

God and Smart People

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The other day Jesse, my 14-year-old son, and I were talking in the car. Taking him somewhere in the car is always a good time, because there's no TV or Nintendo or phone call from a teen pal to interrupt the airwaves between us. And this bright, sweet, healthy lad and I got onto the subject of God. And he said, "all that stuff about God is bullshit," and he wondered how anybody could believe it.

Now Jesse is one very smart boy. He will do well in this world, by anyone's standards of success. He knows a lot of things for his age, and he's sensitive and wise beyond his years. So I was distressed. I happen to believe in God, and I am well-educated if not always terribly smart. So I wondered, have I failed as a parent and mentor?

Then I realized I thought the way he did when I was his age, and like many smart people he was so in control of his world he had no respect for bad luck, tragedy, of feelings about being adrift in the universe. Not as much respect, anyway, as people who have had to take the hard knocks in life. Well, I thought, Jesse simply hasn't lived enough yet. But then again, there are lots of people, smart and not so smart, who live a long time and never feel the stirrings of the soul, and that got me to thinking some more.

The problem with intelligence is not unlike being wealthy. If you have more than enough you close yourself off from some real opportunities that come your way if you are not so bright or poor. The most thoughtful and interesting characters in Dostoyevsky's novels are, on the surface, stupid or crazy.

Now money is more obviously a source of power than are brains. Most people wouldn't mind being rich. Still, there's a lot of folk wisdom and straight street savvy that also tell people: being rich may not be all it's cracked up to be. There are plenty of examples of spoiled, unhappy, boorish, over-drugged, over-boozed rich people around to confirm that conclusion in the average person's mind.

Being smart is something different, though. I don't know of anyone who wouldn't mind knowing a lot more than he or she does. Ask people: if all it took was to drink a bottle of something and they'd instantly know French perfectly, would they drink it? You bet they would. Why not? And, gee, if they just had an advanced degree in this or that, they could make more money or get a more interesting job or be a more interesting date, or whatever.

So few people see the downside of being gifted with a lot of intelligence. Sure, there's also the folk wisdom about people being "too smart for their own britches," and we all love to make fun of the techno-nerds who are whizzes at computers but don't know how to tie their own shoelaces. What we're really saying about those people, though, is that they're smart, but not really smart enough at most of the things ordinary people are smart at. We seldom really focus on the danger that intelligence can be a block to the development of the soul.

What I see that is wrong with many of the really intelligent people I know is a lack of receptivity to anything spiritual. The mysterious, mystical, soul-laden things of experience. Smart people too often use their gray matter to spin lovely philosophical constructs full of flawless logic, dressed in the elegance of mighty words. But these constructs are often unhappy, lonely and empty, like castles with no furniture.

They rightfully pride themselves on their uniqueness and independence of thought, but they think the road ends there, or they see no road other than the one they think they have built for themselves, all by themselves. And so, like the materially rich, many of the intellectually rich people wind up lonely, unfulfilled, spoiled, arrogant -- often talking articulately but endlessly about only themselves on expensive psychiatrist's couches.

Too bad so much of that intelligence cannot be turned back on itself, with a smidgeon of feeling attached: wonderment, awe, gratitude for the gift.

So let me try it, and see if you come along. Let's really examine how smart you really are, and what some very, very smart people have to say about the limitations of intelligence and the doors to a fuller, spiritual side of what resides right inside yourself, waiting to be exploited.

Why not begin with some hard evidence everybody can agree on, if you accept science as a way of effectively reading and manipulating reality (so far it works pretty well in our world: it delivers food in abundance, we can make bombs that blow up entire cities at a crack, we harness the power of the sun to make electricity, and so on and so on).

Let's start with physics, the most advanced of the sciences, and math, the language of physics. The human imagination precedes discovery. Theoretical physicists take what has been developed in labs and cyclotrons as hard fact (the empirical science) and they make up things that just might be true (theory). They use math to describe what the next discovery might be. The physics community then gets excited or bored with the theory. When enough physicists who work in labs and cyclotrons get excited they get a lot of money, mostly from governments, to see if the theory will produce results. And over and over again, they produce results to confirm the theory. We call the result progress.

