root. And if some of your convictions don't fit the pattern I've traced, keep them; the pattern is mine to offer, not yours to accept.

The root is what you are before you were taught what you are. All rivers know this, even when they forget. We are all moving toward the sea.

IV

Diagnosed?

I had an idea a few years ago that only came back to me in the last few months: to write out a process I went through reflecting on mental illnesses. My own awakening did make people around me notice that something was different. My family includes several therapists and teachers, and the community they're still a part of is a close-knit Protestant one. The combination augmented, I think, what would appear to most people from the outside: suspicions that a screw was loose or that some mental illness was involved.

I am not writing this section to prove I was never unwell, or to settle scores. I am writing it because the overlap between spiritual emergency and psychiatric categories is real, poorly understood, and was used in my case as a tool of control, couched in genuine concern, however misguided. What follows is an attempt to hold both facts at once, not folding this into blame, but trying to speak of reasons. That is what this section sets out: the

diagnoses others have suggested I have had over the years; some conditions and their overlaps; admissions of symptoms; the circumstances I was in; how they influenced these processes; how they were triggered; and what I was doing to try to account for them.

At first, after my spiritual experience or awakening, everything was new, and I did have a lot of stumbling to do. I lacked the ability to contextualise properly to myself, and in retrospect it was naive to think there was any way whatsoever to include my family in what was happening. I have found with many religious people, though certainly not all, a certain amount of ego that piggy-backs onto religion itself. Belonging and agreement become a way of gaining allies, earned by accepting and repeating a preferred narrative rather than through the harder work and discipline that actually transcends simple, black-and-white thinking.

The more people around someone agree, the more that agreement functions as evidence for their particular version of “truth,” their specific reading, their specific doctrine, reinforced simply because others have accepted it too. When I question something like trinitarianism, to someone whose belief depends on that doctrine, my questioning can register less as an honest difference and more as disqualifying, proof that I’ve placed myself outside what they’ve built their alliances around. It’s when people feel threatened this way, or feel a need to regain control of a narrative slipping from their grip, that this dynamic gets weaponised against me, or against anyone else who cuts against the shared story.

Others are threatened, but often this is taught and learned behaviour. My openness, according to institutionalists, is itself a threat to an established order. Those orders are constructs, reflections but not full reflections of G-D, and that’s exactly where people shut down or project. Even years on, with the worst of the pain and processing behind me, I am still seen as someone potentially dangerous. The fears are real; I have felt them too, which is why one must be careful in whatever process someone is going through.

The risk is getting too high on our own vapours. At first, when I would enter a sort of trance state, it was like being high. My energy levels were higher, I was more attentive, and I was much more able to stay in the moment I was in. The explorations of eschatological overlaps would at times make me

wonder at, and sometimes relish, the possibility that I was special. It was hard to ignore the fact that the stories of the early church (living without a real hierarchy and for each other, willing to die rather than utter falsehood) became very real to me, difficult to discount when I felt the same way.

There's something important to understand and mitigate: the spiritual "high," which without control can be dangerous. There are many spiritually awakened people who go down this path and start proclaiming that they're some special conduit. The point is not to let the high carry you so far upward that a crash follows, immediate or long-term. It takes practice and discipline.

I had to learn this quickly, or someone would suspect I was somehow mentally ill, but mostly because I was the primary caregiver to my kids at the time. I had to make sure I was stable. I did stumble briefly near the beginning, something I write about in Ragna, in 88, but resolved afterward never to get to that point again. That being said, the circumstances and process of undergoing severe narcissistic and spiritual abuse kept pushing and nudging me closer to this. It also didn't seem to matter how important it was to me; the fact that others were cut out and not in direct control of it meant that I appeared dangerous and unpredictable, when to me I was entirely predictable, living out what I believed scripture intended for us.

In retrospect, I have more insight into what was going on around me and into the concern of the people around me. However, in the thick of it, I could only learn to carve out a separate space for this journey. I remember going through web articles breaking down some mental illnesses and seeing that, for at least the ones I was looking at, they gave a list of symptoms: if you had a specific portion of them, you likely fit the diagnosis. I found it interesting because I didn't have whatever I had been told I did, but I could see directly how some of the things I was experiencing looked like symptoms and, for the purposes of the exercise, would count as them.

What this also served to do was keep me vigilant. I was open to the fact that I might simply be developing or going through stages of mental illness. The thing is, religious psychoses aren't diagnosable in and of themselves. There's ambiguity there, but I understood the process was happening within me, in my mind's eye, and although it manifested in some ways outside of me, it was mostly a matter of feeling out extreme emotions and trying to take

in and absorb as much as possible from whatever was going on around me. After those first few months, when I wrote and disturbed my family, I didn't write anything for a year and a bit. I knew I would write again eventually. After about a year, I felt more secure and insulated, enough to write again.

Regardless, I was naive in thinking there was any way to have a rational conversation. I was also in a particular state, having just become the mountain in Tekel, in 88; emotion, imagination, and a whirlwind of spirit surrounded the writing. The coincidences that aligned and became apparent in quick succession left me frightened and dumbfounded, which is why I started trying to share that I was writing. It was foolish, and sometimes I felt swept up in urgency. I have had to work hard at understanding what that urgency was telling me and at not letting it make me act impulsively.

This did escalate paranoia, which led to an increase in those around me questioning, testing, and probing. To me, it was as though they had a need to quantify what they were feeling and externalise it. They were scared and paranoid because they imagined I would be some self-proclaimed "prophet" or guru who would go off the deep end, form a cult, or stand on a street corner with a sandwich board. Maybe someone they'd seen portrayed on television, writing compulsively on the walls of a padded room.

It certainly didn't help that, while writing during this period, it did feel as though I was being compelled to keep writing. I was breaking through the safe threshold of the aforementioned high, and part of my attempt to let my family know I was writing was to keep me grounded. I was searching for a tether and needed someone else to tell me to stop; otherwise, I had difficulty seeing how I could stop on my own.

Over a few days, things became so confusing that I didn't understand how, but I still felt the same spirit and the same naive optimism that they could hear my rational arguments, arguments that cut against the version of Truth they were clinging to and the specific mythology they held so rigidly. But I did have a breakdown. I was being spun in circles, with projections directed at me, and the pressure escalated and compounded until it became too much and I physically collapsed.

There's a certain amount of gaslighting that we want to believe. For me, it was the weight of confronting how much of my hope, love, and adoration for

the people around me came from desperately needing to believe in them, rather than from a reality that fully supported that belief. It was shattering to confront this: whatever progress I felt was happening consisted of projections, either from me or from them, and was not real.

The truth was that I was mentally, physically, and emotionally exhausted, pushed to my limits while attempting to work on a toxic relationship almost alone. I believed the others were more interested in the Truth I thought we were building together than in simply telling me what they thought I should hear. That was what led to the foundation of a hell being prepared for me. Perhaps that is hyperbole, but it was a version of hell that was not only mine. Other people have experienced it too, some worse than mine, some not.

Part of what follows, the hospitalisation, is a personal narrative that for a time existed in 88. I've tried to lay out the personal struggles in a way that doesn't condemn, only reflects things others can identify with. This has not been easy, but I continue to endeavour to do so; the process has led to and feeds healing and ease in finding peace amidst chaos.

I still have anger towards these people as they continue in specific actions and behaviours that I have, on multiple occasions, told them are harmful to me. In my experience, they have been unwilling to learn about and understand what narcissistic and spiritual abuse are, despite my stating for years that this experience was nothing more than that. They can't even define these things for me when I've asked. I came to these conclusions last, after every kinder explanation ran out, and I still hope some of them are wrong.

I am still unable to have a relationship with my kids that isn't directly controlled by the same people who describe what's wrong with me as inherent and to be feared. Whether or not they understand it this way, their fear is real. What they call inherent, I know as the emotional and psychological scars of these years: of being discounted, of being treated like a criminal and as someone with an illness I don't have. That treatment was dehumanising; I experienced it as gaslighting.

As difficult as the betrayal, the pain, and the abuse were, the worst of them is behind me now. I'll never forget them, and I'll never be completely free of

what they cost. That's why healing, determination, and gratitude sit alongside the pain rather than replacing it. I understand and forgive. I no longer need them to acknowledge what they caused; I only hope that at some point they'll learn not to repeat it with others.

This is something I can't control, and my own attempts to push it or draw their attention to it only made things worse. I can forgive them, but they haven't been able to accept being forgiven. This is why being close to them remains impossible; receiving forgiveness requires asking for it, something fundamental to the religion I was raised in, and part of the frustration and confusion is that so much of their identity is also tied up in that same religion.

What I've found is that people are subjective in how they apply their own lessons about Truth. We all learn to favour our own set of facts, forgetting that others will hold theirs just as firmly as we do. When someone tries to hold on to me instead, to control rather than understand, I've learned to become sand rather than stone: the tighter the grip, the more slips through the fingers. Conflict is a chance to work through a difference, but when someone is too stubborn to give any ground, they fall back on very human tendencies of manipulation and control, which usually begin to look like narcissistic behaviours and tactics. It is often tangled up with spiritual abuse, one leading into or out of the other.

There's a large body of research linking abuse, especially early in life, to what gets labelled mental illness: depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, even psychosis. In my own experience, and in what I've watched in others, abuse is more often at the root than genetics. I want to be careful with that word, since abuse tends to trigger defensiveness, especially in anyone with abusive tendencies of their own. I don't mean to set myself apart by using it. This isn't unique to me.

