

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

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

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

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

I used to go hiking with a friend, in Harriman State Park, an hour's drive away. As we'd head up the Henry Hudson Parkway, my friend would regularly say, "don't let me drive to work." Her usual work route had her on those same roads, and, if she let her mind wander, she risked slipping into automatic navigation and forgetting to take the necessary turnoff. Understanding that shift from the conscious to the subconscious is important to our path. Who is the one driving your body when it goes someplace your intention wasn't planning; who made the choice that otherwise wasn't yours?

That shift to autopilot is triggered in various ways, and we've previously discussed the need to be mindful of expectations, which can limit how we experience life. In the last sermon I discussed the importance of moving through our days without creating stories while events unfold.¹ The narrator of those stories is the ego, and I asked if you were willing to burn it down to create new possibility. That's quite an ask—and it requires that we take some time to better understand this thing we call ego.

The ego is gatekeeper to our understanding of self, so it is crucial to our path. It is an often-maligned part of our psyche that is seen as an enemy, which is a problem. Today's inquiry on our path toward the Creator will explore this misunderstood and pivotal part of our being. Let's see what is revealed when we view the ego through our dual lenses of science and faith.

The concept of ego arose relatively recently through psychology, courtesy of Sigmund Freud in the early 1900s, even though the study of man, morality, and meaning had existed throughout recorded history. The ancient Greeks saw a split between Apollonian and Dionysian aspects of human nature: Apollonian being rational, ordered, and self-disciplined, and Dionysian being sensual, spontaneous, lustful, and chaotic. Freud effectively inserted the ego as the mediator between those aspects—and we'll return at some point to the notion of splitting the self into competing factions.

Freud saw the ego as mediating between what he called "id," the primitive and instinctual drives, and "superego," which upholds moral, societal, and personal constraints. His id and superego are the metaphorical devil and angel on your shoulders.

¹ The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard said, "Life is lived forward, but it is understood in reverse."

At this point, I'll remind you of what I refer to as word-prisons, which shift the definition, metaphor frame, or emotional polarity of a word, imposing limitations. To frame our understanding of ego as a psychological defect certainly adds limitation. Freud saw the id as the urges, the ego as the arbiter, and the superego as the moral critic, but their presence presumed dysfunction, a disharmony among the voices in your head. In general usage, the word "ego" has acquired a negative emotional charge that repels us. That desire to move away is because we typically hear the word used in criticism or as a warning. We're told we need to get rid of our ego because it will cause us nothing but problems.

That thought is troubling from both an evolutionary-biology and a spiritual point of view. We see cognitive processing as part of divine design. Why would we eliminate a divine gift rather than explore its use on our path?

We commonly hear disparaging comments—*That guy's got a serious ego problem*—yet there is no congratulatory use of the word ego—*That person has a stunning ego and such poise, I wish I were like that!* To wrap the ego always in a negative connotation places it into a word-prison that denies it as a necessary and valuable tool. We need to model an expansive, healthy expression that invites us to engage. We need to model greatness.

Functionally, the ego is responsible for self-awareness and personal identity. It's what thinks that you are you and not me or anyone else. It seems to regulate our impulses as well as order our minds into a coherent whole, so understanding the healthy ego is essential to our pursuit. The ego-story that is created determines the self who walks our spiritual path.

A healthy, expansive expression of id, ego, and superego would reveal a harmonious system, with the id as the artist, guardian of the creative impulse, the ego as the seeker, the conscious navigator charting our path, and the superego as the sage, the keeper of wisdom and profound knowledge. These aspects are not pathologies to be cured, but wonderful tools to aid in perception. They are allies on our path—unless they've been limited, hindered, or corrupted.

So, what is the purpose of unfolding all of this? We are understood through our actions, thus become and may be judged by what we do, regardless of why. You may recall that I said common sense is only common *within* a personality type and not necessarily between them. There are multiple ways to experience reality, and our understanding of the world is mediated by the ego. An unhealthy ego distorts perception and limits understanding.

That creates a curious challenge summarized in the cliché that the road to Hell is paved with good intentions. That's a little intimidating, no? How are we supposed to reconcile our intention with our actions? How would we know if *we* were on the wrong road?

There is a Sufi parable of a martyr who is brought before God on resurrection day, who says: “I fought for your cause, even to martyrdom.” God replies: “This is untrue; you fought with the intention to be called a hero, and people *have* called you a hero.” He is taken to Hell. Then a rich man is brought forward and says to God, “I have given liberally to that for which You desired generosity to be extended.” And God replies: “This is untrue; you gave liberally to be called generous, and you *have* been called generous.” He is taken to Hell.

The longer version continues with other individuals, each discovering too late that you can lie to yourself but not to God. The story offers an array of illustrations of how self-delusion is a road to ruin—even though you’ve convinced yourself you’ve done the right thing. Self-delusion is a danger of the unexamined ego. That’s why the Sufis warn that the unexamined ego obscures the true nature of being and reality and imprisons us in a world of illusion. A healthy, functioning ego is essential, as it allows for unbiased observation with no attachment to outcome, and reveals pathways to deeper Truth, with a capital T.

It is said that true character is revealed through the consistency of our behavior and choices, and Carl Jung said, “You are what you do, not what you say you’ll do.” The path we walk towards the Creator compels us to subtlety, to seeing with deeper discernment, so let’s take a moment to consider that there’s a difference between doing and being.