That process alone is fascinating, and poses the most interesting (to me) philosophical question of all: Where do new ideas come from? How is it that we can imagine things that are not and may never be? Einstein once said, "Imagination is more important than intelligence" (to which a friend of mine remarked: "Easy enough for *him* to say"). Why do we get so excited when we get a "brainstorm"? We'll get back to that.

Anyway, what physicists have been discovering this century hasn't trickled down well to the population as a whole. Here are some of things they have found out, and it has blown their minds to smithereens, to the point where they have collectively started to do something in their minds like sucking their thumbs:

- Time and space are all part of one thing. An hour and a tree are both part of the same "thing." Physicists have discovered that at the subatomic and "macro" levels (i. e. the whole universe) -- in other words, in the realities that go on that are so

small as to be "below" our consciousness or so big as to be "beyond" our consciousness -- time can move backwards, for example. The positively charged electron called a positron does exactly that. Experiments have been done where two things leave one place at the same time but in other directions, and they come back at different times, even though the time on each of these things measures the same time *as to each other*. Try to figure that out and you get a headache: Missile A goes out into space for 2 years and Missile B goes out for two years into a different place, and as to each other it was 2 years, but measured from the earth one comes back sooner than the other. What's going on here? Nobody has the slightest idea, but they call it the theory of relativity and it made Einstein a very famous man (a guy who was, incidentally, not so smart in math when he took it at school. So much for schools.).

- Gravity. According to Newton, everything could be explained mechanically -- you touch that thing and it will move so far, and except for friction slowing it down it would just keep on moving at the speed it was touched and keep going forever. But gravity, the thing that caused the apple to fall on Newton's head and got him thinking (that's where *he* got his new ideas, from an apple!) nobody has ever been able to explain. How can the moon, not touching me anywhere, have a gravitational pull on me (which it does)? How can things millions of miles away, through the sheer fact of mass alone, have a pull on me? Physicists call this "action at a distance" and they go nuts theorizing about "gravitrons," extremely small particles or waves or whatnot that go through everything in the universe and cannot be measured. Nobody has ever seen a graviton and wouldn't know how to go about measuring one. It's all a lot of mumbo jumbo about a fundamental mystery. The important thing to ponder is this: what else is there besides gravity that we cannot see, comes from sources we can hardly see, and yet affects us? Are we so smart that we have detected gravity as the only such force at work on us "out there"?
- Black holes, parallel universes, antimatter. Those are all words to express the possible existence of whole universes full of an opposite, negative mirror image of what we call matter and energy. Black holes exist in space, emitting very powerful blasts of X-rays and gamma rays, suggesting some great source of energy coming from a high concentration of mass -- only they can't find *any* mass to attach to these things, so they are called black holes! You might as well call them zorborts or brumbangs. What the hell is going on? We haven't a clue.
- String theory, the Theory of Everything, multiple dimensions. Mainstream theoretical physicists (i.e. a large number of them, rather than the isolated crackpot) with the help of mathematicians have a good track record. A physicist named Niels Bohr was probably more responsible for the revolution in thinking in physics than was Einstein. Bohr discovered what has become to be known as quantum physics. Before Bohr, people thought of atoms as being miniature versions of our solar system. Electrons orbited a nucleus of protons and neutrons,

like the Earth and Venus traveling in fixed orbits around the sun. He discovered however, that, using the solar system model, electrons simply shifted from one orbit to another, according to changes in the atom's energy level (such as when atoms combine to make different molecules in a chemical reaction), *without traveling between the orbits, they simply disappeared at one orbit and showed up at another*. Somebody once said that is like believing a horse can walk through a brick wall without disturbing either the wall or the horse. Bohr called it a quantum theory because what we call an electron simply makes a quantum leap from one energy level to another when an atom changes in its energy state. It was considered outrageous at first, but again and again the theory explained things about how matter and energy work that before couldn't be explained. Until Einstein came along and said in effect matter and energy are really two sides of the same coin, $E=mc^2$. More mystery. Like gravity, something happens at the atomic level that's beyond our experience at the human level. If we could do quantum leaps we could dispense with airplanes. We could be in Seattle one minute, in Paris the next, with no jet lag. It would be a neat trick.