Abusing a position of power, being emotionally manipulative, and letting a relationship bend to serve oneself over the whole are ordinary human tendencies, not exotic ones. All of us have been on both sides of this at some point: harmed and harming. Being harmed raises the risk of harming others, though it can also make it more likely that the person experiencing it grows from the experience and becomes less likely, not more, to cause

harm. What actually makes a dynamic abusive isn't the moment itself. It's the refusal to acknowledge it and try to reconcile. Then the repetition. Then sunk cost can take hold, and people can't help but deny, deflect, attack, or start playing the victim.

Abuse like this rarely comes from villains. It comes from people caught in their own fear: some watching someone they love change in ways they can't follow, and/or grasping for whatever stability they can still control. That doesn't excuse what it does, but it explains why it happens and why the people doing it often don't experience themselves as doing harm at all.

There's a specific mechanism worth naming here, because "they don't experience themselves as doing harm" doesn't go far enough on its own. Some people are wired, by temperament or by their own history, to read ordinary disagreement as an attack. Not most disagreement. All of it. A raised eyebrow, a boundary, a simple correction: anything that doesn't reflect back the version of themselves they need to keep believing in lands as a threat to their survival rather than as information. I don't say this to excuse what follows. I say it because what follows makes a strange kind of sense once you see what triggered it: to someone experiencing ordinary feedback as an existential threat, becoming defensive or aggressive isn't cruelty for its own sake. It's what a person does when they genuinely believe they're the one under attack.

This is where putting yourself in someone else's shoes, which is supposed to be the thing that saves us from cruelty, gets turned inside out. It only works if you're actually looking for what the other person feels. If instead you reach for what you would feel and hand that feeling to them, empathy becomes a mirror instead of a window.

Someone convinced they're constantly under threat imagines everyone around them is plotting or resentful because that's what they'd feel in that position. They treat their own imagined resentment as evidence and feel licensed to strike first at a danger that was never actually there. It looks like empathy from the inside. It functions as projection. I don't think this is villainy, most of the time. I think it's a person mistaking their own fear for someone else's intention and never getting far enough outside that fear to

notice the substitution. I've had to ask the same of my own readings of the people in this story.

I recognise the physiology of it too, because I've felt my own version, physical as well as verbal. I don't need to litigate the specifics here. What I've noticed is that gaslighting floods me with the same cortisol, the same narrowed attention, and the same threat response that the other kind did. The differences between them are real, but subjective. In what my body actually does with them, they overlap more than they diverge. I don't think the people who did any of this to me were exempt from that same chemistry. Ordinary disagreement, for someone primed to read it as an attack, can trigger the same cascade as a real threat would. We were, in a sense, running the same hardware, calibrated to fire on different signals. That doesn't make what happened to me any less real, or my hurt any less mine to hold.

The mechanism is usually simple, even when the damage isn't. A boundary gets crossed once, out of fear rather than malice. When it isn't named or stopped, it gets crossed again, until crossing it becomes normal, and the boundary itself hardens into something closer to a wall. Labels, diagnoses, interventions, whatever form the containment takes, stop functioning as care and start functioning as control, often without anyone involved consciously deciding to make that shift. Nobody wakes up choosing to become the mechanism. They arrive at it one small accommodation at a time.

What makes it survivable, eventually, is naming the pattern rather than the person. Once you can see the mechanism operating, fear producing control producing more fear, you stop needing anyone to be a villain in order to stop participating in it yourself.

What follows is the hospitalisation sequence as I experienced it. I include it not as an indictment but as a concrete event upon which later diagnoses were hung.

Both families panicked, and things escalated. They sent doctors, therapists, and, on several occasions, the police. The more I tried to explain what I was going through, the more my explanations were heard as symptoms.

They had the police escort me to hospital on a Friday morning, where I was locked in a room for thirty hours, awaiting COVID results. Being confined, I

was angry. I was already seeking help away from my family, but they wouldn't believe me when I told them. I also felt safe for the first time, having been under constant stress for the previous nine days. I felt relief that they would leave me alone in this place. They asked for me to be hospitalised, and I was. No one outside the family had raised any concern about me including a therapist and several police I had spoken with who were sent by my family. It felt as though I was locked up for their sake, not mine.

I began to see my stay in hospital as a gift nonetheless: a safe harbour. For the three days I was there, I finally had the respite I desired. The people there were so good to me. They treated me with dignity and respect. They cared for me, a stranger, and I began to care for them. I wanted to learn their names, be courteous and grateful because, in them and their calling, I saw nobility.

I had lost ten pounds in two weeks. I ate like a horse, drank, and listened to those who shared the floor. Occasionally, my family would reach out, and I began to notice my own blood pressure rise and my pulse race each time they directed more of their fear at me. I finally understood that what I was feeling was cortisol spikes resulting in anger. Fight or flight: something I had never before let myself feel for more than a few moments, let alone allow to escalate.

No one had ever seen me angry. When I finally did become angry, all they saw was the beast they were constructing. My delusion, to me, was that I still believed I was not angry.

Over three days, my senses returned. I had finally caught up to myself. I finally met with a psychiatrist, one who listened, who was as clear as the first Christmas. As he opened the door for me, he gave me a great gift: a simple hand on the shoulder. In that gesture, I set out to finish what I'd started.

This too shall pass.

I do not blame my family for becoming what they feared. They were motivated by love, but that motivation was misused, and our children were hurt by what followed. I had been their primary caregiver; then, served with an order without notice, I had to leave our home, and for a time I had no home at all. They watched this happen without understanding why. They shared their fear to the very people trained to read it: police, doctors, and

therapists, all while insisting how afraid they were of mine. It didn't seem to matter how many people understood me and my circumstances; I was only seeking help when I was desperate or being questioned, and the story kept spreading.

I understood their concern right from the beginning. I was begging them to leave me alone, and that only compounded things. Being released from hospital with no official diagnosis led me to believe they would be placated. I took antidepressants for three months as a placebo for them. I thought that, with a little time, and with the way my ex-wife treated me through the hospitalisation and the way she instigated the divorce, my family would come onside. I asked for therapy, and for mediation. It took almost three years to reach a separation agreement; through those years I could barely work, lived paycheque to paycheque, and took on predatory loans to pay for whatever legal help I could. I thought that, with a little time, and with all of that laid bare, my family would come onside.

That belief made me sicker, as I kept getting confused about who they actually were. My explicit and clear cries for help, and for them to stop, would escalate their actions and compound the difficulties. Understanding didn't make it any less painful to endure; it only made it easier to heal from afterward.

The hospitalisation happened almost five years ago, but it took on a life of its own. None of those who later relied on it were present for what actually happened there, yet the bare fact that it had happened became evidence. Each person in the reporting chain who saw it as concerning added their own weight, and the record compounded, until it was being used to withhold relationships and resources, leaving me feeling stripped of my humanity. It didn't seem to matter that there was no diagnosis. Twice, judges made orders without me being present: one agreeing with the hospitalisation, another to prevent me from going home. From then on, the orders themselves seemed to settle whether any action against me was just.

I have made peace with it and with the pre- and post-hospitalisation proposals of diagnoses. I was equipped in a way: the therapists in my family helped me understand, at least at some level, what had always interested me: psychology. This kept me vigilant, curious, and equipped, but it also

made for a difficult environment in which to go through the change I was experiencing, since they seemed to need to fit whatever was happening to me into a narrative they could understand, one that left little room for my own experience of it.

I don't believe anyone in the field of psychology is practising junk science; most are trying to do good with the best tools available. I do see psychology as an attempt to be scientific about one of the most subjective subjects we study. It's relied upon heavily in our justice system. I can see why, but I also see how difficult it is to introduce doctors and psychiatrists into a court proceeding as though they're experts, especially when they're limited by their regulating bodies in what they can report, whom they have to report to, and the liability of disgruntled patients or people who have a vested interest in the outcomes of their diagnoses.

Psychological abuse is recognised in Canadian law: the Divorce Act counts it, along with coercive and controlling behaviour, as family violence, and coercive control has recently been made a criminal offence, though the law isn't yet in force. Recognition isn't the same as enforcement. It was frustrating to be told by friends, lawyers, doctors, and therapists (some, not all) that what I described sounded like abuse, and, in the same breath, that I would need evidence to corroborate it. Much of what I would point to as evidence is the very thing that gets conflated with mental illness; whatever symptoms I showed were, as I experience them, emotional and psychological bruises and scars.

Much of the evidence of the abuse is the very thing that gets conflated with mental illness; whatever symptoms I showed were its emotional and psychological bruises and scars. My witnesses were all participants. Therapists and doctors can validate my experience, give me tools and affirmations, yet few are willing or able to put it in writing in any meaningful way.

The labels below did not all have the same status. Some were familiar parts of my history, some were proposed by others, some were repeated to me through clinical conversations, and some were possibilities I considered for myself. I have learned to distinguish between a label based on direct

observation and one passed along through someone else's account, but I am not trying to litigate that distinction here.

Here is the list of diagnoses others have suggested and I have considered. It's not a clinical self-assessment, nor an attempt to argue every one into non-existence. It's an attempt to show where real symptoms overlapped with real circumstances, and the risk of labels beginning to do more work than the symptoms themselves.

A label can give you a reference point along your journey, something to reflect on and learn about yourself. It can also become something that enslaves you and keeps you stuck; some even hide behind them.

I will take them roughly in order of how long they have been in play, or how acutely they were proposed around the crisis: first, the longer-standing patterns (ADHD, depression, seasonal affective disorder), then those more closely tied to the period itself: hyperthymia, bipolar disorder, cannabis-induced psychosis, delusional disorder, and schizoid personality disorder.

The list is longer than I would like. If at any point it begins to feel repetitive or heavy, skip ahead. The point is not that every reader must sit with every entry; the point is that I did. It helped me understand myself, reinforced the human part of me, and helped me better see the human part in everyone.

ADHD

A pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity that interferes with functioning, usually first noticeable in childhood.

Inattention / difficulty sustaining focus

I was diagnosed as a child and as an adult. I can be focused; I can feel the flow state. My difficulty as a child was switching focus on and off. As an adult, it was my difficulty seeing the bigger picture, and not having enough control in my own life, that derailed me.

I know how hard this can be for people living with it. What helped me were workarounds more than cures. My work as a contractor helped me practise shifting my hyperfocus rapidly. What took longer to overcome was understanding why I lacked motivation or felt blocked from doing certain things.

I now see that difficulty as related to having little sense of control over the circumstances or the outcome, as well as to relationships that, in nuanced ways, reinforced those blocks and granted me permission to stagnate in one place. From the outside, that began to cement itself into an identity. Whatever was diagnosed, to me it may at times have been a difficulty, but it is also a gift when turned into ability.

Impulsivity

I have a general sense of self-confidence, fewer inhibitions, and fewer fears about things I have spent time reflecting on. I am introverted and rarely rely on other people to validate my thoughts or experience. This doesn't mean that I am correct about everything, but measuring this can be highly subjective. Any mistake, or even perceived mistake, could be recorded in this way.

In Ragna, in 88, I describe a moment when I acted on impulse, and I own that. Was I taking unnecessary risks? Only if one believes that not agreeing with a handful of people about Jesus means I am going to hell.

Hyperactivity or restlessness

I have experienced restlessness. Hyperactivity, I think, can be confused with someone in a flow state who is unable to control it. Learning how to manage priorities and the flow state, so there isn't a burnout or a diminishment of whatever is in the tank, is how to curb and control it.

Learning from where you missed reading the room, what you missed and why it was important, helps in reining it in. I am a bit of a wanderer, a curious person who likes new experiences and adventures. Something I have been learning is to slow down and appreciate the moment I am in more.

Mindfulness has helped me a great deal, as has appreciating different expressions of spirituality that parallel mindfulness and can be woven together. I've gotten better at it to the point where I no longer consider these problems, hyperactivity or restlessness, though I still feel them from time to time.

Depression

Persistent low mood and/or loss of interest, with a cluster of physical and cognitive symptoms.

Low mood / anhedonia

There have been a few periods in my life when I did have depression. One was returning to Canada after having lived from age eleven to eighteen in Korea. I was a third-culture kid, and I had difficulty adjusting to life here: a huge part of me for which no one around me had any context, and for which I had only partial context about them.

I did improve, but within a few years, after finishing post-secondary, newly married, and unable to find work, I could see only my failures in previous jobs and relationships, as though I were letting everyone down. I was in a shame spiral that was difficult to pull out of. Although the first period was something I went through alone, this one did have an impact on people close to me, and I am sorry for being a source of negativity and for making them feel what they did.

Sleep and appetite disruption

During the first period, when I was eighteen, I did have serious appetite and sleep issues. Within a few months of that period beginning, I learned how to induce sleep: allowing a period for racing thoughts, trying to see what I could resolve, latching on to something, then meditating and switching focus inward, physically feeling the blood in my veins, the breath in my lungs, and the beating of my heart, before getting lost in the rhythm of them and slowing them down.

I haven't had long-term sleep issues since. The most critical element for me is how much stress and cognitive dissonance are flowing through me. Resolving as much as possible as close to events as possible is the most efficient way I have found to process what is happening, instead of allowing things to be triggered through emotions and clouding my perceptions, adding to the noise and making it more difficult to understand with distance.

This does mean that I may have a few days in a row of reduced sleep, but often I see directly how it is required for me to put myself back together enough to proceed in the best way possible. I am not perfect at practising this, but the point is to practise.

Fatigue / low energy

For me, this was more like anhedonia. A lack of motivation means one is not active, not eating as much, sleeping more or less. There needs to be a spark of something, anything, to get one out of bed. It is a gradual feedback loop that consumes us until we reach the roots.

Feelings of worthlessness or guilt

This is something I have felt, but I think no more than anyone else feels at certain points, such as when we're wasting our talents, failing, wasting the gifts we were given, or not living up to our full potential. There are specific failures involving other people that I have let down and can still return to. Feeling their pain represents, to me, a strengthening resolve not to repeat those failures.

It is hard in the deep to see the light on the horizon, but if one seeks, they will eventually find it.

Seasonal Affective Disorder

A depressive pattern tied to seasonal change, most often worsening in fall or winter.

Seasonal mood shift

This is something I have only had during periods when general stress was higher and draining personal situations and relationships meant I was at a poor baseline. When the baseline stress is higher, it is easier for the weather, and for the low sunlight of winter, to have a noticeable effect.

Low energy / oversleeping in low-light months

I can't say one way or the other; sleep is not an issue for me. This too is subjective. During periods when I had an excess of processing while I was in close proximity to the people who had me hospitalised, I did sleep less, which was then extrapolated, reported, and insisted upon as indicative of sleep issues.

So far, watching for triggers and keeping a healthy mind and environment has meant I haven't shown symptoms again for over a decade. By accepting the possibility and diving into it rather than away from it, it loses its hold.

That's the same paradox running through this list: the acceptance itself, whether rooted in oneself or in how one reacts when in the presence of another, is what dissolves the diagnosis.

Don't let the diagnosis manufacture symptoms.

Hyperthymia / Hypomania

Not a formal DSM diagnosis, but a temperament pattern: persistently high energy, optimism, and confidence, sometimes considered a mild, stable cousin of hypomania.

Elevated baseline energy / mood

This is what was first suspected in relation to bipolar disorder. Unburdening oneself of past shame and regret, and seeing every day as proof that you are transformed and transforming, is a big jump from one's baseline. It is how this manifests, and how it may lead to other symptoms and impulsive ways of thinking, that makes it dangerous.

Bipolar Disorder

Episodes of depression alternating with mania or hypomania: elevated mood, decreased need for sleep, grandiosity, and racing thoughts.

Elevated / expansive mood

This is basically covered in the hyperthymia section. I have also discussed how there is a sort of spiritual high, a way it can begin operating a bit like a drug, which then makes one susceptible to thought patterns and behaviours of an addict.

Hypomania was first suggested to me by a family member. I was open to it, which led me to read up on wellness, increase mindfulness, and learn more about mental illness and mental health.

Decreased need for sleep

Covered under Depression and Seasonal Affective Disorder above.

Grandiosity

I don't see myself as special, and I don't see Jesus or any other prophet as special either, which is exactly the part that reads as threatening rather than humble. The more someone has internalised shame or control imposed by others, the more hope they tend to place in a chosen messiah, and I don't think that's wrong so much as incomplete: we're all part of the whole, all necessary, all special, all one with G-D while apart from.

Taken at face value, some people see me as equating myself with the people they've elevated and conclude that I'm being grandiose. What they're not seeing is the inherent grandiosity in their own worship of a messiah or prophet as though that figure were G-D itself.

This was, more than anything else on this list, the thing insisted upon. I think it served a purpose beyond diagnosis. Read one way, the manuscript is a record of healing and growth that happened during and despite abuse. Read another way, the manuscript becomes evidence of grandiosity, and the abuse I was describing becomes evidence of persecutory thoughts. That second reading discounts both at once: the growth becomes delusion, and the harm becomes something I imagined.

It didn't help that, in the run-up to the hospitalisation, most of what I actually said passed through something closer to a game of telephone, filtered through my ex-wife, her family, and my own, until sentences I never spoke came back to me as things I'd apparently said. No amount of explanation or context moved anyone off what they'd already decided.

They have their own prophets or demi-gods that they've turned into idols and elevated. I hold up a mirror to that elevation simply by speaking of these figures in ways that bump up against the mythology built around them. Just as others should be careful about their own unexamined idols, I need to watch for my own too.

I don't think the real difference between me and the people who've decided I'm forcing this is the amount of time and spirit I've put into it, though that's how it first looks. I think it's hierarchical. Time spent gets quietly read as a claim to rank; more devotion is assumed to mean more advanced, more special, further along than whoever's watching. For someone already carrying their own shame or sense of inadequacy, that reading isn't neutral information. It's a threat. The same mechanism this whole section has

already named, feedback that doesn't reflect back the self someone needs to keep believing in, lands as an attack rather than a fact. Grandiosity, from where they're standing, is the label that makes the threat make sense.

I know people who've devoted just as much time and spirit to this, or more, without this friction, and I don't think the difference is that they're calmer or more disciplined about it. I think it's that they were never running from the hierarchical comparison in the first place. Someone else's devotion to their own path didn't register as a claim about their own standing, so there was nothing to defend against. We're all somewhere on the same spectrum. The friction only shows up where someone's already measuring their place on it against someone else's.