- Light. People have been studying light for centuries, trying to figure it all out. Physicists used to think light was like the speed limit in the universe. Nothing can go faster than the speed of light, 186,000 miles/second, or that thing itself becomes light. Now they have to think differently. For one thing, gravity is instantaneous, it has no speed, it simply is there. Parapsychologists, scientists who study unusual phenomena in certain kinds of apparently gifted people (things like ESP -- extrasensory perception, the ability to see things without using sight, or people who have precognitive experiences, the ability to have premonitions about something they later experience, a kind of "future mind" experience) are coming to believe that thought and interhuman attraction are as instantaneous and as powerful as gravity.

As for light, another phenomenon is worth noting here, which relates to two major principles in modern physics. Nobody knows for sure what light is. If you want to prove that light consists of particles or "photons" you can set up an experiment so that you can show light behaves like little bullets hitting a target. Voilà, light consists of particles! But wait a minute! Set up a different experiment, and you can prove that light is like waves in a pond hit by a pebble, radiating out like radio waves. So what is light, then, huh? Waves or particles? Answer: we don't know, because in the mere fact of making an observation we change the thing observed. There are lots of tedious examples to prove this point, which I'll spare you. If you want to know more about that then read books about a guy named Schrödinger. His point is that every time we set up the camera to have it click later so we can get in the picture with the rest of the family, we inevitably stand in front of the lens so the picture gets botched. That's not literally true, but you get the picture, or rather you're not supposed to get the picture, right?

Anyway, to flog this dead horse further, the other principle here that became famous this century was the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. It goes briefly like this: Whenever you

want to measure the location of an electron you'll have no problem, but when you do that you'll never know how fast that electron is going: its velocity. On the other hand, if you want to know how fast the electron is going -- no problem! But then, when you do that you'll never know where that electron is. So take your pick: velocity or location. Can't have both. It's the Big Mac or the Chicken Nuggets, pal, but not both. How does Heisenberg prove his point? Hell if I know. I never studied physics all that much, and who would want to, they work in such awful looking places full of low ceilings with flickering florescent lights and linoleum floors, with lots of chalk all over their clothes.

But the important thing to remember is that modern physics, the far outpost of science, where more and more mysterious phenomena are being found every day, the most gifted of this group are all coming to one major conclusion: we are barred from "knowing" what "is really going on," there may be as many as a dozen or more dimensions impinging upon us, one of which may certainly be what we call the future, another of which we call the past (all of which notions of time are probably faulty anyway), and who knows what the devil the other dimensions are. How do they suspect this? I don't know. But they are sure they are onto something, with a jargon and a very high level of intelligence to prop it all up. With such super-smart people talking this way, it ought to give the ordinarily smart people pause.

So let's pull back a minute from this frantic dash through the Mall of Physics where we can't do any real intellectual shopping, and come back to the Earth we live in every day. Let's just use some applied logic to what we all know from common every-day experience to ponder the very real prospect of what many call God, which, after all this blah blah, is where I want to go.

Before getting to anything as grandiose and screwed up as the various notions of God, the meaning of life, where do we come from, etc., let's just consider the fundamentals of mystery and magic.

Accept as a working hypothesis for now this idea: By coming to terms with the profound unknown you can derive a nugget of knowledge to guide your life more meaningfully, perhaps, than it is being guided now. I'll try to explain that. Keep an open mind till you're done reading this. Do we have a deal?

Think of the unknown first of all as not the unknowable. We have that experience every day. That's what sells newspapers; we didn't know what the President was going to do about the economy yesterday, then he gave a speech, and now we know (although with politicians we can never be sure). Sure, the unknown will undoubtedly also contain things we will never know; but even there we can possibly get shadows from what that Unknowable might be like, and with our imaginations to add to the stew we may reach a higher sense of ourselves as parts in a larger scheme of things.

Take knowledge, what we think we know. Take consciousness, which is an even bigger pool of the brain's activity. Philosophers and psychologists have done a lot of head scratching to figure out if what we know is really what is to be known, and how do we know we know something when we know it, and is it really our idea or someone else's,

do we have a Collective Consciousness that exists independent of us and so on. After reading all that stuff you need to buy the giant size Advil bottle.

That kind of "epistemology" (the philosophy of knowledge) is useless stuff. Certain things you know with a high degree of certainty (my phone number, what I had for breakfast this morning), other things less so. So what? The key question is: Are my abilities to think and imagine as a human being limited? Of course they are! Just looking at other people will tell you that. So and so can come up with clever poetry, and So and so can argue his way out of anything, and So and so is better at diagnosing people with aches and pains than any other doctor in town. Nobel and Pulitzer Prizes don't land at everybody's doorstep.

But we have to go much further. Think of the grasshopper. It functions well for what a grasshopper has to do. But think of the grasshopper bumping up against your shoe. Does it bring a grasshopper consciousness to what your shoe is to it? I don't see why not, it certainly must react to it as food or non-food, grasshopper sex or no grasshopper sex. Grasshoppers, after all, *do* things in response to their environment. Now think of this: Who is to say we don't ourselves also bump up against some kind of super-thing shoe all the time of some far superior species we are just too dumb to figure out? Who is to say, out of the hundreds of thousands of living forms, that we are at the top of the ladder? A more superior form of life, for example, would be free of the limitations and pains of the body. Maybe evolution has gone on beyond us in ways we are too limited to know. Look at the math of it: it is highly improbable, given plant and animal life in all its variety as we know it, that we just happen to be the latest and best model of consciousness in the universe. Sounds crazy? So is it crazy to think that electrons can jump from one place to another without "traveling" as we understand movement. So is it crazy to think of something affecting something else, like gravity, instantaneously, no matter how far away. We have to keep our minds open to all the wild possibilities.

And what if we do? We can *evolve*, that's what. We can truly become something more than what we have always thought we were as individual human beings, we can crawl out of our limited minds and bodies and become attached to a greater awareness. In other words, the rich fountain of emotions and imagination that lies dormant in our minds can expand wildly into new spaces so that we can transcend the petty crap that, left alone in a lesser aware state, makes life seem meaningless, boring, full of torment and injustice. That's a mouthful that needs some explaining.

First of all, we have been taught that evolution is a linear, biological process. We first look at unicellular globs in microscopes, and the biology teacher says: "That's a primitive life form, the sort which first came out of the primeval swamp millions of years ago when life first began." Then we are taught how something like monkeys led to better monkeys and man, and how man stooped and carried spears and rocks until now, where he wears ties and commutes to work and is the crown of creation. Forget that picture. Just look at who you are now and what you are capable of, and what the animal *homo sapiens* has

been capable of for the last three or four thousand years, the wells of mystery and magic he has been able to tap.

Those wells are art, music and religion. These are the shadows cast from the Shoe of the Unknown Things, gifts from somewhere else, which give inspiration to the individual and community with others. Look at the evidence: every culture everywhere and at all times has had art, music and religion, each feeding the other. None of it is necessary for sheer biological survival, so Darwin can pack his bags and leave this particular scene. Art, music and religion have these things in common: patterns of expression (nothing is truly random); they speak to and are driven by feeling and not thought ("smart" here means nothing, all on its own); they are communal, where the creator, the inspired person, relates to a receptive audience; and they seek permanence in time, to be passed on to yet unborn generations. They carry the myths of a people, the value systems for communal survival (OK, Darwin, come on back in), and they uplift. They acknowledge the source of inspiration (from the Latin *inspirare*, "to breath in") as coming from someplace else, be it the Muses, God, luck, whatever. We speak of the good creators of art, music and religion as "gifted;" talent is something you cannot learn. And in these endeavors we have, last but not least, the "aristocrats:" the very talented ones.

About these special aristocrats of the soul not enough can be said. We all accept the fact that a Shakespeare or a Beethoven come by once in a generation among a people. What we do not so readily accept is the *possibility* that there are also spiritual aristocrats. Keep your mind open for that possibility. Ghandi was certainly one, so was Buddha and Jesus of Nazareth and Einstein, who for all his knowledge accepted that he really knew very little, other than that "God does not play dice with the Universe," that in all the potentials for chaos in the apparent random arrangements of matter and energy there still were clear, simple, fascinatingly limited realms of patterns at work wherever Einstein's superior human mind was given a chance to peek in the Great Unknown.