That said, I do reflect on whether I am or am not a prophet. Setting my own beliefs about the word aside for the moment, from the outside it is difficult for me not to see the parallels, without even weighing character, only the events I lived through. I also understand that, without knowing me, my desires, my thoughts, or the emotions running through the process, it can look like I'm claiming the role and then acting out whatever people assume that role requires.

In some ways, that is a little true, though I think I was doing what many earnest seekers do inside their own tradition: reflecting on the lessons and stories of the prophets to see how they might apply to, or shed light on, our own circumstances.

Racing thoughts

This is not something I try to rein in simply because it is racing, except when it will affect what is immediately in front of me. My awakening was like letting off the brakes and allowing thoughts to resolve themselves. The brain is a muscle: the more we exercise it, the quicker our response can become, and the easier it can be to recognise what needs attention in a crisis, and to take the good and bad in a way that builds up our Spirit.

This is not an argument that the thoughts are correct, or that every connection they make is meaningful. It is an exercise in learning how to remain inside the movement of thought, to observe where it circles and where it gathers force, and eventually to begin nudging it. The circling itself

can become information. With practice, one learns to guide the movement rather than be carried by it, and eventually to control it more deliberately.

It is important to notice whether the racing is moving toward something useful or merely circling itself. It does not need to arrive at an obvious conclusion, but it does need, eventually, to become more directed. It is also important to find a strong basis for equilibrium, and to become well practised and disciplined in returning to it as quickly as possible before venturing out again in a more controlled and thoughtful way.

Cannabis-Induced Psychosis

Psychotic symptoms emerging during or shortly after cannabis use, attributed to it rather than to an independent psychotic disorder.

Timeline relative to use

This was something insisted upon by others, but never diagnosed. I do not accept cannabis as an explanation for the origin of my religious study, my attempts to relate Eastern philosophical ideas to Western ones, or the spiritual framework that developed through that work. Cannabis did not hijack my religion.

THC is psychoactive. If one's baseline stress is high, when there is a great deal of gaslighting or some other unnoticed or unresolved toxicity surrounding someone, smoking cannabis can make things worse. It can lead one to give extra weight and energy to negative thoughts and energies, and one can begin losing the ability to value thoughts appropriately.

I am a cannabis user. There were periods in the distant past when it was an addiction, but that has not been the case in almost two decades. I have noticed that when my stress is high, cannabis is not enjoyable; it can compound things and make them worse. That is a practical observation about its effect on me, not an admission that it caused my spiritual experience or the understandings I drew from it.

My admitting that I use cannabis on occasion, and attempting to explain how I see it to those who insisted I had cannabis-induced psychosis, led them to see only excuses, minimisation, or an attempt to ignore whatever they were fearing. Their personal feelings biased the interpretation, and at times even

which words they chose to hear. It was the same reordering of my words I described above, and my attempts to correct it only led them to conclude I was lying or confused by my psychosis.

The convenience of this label

This is what I see as a danger with psychology: the compulsion to slap on a label, medicate, and believe that doing so is all part of the right thing. I am not saying this is wrong in every circumstance. However, it is difficult when people keep insisting you need help with something that doesn't exist.

My refusal to accept their diagnosis was only another proof of their diagnosis.

Delusional Disorder

A fixed, false belief maintained despite contrary evidence, without other major psychotic symptoms.

(My understanding of this is a prolonged period of around a month involving some combination of grandiose or persecutory thoughts despite evidence.)

The specific belief in question

This one I have always had issues with. The grandiose thoughts were already covered in the bipolar section. I suppose I will hold out that I value my own experience, and the things I have learned from it, over other people's readings of it. To anyone compelled or biased toward diagnosing, that gives every disputed fact weight.

Resistance to disconfirming evidence

When someone is going through difficulty and has had all their relationships undermined through narcissistic and spiritual abuse, simply stating what is happening without what others consider proper evidence can be viewed as evidence of persecutory thoughts: delusion.

I have had periods lasting a few days when I feared certain people would do things to me that would continue to have a large impact on my life situation: fears that they would do things they had already done to me. I could often resolve these fears, understand the situation through the lens of narcissism, something that exists to a degree in everyone, humanise those people, and

move on. If one is forced to endure these circumstances for whatever reason (mine being simply to spend some moments with my kids), then I may go through another brief period.

If these things compound, if one is subject on a regular basis to accusations through lawyers, courts, and gossip, along with the loss of home, resources, and family relationships then this could potentially extend to a period leading to a diagnosis of delusional disorder.

What I have difficulty accepting is that this diagnosis treats my account of other people's behaviour as itself a symptom. Fears and paranoia were directed by other people. I have no history of violence or abuse. I am a fairly thoughtful, "nice" guy. Just ask my mother.

To me, the behaviour of those who have insisted for going on six and a half years that I am dangerous in a way that justifies the treatment I have received, and continue to receive, looks like the very thing they diagnosed in me.

When people are backed into a corner by their own contradictions, fear, or shame, they often project outward. In the narcissistic loops I was caught in, people attributed to me the very patterns I was defending myself against: persecution, control, fixation, and an inability to accept correction. I was told that my attempts to describe what was happening were themselves proof that I was delusional. From my perspective, the diagnosis became a way of reversing the direction of scrutiny. Everyone else in the loop could remain outside examination, while my response to it became evidence against me.

Everyone suffers from some sort of delusion. Often it is innocuous and inconsequential; sometimes it isn't. Something that was difficult for me, but that I can see more clearly now, is this: all I can account for and control is myself.

Being open to being wrong, not jumping to conclusions, and not being haphazard with judgements means that I will learn to spot them more easily. The more I am able to spot and account for, the easier it will continue to become. The less delusion, the less bias, the less our egos control us. Turn from divisiveness into synthesis.

I know that the people with whom I have had difficulty are human, just like everyone else. I can focus on the consequences this had for me, or I can

know that they are growing, learning to be better to others, and becoming more accountable in other parts of their lives. I can't be the one to cure them of what has hurt me. I can only show them whatever grace I can and hope that they continue to grow into the best versions of themselves.

Even though it felt like they were dragging me into their hells, they are on their way out of theirs, as I am, as everyone is: a few hard-fought steps at a time. A few slips and stumbles here and there may look like regression in the moment, but they are simply part of our struggle to climb out.

Schizoid Personality Disorder

A pervasive pattern of detachment from social relationships and limited emotional expression, typically long-standing.

Social withdrawal

This is something that I believe is diagnosed in the teenage years or in young adulthood. From the start, this never sat right with me; I was far from this as a teenager and young adult.

What I was experiencing was the loss of community and friends, and most of my family, all in quick succession. I was doing a lot of negative processing and didn't have the desire, ability, or headspace to keep up with its pace. I know that being around someone who is going through a lot is difficult. I also understood how easy it is to agree with alternative narratives being repeated by others, and for that to compound things.

So what was the wise thing to do? To lay low and keep to myself, journal, and try to endure the process long enough to gain some safe distance in order to heal, something that was impossible while I was in the middle of the long, drawn-out process I went through.

Once out from under it, I am back to my old self in many ways. I have friendships and relationships again. Yet to some I have a personality disorder? I suppose my delusional disorder is leading me to refuse another diagnosis.

Restricted emotional expression

Although I am sure this can become a pathology, without going deeply into that, I think it can also be indicative of wisdom and mental health. I have done a lot of work learning from and about my emotions. I feel them deeply.

I know that if I let too much of the pain of something through, the person listening will likely inadvertently feel it. There is a risk that they will process it as fear or as evidence of an inability to control myself. That is to say, one should still have some unrestricted spaces; it was much harder for me without them.

Don't bury or refuse to feel your emotions. Only try to understand when and where it is safe to do so.

Everything above was suggested to me by someone else, at some point, by name. What follows wasn't. These are patterns I recognised well enough in my own experience, or watched closely enough in someone else's, to believe that under a different set of circumstances, in childhood or as an adult, they might have taken hold in me too. I include them for the same reason as everything above: not as diagnosis, but as an honest account of how close some of these were, or might have been, and why they didn't.

Schizophrenia: someone I met in hospital

When I was in hospital, I met someone with schizophrenia. In listening to his story, I recognised a family caught in some of the same patterns as mine and others. It was sometimes difficult not to jump to a wrong conclusion about some of the narcissism I observed. I did sense it was learned behaviour, not indicative of inherent narcissism, but what struck me was the power his family had over him and his situation: meeting with doctors without his presence, being gaslit on a regular basis, and being completely dismissed and neglected at the whim of his family.

Although the severity of his condition was high enough to make it difficult for him to function, I couldn't help but recognise that, apart from those dynamics, he might be perfectly healthy. With my own new sense of spirituality, and with the way my own family was reacting to it, I saw a possible path for me.

Over the next few years, it did feel at times as though I was being nudged towards mental illness. I wasn't hearing voices. However, I could see how ego could take an experience like this and lead someone to claim that G-D speaks to them. I am more or less suggesting this. I am just careful to frame it as something that everyone does, or can experience, in the way I have.

Really, the biggest thing that pushed me along the path was the gaslighting. It often originates from people causing or contributing, knowingly or unknowingly, to a problem. I can't say for certain that this person would have had the same illness if his environment had been different. There is certainly my own bias at work here. Although I have a similar enough experience to empathise and perhaps give some context, there is also a risk that my own experience colours the full picture based on me rather than him.