This century and the last not only gave us great physicists, but great existentialists: Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Bergson, Sartre, Camus. The existentialists have pessimistic and optimistic things to say, depending on your mind set. On the one hand, there is the often misunderstood quote from Nietzsche: "God is dead." It is certainly possible that there once was a God who like everything else is mortal, and so we are now the last vestiges of a creative force that has come and gone, and we are left alone to forge our way in the wasteland of His creation, doomed to a cold, meaningless existence. But Nietzsche also said "Life is a fountain of joy...become who you are...turn yourself into a wheel rolling out of itself." He and the other existentialists exhort people to courage, to define for themselves a "superman" capable of rising out of the muck of daily animal survival foraging and to rejoice in existence, being for the sake of being. Nietzsche found in the music of Wagner the pure essence of longing and desire, love and a oneness in eternity. He found eternity to be his God and heaven, a blissful theory that life is "the eternal recurrence of the same," that like the Hindus we will come back again and again to existence to relive life until the soul is purified. Other existentialists are less rhapsodic, saying pretty much this: believe what you want, but believe, and in the act of believing

the thing you believe in will come to be. A kind of purposeful self-deception, if you happen to be a cynic. But I choose to side with Bergson who talks of a "leap of faith" -- make that leap, and like Niels Bohr's electrons, you will simply jump into a new energy level, where you can *enjoy* art and music and religion for the very simple fact that you chose to disengage your ever-so-smart brain. You turned off the noise of your internal radio.

This has been more jabber than I intended. You still with me?

So we slowly get to the final stretch. OK, you say, art and music, I can buy that as sources of spiritual wealth. You don't have to be a Christian to feel the depth of sorrow and transcendent love in the timeless music enshrined in Bach's St. Matthew's Passion. That speaks to you, but not the fairy tales in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Fine. I am not asking you to take that giant a "leap of faith." Where you go once you get inside your spiritual car is your business. The point is whether there is such a vehicle at all for you to climb in, and convincing yourself you can drive it.

Ultimately it becomes a very personal experience, and sadly it may never happen to you if you do not open both your very smart brains but also your very humble heart to it.

Maybe it happens to only spiritual aristocrats. Why shouldn't the range of human talents, by definition only sparingly handed out, not also include a talent for spirituality?

Often spirituality comes from a single religious experience, seemingly randomly dished out. Martin Luther's religious experience, the lightning bolt, is well known, as is the conversion of the rake St. Augustine. Those were spiritually talented people. I am less talented, but I did have such an experience, at the dawn of a day many years ago, when I was a young student in Paris. I had been up all night, and I happened to wander, apparently randomly, into the Sacré Coeur, the Church of the Sacred Heart. It is an ancient church open to the air on all sides, with a white domed ceiling, like an old mosque. The ceiling is a huge white, smooth thing, like being inside a giant eggshell. It was 4:30 in the morning, and a lone monk was chanting the mass in Latin. These ancient sounds echoed around and around in this eggshell, and the thought that this ancient rite in this ancient place in this ancient language was being done yet again, by this lone monk in the middle of a lone night at that hour... The "*agnus dei qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis, miserere nobis...*" echoed from a distant past, in a melancholy monotone, as if it were the voice of God Himself. I was transfixed, mystically borne by the sounds, the smell of that morning, the simple humility of the priest. I was taken to a mysterious, eternal place of the soul. I was forever transformed.

I didn't become a Catholic, though I could have done so that morning. Since then the Catholics have ruined the mass by taking it out of the mysteries and mystique of Latin and into the vernaculars of the world. It has become another Protestant sect. Christianity remains beautiful in thought and artistic expression, but, to paraphrase Bertrand Russell, Christianity was ruined by Christians.

But so what? Any religion will do. Or none at all, so long as you have a life of the spirit. But most if not all religions succeed in pointing you to places of evolution for the better

parts of ourselves, the emotions and the imagination, in short, the soul. Call it a Higher Being, the Force, or God -- whatever. Truly smart people like Einstein or Schweitzer or Ghandi placed their consciousness on that higher plane, lived lives of a serene productivity for others, and simply got more out of having been alive.

And so, to my son Jesse, this admonition: Consider *all* the wild possibilities!

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