I think there are heritable traits, some related to illness. I think this is often confused with, and given undue weight when, one cannot see the behavioural similarities. Healthy habits are something we need to work on, but we inherit tools from teachers and parents. Some get more than others, but there is too much risk of confusing what may have far less to do with a genetic condition than with the environmental factors that are also shared.

That is not to say genetics have no role. It is simply that genetics can become an excuse not to learn the actual root of something and gain some control over it. This is true of both our mental and physical health. Healthy eating and exercise are good for our mental health, and good mental health can be an affirming enough place from which to develop and maintain those habits in the way that feels right and organic to the individual, without societal or personal guilt and shame taking away from focusing on the wins and growing from them.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Something the man I met in hospital had was hypervigilance to the point of making obscure connections to justify and construct a narrative for himself and to justify the emotion.

Hypervigilance is, I think, the biggest indicator of PTSD. I won't claim that he had it, or that I do, though I think trauma is the right word for what both of us were going through. Whether mine still counts as "post" is its own question.

Some of what caused it hasn't fully stopped; it has simply dropped to a much lower intensity, which makes "post" feel like the wrong prefix even now.

I still get triggers and occasional flashbacks, but they don't rise to a level that affects my ability to work or the relationships I have now. That is entirely different from what it was like while I was in the middle of it; there is no real comparison.

My vigilance manifested in a situation where reality itself was consistently being twisted and distorted to someone else's narrative, one over which I felt I had little or no control. When I was in the middle of it, the trauma was triggered and compounded on a regular basis. Now it is far less frequent and has far less consequence, though it is not gone entirely.

It didn't matter how many times I responded calmly or tried to explain another way; what I said was brushed past, and the pattern repeated. Eventually whatever compassion or patience I had would get depleted to the point where I would respond. Didn't matter how much was in the tank, eventually it runs out.

I already stated that it did feel as though mental illness was being imposed on me rather than being something inherent in me. I am still triggered by gaslighting, not to do anything other than try to call it out in some way, to explain that a conversation in which one person can't validate the other's experience without making it personal makes communication impossible. If that doesn't make it stop, I will remove myself.

When someone denies the truth and insists that my experience wasn't real but imagined, my difficulties with what I thought were things anyone would have difficulty with are twisted into some pathology. Being discounted and dehumanised floods me with cortisol. But I also see how it makes me more empathetic and conscientious about other people who, to varying degrees, are hurt by gaslighting and projection. I remind myself, not for their sake but for mine, that they too are hurt by these things.

I also think about how I should account for myself with others so I don't repeat the harm caused or channel it into others. If I begin to, I need to make sure that I am able to stop and work towards some healing.

I did feel as though it was impossible to heal from trauma while it was compounding. I don't know whether I was right to frame my experience the way I once did, and do now, as alongside a soldier's: expected to heal from PTSD while still under fire.

Whether it would be harder to go through a war or to go through severe narcissistic abuse is ultimately subjective. Just as I am sensitive to other people attempting to quantify my trauma and place it in a hierarchy, I want to be sensitive about doing this to other people. Pain is pain, trauma is trauma, and physiologically it operates the same among the population. The specifics of the cause lead to the nuanced specifics of the cure, but the impact, the stress, and the triggers are all felt much the same.

Paranoid Personality Disorder

I don't think this applies to me. However, there are overlaps with what was suggested to me, and I do believe that this disorder can grow from, or may even be a diagnosis of, victim mentality consuming someone, something I have been trying not to allow in myself.

My frustration is when people responded to my circumstances as though I were a person playing the victim, when this is how I saw my accusers: as people playing the victim toward me. It would at times make me feel as though I were living in a bizarro world when this kept repeating. It also felt like gaslighting, as people would inadvertently compound the trauma simply by not fully understanding the situation or how trauma works.

I can understand the impulse to paint them with the same brush as the people who were actually bringing the harm. The difference, as I've come to see it, is whether the harm being named is specific and ongoing, or whether ordinary difficulty is being read as targeted.

I have heard people complain as though they're victimised by things most people simply deal with. Paranoia is not exactly the same as seeing oneself as the perpetual victim, but both can be rooted in an over- or under-importance that the ego places on the self, as if there were some grand conspiracy, or as if people were going out of their way to target someone through whatever control or manipulation they may be sensing, rightly or wrongly.

Avoidant Personality Disorder

I believe this is rooted in a fear of rejection. In many ways, I did feel rejected by a great deal. It didn't develop into a disorder because I always saw it as related to other people's bias.

Apart from the story and my immediate circumstances, I didn't feel rejected. I stopped seeking validation partly to shield myself from feelings of rejection, but also to inoculate myself from the general trend of relationships being undermined the more I shared about what was going on with me.

If there was a chance of maintaining some of these relationships in the long term, it meant re-engaging with them at a point in the future that wasn't tainted by the compounding situation and trauma I was going through. It took years for me to lose everything, but when you have nothing left, there is no more mechanism of control from those who, for whatever reason, view you as a threat.

That doesn't mean I had this insight in the thick of it. It hurt like hell and was confusing to go through. It took years to play out to completion, and my relationship with my kids was the hardest thing to lose, piece by painful piece.

Here is the thing I keep circling back to, and it isn't really about any one diagnosis. You can pass a test nine times out of ten, but if the test is only built to track deviation, designed only to flag the wrong answers, then of course all anyone will ever see in the record is the tenth time. The nine don't count toward anything; they were never being measured. The ones that do are compounded into a pathology that the method itself manufactures. Not fabricated exactly, but built to find what it is looking for and nothing else.

I don't say this to argue that any specific label was wrong. I say it because I think it is true of how many of them can work, mine included, and probably true of most of us who have ever been measured by someone looking only for what we got wrong.

Underneath it, what I actually remember feeling wasn't delusion or grandiosity by any name I would choose for myself. It was closer to being certain of very little except that something real was happening to me, and

being unable to find anyone willing to sit inside that uncertainty with me instead of needing to name it first.

I want to be clear: there is nothing special about me when it comes to spirituality, just as there is nothing special about the difficulties I went through either. Plenty of people have endured the same and worse, just as plenty of people have transited the planes I claim to have transited.

To be honest, I don't think I could have survived it without externalising the reasoning for going through with it. What I want more than anything is peace. What I want is for us to grow into adulthood. It is as simple as being better to one another, but that is easier said than done.

This leads, at some point, to a question about how we purge what is no longer serving us. What motivates me to finish the journey is finding ways to help, even if it is at such a small scale that it passes with little recognition. This was my focus. I always knew that, at the end of it, things would be better for me regardless of what happened with the manuscript. I get to keep all the lessons and still get to live out my best self.

Only now that I'm sure I'm not attached to how the book is received can I see that, for me, the journey is already as complete as a manuscript can take it.

Do these manuscripts present as proof of healing, or as justification for diagnoses? Perhaps neither; perhaps some of both. I'll leave that with you.

I know what I know.

V

Catharsis

I had quite a few more rebukes in previous versions of 88. These were the parts I struggled with most, and I think the reason was that they were more for me to resolve within myself than a place to virtue-signal or pronounce judgement. I've cut most of them from what follows here too, not because the underlying critiques were wrong, but because naming problem after

problem by name mistakes the outgrowth for the root. Capitalism is the clearest example: I once felt it was rotten to its core; I'd now say it's sick, but not the sickness itself. Almost every complaint I've ever had about the world, about a group, a system, a movement, turns out on closer inspection to be a complaint about something human that shows up everywhere, wearing whatever costume a given culture or moment hands it.

This is, I think, the one place in 999 where I'll let myself equivocate on purpose rather than try to write around it. Everywhere else I've tried to say what I mean and let it stand. Here, the caution is the point. I hold to something close to Jesus' own teaching: that hatred and murder aren't different in kind, only in degree, that calling one a small sin and the other unforgivable is a comfortable lie we tell ourselves. If that's true, then writing carelessly about what's broken in people isn't a minor risk. It's playing with something closer to the real thing than most people want to admit, which is exactly why I keep checking myself against it.

My own opinions will cloud the end result no matter what I do, and I felt that tension for a long time, wanting to remove myself from the text entirely. I've cut a great deal, but I've come to understand I need to stay in it in some way. It's taken years of work on myself to manage this; I always felt that if I hadn't done the work, it would show in the writing. Yet here I am giving myself a space to let some of my spirit back in. Right or wrong... I think it's both.

What I keep coming back to is this: the rebukes I could write for any group are almost entirely interchangeable with the rebukes I could write for any other. As far as I can tell, there's roughly the same proportion of difficult people in any group I've ever belonged to or studied. The specific manifestation changes with the culture, the language, the history it's dressed in, but the underlying human problem doesn't. Greed looks different funneled through a caste system than it does funneled through a stock market, but it's the same appetite finding whatever channel is available to it. Tribalism looks different organised around nation than around religion or party, but it's the same instinct for in-group loyalty and out-group suspicion finding whatever line is closest at hand to draw.

What I notice most often is a kind of misdirection that happens almost automatically: a problem that's structural, that would exist regardless of the individuals at the top of it, gets recoded as a problem of identity, of which group is causing it to which other group. People who benefit from an arrangement have every reason to prefer that story, since a structural critique threatens the arrangement itself, while a tribal one only threatens the other tribe. So blame gets exported sideways, onto whichever group is expedient, rather than upward, onto whatever's actually producing the harm. This isn't unique to any one culture, era, or ideology. I've watched people do it while defending systems I'd consider broken, and while attacking the same ones. The direction of the politics doesn't change the shape of the move.

This is something humans have engaged in for millennia. I don't think it's set to change overnight, however just like I see the individual struggle in wrestling with one's ego, I see that extrapolated onto the external constructs the ego was taught to rely upon. Societal transformation can't be sustained without individual transformations underneath it.

The thing is, I don't think this is too onerous for most people to contemplate, understand and practise. It's a very small group of people who want the wars that impact all of us, when most of us just want peace. In principle it could be as simple as most of us saying enough, and declaring peace. In practice, peace also needs boundaries and protection, and it won't come overnight; but the refusal has to start somewhere. If there are no soldiers or ammunition, then the ones who desire so can club each other into oblivion, without the rest of us providing the means. So many people prefer peace. The people who seem to relish the opposite are worthy of our pity as much as our hope that they find healing from whatever pain is moving through them.

VI

On Prophets and Kings

What follows isn't a claim that I am any of these figures, or that scripture was written with me specifically in mind. It's a demonstration of a way of reading, examining a life closely enough to find where it teaches you something about your own, the same practice Second describes: inhabiting a pattern long enough to learn from it, then setting it back down. Bhakti traditions do this too: devotees who see themselves as Radha or Hanuman to feel what they felt.

I've chosen two figures, Samson and Jonah to work through here, but the method isn't limited to two, and some of it isn't even new work, it was already written before I went looking for it.

Moses is already threaded through 88 itself: the sea that divides and closes, the original broken tablets before they were rewritten, years in the wilderness before anything was asked of him, a burning bush that names itself by refusing to be named, privilege he was born into and chose to walk away from. I didn't set out to build those parallels; I noticed, writing, that they were already there.

Joseph belongs in that same category. Betrayed by his own family, specifically over favor and difference, sold by the people closest to him rather than by strangers. Falsely accused in someone else's household, unable to defend himself in the room where the accusation was made, a specific circumstance, not just a thematic echo, that I've lived a version of myself. He doesn't rise through vindication in a moment, he rises slowly, inside the confinement itself, long before anyone outside notices. And at the end, forgiveness offered to people still too afraid to fully believe it's real. What was evil became something else. I want that to be my story too. I'm not sure yet that it is.

Adam is further back than any of the others, the original exile, the first threshold crossed without return. Outside scripture proper, the old accounts of his and Eve's penance have them standing in rivers after the expulsion, Adam in the Jordan, Eve in the Tigris. I didn't build the Yarden section in 88, or the line about going to the waters, with that story consciously in mind. I found it there anyway once I went looking. Those same accounts have Seth returning toward paradise seeking healing for his dying father, and receiving only a partial mercy for his trouble. Seth carries multiple meanings

already in these books hinted at in the Glossary, the ordinary son and the redeemer-archetype, and I think I understand now why the same name had to hold both.

Abraham's binding of Isaac asks him to give up what's most precious to him, not knowing whether he'll get it back. I know something of that structure, though what was asked of me wasn't a knife, our relationship was the thing sacrificed. And it wasn't only mine to lose; my children lost it too, in ways I can't speak for. I don't know yet if there's a ram in the thicket waiting for me the way there was for him. I'm still standing on the mountain.

Isaiah is different from the rest of these in one specific way worth naming. Nearly everyone else in this reading responds to being called with some form of reluctance, delay, or doubt: Moses asking who he is to go, Jonah running the other direction entirely, Abraham waiting and doubting and taking matters into his own hands more than once. Isaiah doesn't. When the voice asks who will go, he answers before anyone singles him out: here am I, send me. He volunteers.

I recognise something of that in myself, though I didn't understand what I was volunteering for at the time. The first time after awakening that I read the warning at the end of Revelation, the one about not adding to or taking away from the words of the prophecy, it didn't read to me as a punishment or threat. It read as part of the equation, a term already accounted for, something I'd agreed to before I understood the cost of agreeing. I didn't know then how difficult things would become. I don't think anyone could know that in advance and still say yes. But I've never been able to convince myself that I was only pulled into this, or driven to it by circumstance, the way so much of the rest of this section describes. Somewhere underneath the reluctance I've also felt, and there was plenty of it, I think I chose it. Isaiah is the only figure here who chose first and was frightened after, rather than the other way around, and that order matters, to me at least, more than it might seem.

Job is elsewhere in this book, in Satan, where I note how my reading of him has changed, but he belongs in this company too, if only briefly. Anyone who has suffered without a clean explanation for why, and kept arguing with what they believed rather than abandoning it, has something of Job in them. That

kinship doesn't need its own chapter to be real. It's enough to say it here: he's one of the ones I recognise myself in, even if I already said what I had to say about him.

Elijah, David, and Krishna are all sitting inside a single passage in *Adrift*, a chapter of 88, without my having flagged it as such at the time: "the Lord said to my Lord," David's line applied to Krishna and Arjuna. A chariot and a teaching on attachment and duty that belongs to Krishna and Arjuna more than to anyone else; and "false prophets burning in holy fire," Elijah alone at Carmel, no allies, going against every prevailing belief around him. I didn't sit down to braid these traditions into four lines. I only noticed afterward that I had.

Arjuna doesn't hesitate because he doubts the cause. He hesitates because the people arrayed against him are his own family, his teachers, people he loves, and fighting them, even for a just cause, feels like it will cost him more than losing would. I know that particular paralysis, responding at all meant having to act against people I love, in courts, on paper, in front of people whose job was to decide who deserved what, knowing that winning would still mean loss on every side that mattered. Krishna's answer isn't to tell him not to feel this. It's to tell him to act anyway, fully, without attachment to how it turns out, because withholding the action doesn't withhold the grief, it just adds paralysis on top of it. I don't know that I've mastered *nishkama karma* the way Arjuna is asked to. I know I recognised the battlefield before I recognised the teaching.

Sita is the figure from outside my own tradition I return to even more than Arjuna. She isn't tested once. She's tested, vindicated, and then made to prove it again anyway. The *agni pariksha*, walking through fire to demonstrate her purity after Ravana's captivity, should've settled the question. It doesn't. Rama, the very person the trial was supposed to satisfy, later exiles her a second time over the doubts of people who weren't even present for the first proof. I know something of being cleared once and discovering that clearance doesn't hold, that vindication in one room doesn't travel to the next, that the people who most needed convincing were never going to be moved by evidence, because the doubt was never really about the evidence. What stays with me about Sita isn't the fire. It's the second

exile, happening to someone who had already done everything asked of her to be believed.

Hanuman is the third of these, and maybe the widest door. What struck me first wasn't his strength but that he'd forgotten he had it, a curse from childhood that had to be lifted by someone else, reminding him of who he was before he could use it. I recognise that shape from the inside: power that was always there, sitting unused until another person, or circumstance, or crisis, names it back to you. But what stayed with me longer than his own strength is what his devotion did to everyone around him. The vanara army wasn't capable of what it became capable of because Rama was powerful. It became capable because of what Hanuman's devotion unlocked in an entire tribe, for a cause that wasn't theirs by blood. Devotion, in that story, isn't a private transaction between one servant and one lord. It's contagious. It moves sideways into people who were never the ones being tested.

And then the bridge itself, which I've come back to more than almost any other image in the epic. Hanuman crosses to Lanka alone, in a single leap. But the bridge that follows, built by Nala and Nila and the whole vanara army, carries everyone, back and forth, repeatedly, in both directions. That's the shape I want for these manuscripts more than any other image I could reach for: not something that pulls a reader from wherever they stand toward one fixed destination, but something that lets the traffic run both ways, lets someone carry what's here back into their own tradition, and carry what's already theirs back through here, until neither side is quite a foreign country to the other anymore.

M'Bona is the archetype I first recognised as close to Jesus outside my own tradition, and the one that reached me earliest and most physically. I lived for a time in Malawi, between the Shire River and a mountain shaped like a star, near a single Chilema tree that has become its own small forest by a mountain with a stream running from its summit, disappearing into sand at the base. M'Bona was killed by his own kin for being different from them, and tradition holds that his head was buried at Khulubvi, in a grove where his shrine still stands. It, and the shrines connected to it across the lower Shire, are where people still go to ask for rain and renewal. An unjust death at the hands of family, and afterward, what remained of him kept sacred, isn't a distant structure to me. It's close enough to the shape of Golgotha

that I don't think I can dismiss the resemblance, whatever either tradition would say about the other.

What I took from him wasn't doctrine. It was a specific, physical sense of being a rainmaker, someone whose descent, whose darkness, is what the rain actually comes from rather than what it washes away. I wrote once that with the darkness comes the rain, and I didn't fully understand what I meant until later, when it became something closer to a discipline: I possess darkness so it cannot possess me. Not denying it, not being ruled by it, holding it the way a shrine holds what's left of someone, the way Shiva holds the poison in his throat, neither swallowing it nor spitting it out, after the worst has already happened to them. Finding what's held that way can still be a source of life for the people around it.

Princess Bari is a name I've carried since it was a name in a list, in the lake-of-fire scene in 88, without ever giving her the room she deserves. She was born the seventh daughter in a kingdom that wanted a son, and abandoned for it, set adrift by the same parents who were supposed to protect her. When they later fall ill with nothing else able to save them, she's the one who makes the descent into the underworld to retrieve the water of life, the daughter they discarded becoming the only one capable of saving them. She succeeds, and becomes the first mudang, the one others turn to ever since, precisely because of what the descent cost her.

I lived my formative years, eleven to eighteen, in Korea, and I don't think it's incidental that this is the story that stayed with me longest out of everything I encountered there. I know something of being cast off by people who were supposed to protect me instead, and of the particular ache of the ones who reject you being the same ones whose survival you find yourself still bound to, whether you want to be or not. I don't know that I've completed my own descent yet, or retrieved whatever the water of life turns out to be for me. But I recognise the shape of her story too clearly for me to dismiss why it stayed with me.

I also want to be honest about something: very little of what follows is original insight arrived at alone. Much of it's built from sermons I've heard, commentary I've read, conversations with people more versed in these texts than I am, synthesized and applied to my own experience rather than

invented from it. Where I've landed on a reading that departs from the most common telling, I've usually found, afterward, that I wasn't the first person to see it that way. With Samson specifically, a reading I arrived at independently turned out to be something someone recently wrote about. I take that as confirmation of the method, not evidence or validation of any special insight on my part. Anyone willing to sit with a text long enough tends to find that others have been there before them.

Samson

I used to hear this story told one way, and I suspect you did too. A strong man, gifted by G-D, undone by his own weakness for women. Three times Delilah asks him the secret of his strength, three times he lies to her, three times she springs the trap anyway and it fails, because he lied. And then, somehow, after three demonstrated betrayals, he tells her the truth. Every version of this story I grew up hearing landed on the same word for that moment: foolish. He should've known. He should've left. He should've seen it coming, because he had already seen it, three times over, and told her anyway.

I don't think that's what's happening in the text, and I don't think I'm the only one who's stopped believing it.

Start further back than Delilah. Samson doesn't choose his calling. He's a Nazirite before he's born, set apart by a vow he never took, strength given to him rather than earned by him. From the very beginning, this is a story about a gift a man doesn't control, not an achievement he can take credit for. That matters, because everything that follows, the repeated pull toward women who will cost him everything happens to a man who has never once been asked what he wants. He was chosen before he had a self to consent with.

So when he loves, unwisely, repeatedly, the same way, I don't think the text is asking us to shake our heads at him. I think it's showing us a man whose one experience of choosing anything for himself is in exactly the place he keeps getting hurt. Every other part of his life was decided before he arrived. Love is the one place that's actually his, and it keeps costing him everything, and he goes back anyway.

Delilah asks him three times. Three times he gives her something false, close enough to sound plausible, far enough to keep himself safe. That's not devotion, that's the ordinary human instinct toward self-protection, and if the story stopped there, it would just be a story about a man who eventually learned to guard himself. But it doesn't stop there. The fourth time, with every reason in the world to keep lying, having watched the exact same betrayal play out three times already, he tells her the truth.

I don't think that's foolishness. I think that's a man who has run out of the willingness to protect himself from someone he loves, even though loving her has cost him everything so far, even though it's about to cost him more. There's a kind of exhaustion that isn't weakness, it's the exhaustion of a person who would rather be known and lost than safe and alone. I've come to believe that's not stupidity. It's the particular blindness that only comes from loving someone all the way down, past the point where the evidence should've stopped you, because some part of you has decided that being fully seen by them matters more than being protected from them.

There's a detail in the older rabbinic commentary worth sitting with here: the Talmud (Sotah 9b) holds that Delilah finally believed him, on the fourth telling, because he spoke G-D's name, and a righteous man wouldn't do that in vain. If that's right, then it wasn't only his love that betrayed him. It was his integrity. He couldn't lie convincingly a fourth time because the lie itself would have violated something more central to him than his own safety. The very thing that made him who he was, his honesty before G-D, is what she used against him. That is not a flaw in his character. That is also his character, turned into a weapon by someone willing to use it.

What happens next is genuinely terrible, and I don't want to soften it. He's captured, blinded, enslaved, paraded for the entertainment of the people he was raised to stand against. This is not a story that rewards him for staying, for loving, for telling the truth. There's no moment where the text turns around and says he was right all along and here is his reward. If you're looking for a story where faithfulness is repaid in kind, this isn't it, and I think that's exactly why it matters.

Because at the very end, blind, humiliated, standing between two pillars with his hands on the stone, something in him is restored, not his sight, not his

freedom, not his former strength in any triumphant sense, but his purpose. He asks, one last time, to be remembered. And he brings the whole house down, killing more in his death than in the whole of his life before it.

I don't read that as vindication. I read it as something harder and more honest than vindication: purpose recovered in the ruin, not before it. Some of us don't get the version of this story where we're proven right in time to enjoy it. Some of us only get the version where, at the very end, standing in the wreckage of everything the love cost us, we find that we're still capable of one true thing. That has to be enough, because for Samson, it was all there was. And I don't want to pass over what it cost others. The house came down on thousands; whatever purpose he recovered came with deaths I can't make beautiful or fully understand. Nor is any of this advice to stay. Nothing in this reading asks anyone to remain where they're being harmed; the balance point in Second holds here too: stay long enough to learn, not so long that it makes you sick.

If you've ever loved someone past the point where anyone watching thought you should, and paid for it, and been called foolish for it by people who never had to choose between being safe and being known, I don't think you were the fool in that story. I think you were Samson.

I too have experienced this kind of love. And I don't think the text asks you to be ashamed of that. I think it asks you to notice what was actually costing you: not weakness, but the specific, devastating cost of loving all the way down.

Jonah

Every other figure in this reading, Isaiah aside, responds to being called with some version of reluctance. Moses asks who he is that he should go. Elijah, once he's answered the call and won, collapses under a tree and asks to be allowed to die. Abraham doubts, waits, takes matters into his own hands more than once. Jonah doesn't hesitate either, but in the opposite direction. He doesn't delay, doesn't ask a single question. G-D tells him to go to Nineveh. Jonah gets up and runs the other way, buys a ticket on a ship headed as far from Nineveh as the map allowed him to go.

I think this is worth sitting with before anything else: Jonah isn't confused about the call. He understands it well enough. That's exactly the problem.

He's thrown into a storm that the sailors, pagan men who don't even worship his G-D, recognise as divine before he does. He tells them to throw him overboard, and they do, reluctantly, and the sea calms the instant he hits the water. He's swallowed by a great fish and spends three days and three nights in its belly, which is about as complete a descent as scripture offers anywhere, darkness, digestion, a kind of death that isn't quite death. And from inside that fish, he prays, not for rescue exactly, but something closer to acknowledgment, that he has been cast down and still remembers where mercy comes from. He's vomited back onto dry land, and G-D asks him again. This time he goes.

Here is where most tellings of this story stop, because here is where the plot resolves. Jonah preaches, one sentence, the shortest and least enthusiastic sermon in the whole of scripture, forty days and Nineveh will be overturned, and the entire city, from the king down to the animals, repents in sackcloth and ash. It is, by any measure, the most successful prophetic mission in the entire Hebrew Bible. One sentence, and an empire turns.

And Jonah is furious.

This is the part of the story that doesn't get preached nearly as often as the fish does, and I think it's the actual point of the whole book. Jonah isn't angry that he failed. He's angry that he succeeded, because succeeding meant G-D forgave people Jonah didn't think deserved forgiveness. He says it plainly, this is exactly why I ran in the first place, because I knew you were gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and I didn't want that grace extended to them. He goes and sits outside the city, hoping, even now, that G-D might still destroy it. G-D provides a plant to shade him, and he's glad of it, then sends a worm to kill the plant, and Jonah is angry enough to want to die over a shrub he did nothing to grow.

And G-D's response is the entire book, distilled into a single question: you cared about a plant you didn't plant and didn't tend, and I shouldn't care about a city of a hundred and twenty thousand people who don't yet know their right hand from their left?

The book ends there. No answer from Jonah. No resolution. Scripture rarely leaves a question hanging in the air like that, unanswered, on purpose.

I understand this man in a way I didn't expect to. I have wanted, at times, for people who hurt me to face consequences in proportion to what they did, and then felt something close to Jonah's fury when grace was extended anyway, by others, or by G-D, or by some worn-down, aching part of myself I couldn't fully silence, before I felt ready to grant it. Forgiveness that arrives on its own schedule, ahead of your own readiness for it, doesn't always feel like relief. Sometimes it feels like a second injury, mercy being handed to someone before you've finished needing them to suffer.

I don't think Jonah is condemned at the end of his book for feeling this. I think he's asked a question he's allowed to sit with, unanswered, for as long as it takes. That might be the most honest thing in the whole story: that being obedient and being at peace with the outcome of your obedience aren't the same thing, and scripture doesn't pretend they are. You can do exactly what you're asked, watch it succeed beyond anything you expected, and still be furious about it, still be sitting under a dead plant wanting to die, still be waiting for an answer that may not come in a form you can accept.

I don't know that I've resolved this in myself any better than Jonah resolves it in his own story. I've forgiven people, and meant it, and still felt the old anger surface when I watched grace extend further than I thought it should, to people who haven't yet done the work. That's Jonah's logic, the part of me still keeping score. I used to think that meant my forgiveness wasn't real. I don't think that anymore. I think it means I'm standing exactly where Jonah stood, under the same dying plant, being asked the same unanswerable question, and being loved through the asking of it rather than the answering.

I want to close with something I'd originally planned to say separately for each of them, but I think it matters more as one point than two.

I've come to read moments where scripture reaches for the supernatural as sometimes reaching for a way to say something true about the human condition that couldn't be said any other way, without necessarily making a claim about physics. I don't think that makes the supernatural reading wrong. I think it means there's room to hold both at once, true and not true, literal and symbolic, without needing to resolve which one scripture actually

intends. Sitting in that tension has taught me more than choosing a side ever did.

Take Jonah and the whale. Three days and three nights in the belly of a fish reads, to me, like three days of existential crisis, haunted by his own choice to run, unable to digest the full truth of what he'd been asked to do all at once. Some truths are too large to swallow whole. They have to sit in the dark for a while before a person can carry them back out into the light. He does follow through, in the end. He also never stops being bitter about it. Both of those are true, and scripture doesn't ask us to pick one.

Samson deserves the same reconsideration. I don't believe he was unintelligent. His strength, if it was physical, was very likely mental too, the same discipline, the same capacity, just aimed in a different direction. He could have torn apart an argument the same way he tore down a temple, undermined a claim instead of a building, shamed the people mocking him with words instead of stone. He chose the building. I don't think that was the only choice available to him, and I don't think the story asks us to believe it was. Both readings stay with me: purpose found in the ruin, and a ruin he didn't have to choose.

None of this is an argument that the literal reading is wrong, or that I need to replace anyone's faith with my own. I do believe G-D is real. For me, wanting the laws of nature suspended for my own or anyone else's benefit was ego; I can't speak for anyone else's reasons. I also believe in the power of G-D to shape things, people and events, this is tangible and real to me, as are confluences of people, ideas and numbers. I have never seen the laws of nature suspended, nor do I need to know G-D is in control. I sense it in currents of emotion, vibration and energies, and see patterns throughout creation.

VII

On Prophecy and Archetype

Prophetic language appears throughout this text because, in the moment of writing, it was the language that felt wide enough to hold the experience. Moving through crisis and awakening, I found myself drawn into patterns far older than I am, patterns that countless cultures have named in their own ways. The names I listed at the start rose not as identities to inhabit but as currents moving through me, reshaping everything I thought I was.

Prophecy, to me, has never worked the way people assume when they first encounter it, as a prediction, a forecast fixed at the moment of writing, waiting for one specific event to fulfil it. For many readers it does anticipate particular events, and I don't mean to rule that out. The function that matters most to me is different: I think prophecy diagnoses a pattern rather than predicting a date, and a pattern, unlike a date, doesn't expire. All Rivers already makes this case about eschatology in general, that the burning of Gehenna and the standing at Qiyamah describe an internal process rather than a scheduled cosmic event. I think the same is true of prophecy that names a coming figure or a coming age. It isn't circling a single moment in linear time so much as naming the conditions under which something recurs, conditions that keep reassembling themselves in different centuries, different bodies, different names, because the underlying human situation that calls for them hasn't actually changed.

That also means a prophecy doesn't have a single owner, or a single correct reading sealed at the moment of writing and waiting only to be decoded. I've come to think the truth in it has to be carried, the way I've already said oral tradition works: through an interpreter who takes responsibility for it in each telling, and who can be replaced if they aren't equal to it. A prophecy gets read again by whoever's holding it now, applied again to whatever conditions are actually in front of them, and it's that re-application, not a single fixed meaning cracked open once, that keeps the pattern alive instead of letting it calcify into something nobody actually has to live out. That's also where I think the real risk sits. An interpreter who treats the words as an unchanging blueprint rather than a pattern they're responsible for applying honestly is the same interpreter who mistakes the map for the territory, and starts serving the words instead of whatever the words were pointing at in the first place.

Every transformation touches others. If this work becomes part of someone else's awakening, then I am woven into their journey just as many people, teachings, and moments were woven into mine. Influence is not hierarchy; resonance is not authority. We rise through one another. The experience that shaped these pages was personal, but never private.

VIII

Who are We to Be?

I've talked myself into and out of writing this conclusion more than once, including in the writing of this very paragraph. What follows isn't a neat ending so much as the last two things I still needed to say, both about how I actually see myself inside all of this.

The whole premise here was to learn, teach, and demonstrate in the best way I could what helped and moved me, trying to get down to my core and write from the human side of me more than the me side. I think I've managed that, in some way, though there's always more I could change or tweak. I could honestly keep writing into this for a lifetime.

The same impulse that reduces someone else's single action to one simple motive is the impulse that would reduce me to one identity and nothing else. We shouldn't limit ourselves to seeing only the outgrowth and mistaking it for the root. There are many variables that may motivate a single action, and seeing it as part of one pattern in the moment ties it to whatever negative emotion produced it, which is part of why emotion is so powerful in imprinting a lesson, what yoga calls a samskara, writing a memory, changing something fundamental within us that leads to changed patterns of behaviour. The more we can feel and let our spirits guide and teach us, the greater we become.

It takes maybe a hundred little lessons to piece together and learn something that has eluded us or given us difficulty. When we see something wrong or flawed in someone else, it's the ego that motivates us to speak out of turn, to insist on something without understanding how to do it. We may

have only learned the lesson in a different order, not more or less of it. Our charge is to be one of a hundred points to one truth for another, a drop in the ocean. Without every drop, the ocean cannot be as it is. Not every correction is ego, either. The ones worth acting on usually come from someone who learned the lesson in a different order and is offering it rather than insisting on it.

It can be hard to detach one's ego from the outcome. I am not saying everyone does this, only that it's a very human motivation we need to learn from and overcome: needing to be the "teacher" of a truth instead of just adding some light to it, apart from us, with no attachment to individual outcome, understanding, or opinion of our own.

The second thing is about being read as a prophet, and what I've settled into believing about that, at least for now.

Years ago I sat in a church that had briefly been in the news, in part because it had its own self-proclaimed prophet. I remember almost saying to myself "another" instead of "a," and catching myself. I have been hesitant, for a long time, to say that word about myself. I still am. I am and am not. I don't want to be one, and at the same time, I do. It depends which moment you catch me in, and what you mean by the word. What I've come to believe is something closer to this: anyone can perform a prophetic function for a moment, by speaking something true that another person needs to hear. That doesn't make them a prophet as an identity. I've watched ordinary people, pastors, teachers, friends, family members, even sometimes strangers at the right time, become this. Some become more than others, and then stop. Then become it again later. It isn't a crown. It's closer to a state you pass through. The more you pass through, the more you're inhabited by it.

Not everyone who feels this stops there, and I think it's worth naming what happens when they don't. Someone goes through a version of what I went through, the pattern-matching, the sense of being addressed by something larger, and mistakes the pattern for a possession rather than a passage. Without the discipline Second describes, without the years of work that teach you to hold the pattern loosely, the natural next step is to claim it permanently instead of passing through it. That is one way a cultic structure

can begin. Not with a villain plotting to deceive people, but with someone who had a real experience, stopped there, and built an identity, then a following, then a structure, on top of a moment that was only ever meant to move through them.

That inhabiting is of the pattern itself, never of any one name within it. Staying too long inside a single instance of it doesn't corrupt the pattern so much as cost you everything else the pattern needs room for that doesn't serve you. Every moment spent only being the prophet is a moment not spent being teacher, friend, parent, or simply a person among others.

The danger isn't in recognising the pattern; it's in staying too long inside any one instance of it. Whether any of us carries one of the Names exclusively is impossible to know for certain, and I've come to think that's not a gap in the system, it's the point of it. Certainty is what turns a passage into a possession, and a possession into a following. The uncertainty is what keeps the pattern transferable instead of becoming a title one person keeps. The moment I claimed to know for certain, I'd have stopped being useful to anyone but myself, and started building exactly the kind of structure I just described. Union was never supposed to work this way, one person gathering it to themselves while everyone else stays outside, waiting to be let in. It multiplies, or it isn't Union at all. The only thing greater than being in it is more people finding their way into the same or a similar version of it, which is a different thing entirely from being led into someone else's.

The space I present in 88 as a construct within my mind was a boat for the crossing, not the final destination. Assembled in a desperate time as was the boat that I found in Revelation.

Years before I understood any of this as my own story, I was a patient myself as mentioned in 'Diagnosed?'. In the next room there was a woman who'd endured something terrible. I only heard her voice through the wall. She'd come out the other side able to see conceit in people clearly for the first time, and able, she said, to finally talk to what she called "our mother," her name for the Spirit. I agreed with her, quietly, to myself. I also found myself wanting to coach her, even then, on how she spoke about it out loud, who could hear that language safely and who couldn't. I didn't know yet that I was describing exactly the lesson I hadn't learned for myself with friends

and family. It played out over the next few years in my own life almost exactly as I'd worried acutely in hers. I think that recognition, watching my own future arrive first in someone else's voice through a hospital wall, is part of what motivated and motivates me. Her story is my story is so many people's stories.

I once wrote, in an earlier and rawer version of this thought, that I am just an echo. I meant it more plainly than it might sound. Not diminishment, an echo is still a real sound; it still carries the shape of what made it. But it isn't the source. If this section ends anywhere, I think it ends there: not "here is my proof," but "here is what it sounds like from inside an echo", and if you're hearing your own name in old words too, that isn't evidence you're special. It's evidence the pattern is doing exactly what it was meant to.