To follow our path, we first set an intention, which we serve by selecting from an ever-increasing set of tools. Tools require technique and skill, which leads to asking: What does one have to *do* to connect with the divine? Yet if we pause at that moment of intention, before we select a process to serve it, a different, more subtle question arises: What does one have to *be* to connect with the divine?

Human doing and being are intertwined yet separate. We talked previously about Christianity’s notion of becoming “as children” to enter the kingdom of heaven, which describes a state of being, not of doing. It describes *being* the natural, free expression of self, not *doing* a conscious presentation of an *idea* of self—one too often viewed through expectation, fear, or neurosis. There is nothing you can *do* to *be* in the childlike state. You just be.

We start life open and available to all of possibility, which diminishes with the ongoing effects and challenges of simply living. The free, joyous, and playful soul gets cocooned in thoughts and behaviors experienced as appropriate and/or protective. Repetition hardens them into rigid beliefs and those beliefs become our default, eliciting a set of expectations and behaviors that are done reflexively in support of beliefs—not spontaneously in response to the moment. That’s why it is by *not doing*—by not defaulting to the unconscious programming—that we can return to the natural or divine state, which was hidden or impeded and is at one with innate being and possibility.

We don't often consider the difference between doing and being, which is generally bridged by thinking that is rarely objective. There is a thing known as "flow state," where an accomplished performer or athlete can access actions instinctively, without thought. It's a bypassing of the conscious mind, a freeing from distractions, self-consciousness, or time, to enter a serene state in which you are no longer *doing* an activity, you *are* the activity. We see this in Taoism, in a beautiful concept called *wu wei*: the action that has no action, sometimes called doing without doing. It also has no self, since doing flows as an effortless expression of being.

Consider meditation, which takes many forms and is designed to get us to do nothing, to "silence the mind." The Zen notion of "emptying our cup" merges doing with being, in that it is an attempt to *stop* doing, to be empty of thought to rediscover what we naturally are: serene, unencumbered, and available to possibility. Whether your spiritual goal is to find the boundless potential in your empty cup, to exist as one with Tao, or to "become as children," all are the result of *not doing*. All are a result of not interfering with our natural state. As it was with Michelangelo's notion of hewing away the rough stone to reveal the beautiful form inside, real transformation is a matter of subtraction, not addition. It is about letting go.

Neuroscientists confirm that "neurons that fire together, wire together," and our default behaviors get held, wired preferentially in the brain, forming an unconscious basis of identity or personality. That basis, often in response to fear or shame, is limited—by definition—since it's a construct of the past. That identity construct is governed by this thing called "ego," which filters reality through our personal identity. That's important to realize, since the ego seems to be responsible for finding balance among internal desires, external realities, and moral values, becoming the gatekeeper that mediates between the conscious and the subconscious.

The human brain mostly operates on a subconscious level. More than 95% of cognitive processing occurs outside of conscious awareness². When we recognize a familiar face, react to a sudden noise, or navigate a well-known route, we rely on rapid, subconscious mental processes. This vast subconscious realm handles everything from automatic bodily functions and ingrained habits to intuitive judgments and emotional responses.

The brain processes millions of sensory inputs per second, while conscious awareness can only handle a tiny fraction of that data³. Our subconscious mind is the invisible engine behind nearly all cognition, shaping perceptions, behaviors, decisions, and even creativity without us realizing it. The ego acts as gatekeeper for what is brought to conscious awareness. Developing it as a tool

² <https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg23931880-400-lifting-the-lid-on-the-unconscious/>
<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4061785/>

³ The brain receives around 11 million bits/sec of sensory input from the eyes, ears, fingers, etc., but can only consciously process around 50 bits/sec. (<https://www.npr.org/2020/07/14/891140598/understanding-unconscious-bias>) What you bring to conscious thought matters.

is crucial. It helps us harness intuition, sharpen perception, improve habits, and become more mindful of the influence exerted by our subconscious over our thoughts and choices.

The ego's construct of self, when crystallized into a rigid pattern, is done at the expense of possibility. It blocks expression of the *true*, unencumbered, unashamed self, full of potential. We must find that true, unencumbered self to become capable of experiencing the divine, so we need to understand the nature of the ego and its effect on us.

Now, science can tell us how the brain functions, but not why our experience of physical phenomena is *like something*, such that it makes a specific impression on our conscious mind.⁴ A certain sound pressure wave vibrates our inner ear, and we think, "let's dance." A particular molecule stimulates the tastebuds, and we think, "delicious!" Science understands the function, dynamics, and structure of consciousness but has not yet reached consensus as to *why* those things create emotionally based cognitive experiences. The answer seems to be tied to the divine gift of empathy.

There's a superb video on the Royal Institution's YouTube channel⁵ in which neuropsychologist Nicholas Humphrey asks why consciousness exists from the standpoint of evolutionary biology. He sees a beautiful mechanism that offers a profound advantage. I wish I could do a deep dive into his fascinating talk but will only share his conclusion. Visual information from the eye is simultaneously fed to two separate regions of the brain. Those two different processing centers effectively have a "conversation" about that information, creating a narrative about it discussed by an inner voice that we've named "ego," which is a process, not a structure. What appears to be a feedback loop between two regions of our brain creates a magnificent gift that is a leap forward in cognition: **it allows for a conscious sense of self**.

That self is centered on sensory experience, giving a capacity to take pleasure in activities and seek sensation. It also allows us to see others as having this same ability, letting us understand their feelings. That unique capacity allows for and compels cooperation, which is an imperative built into our divine operating system: a biological commandment. A subjective, personal experience of the world takes simple perception—the apple is red, the rock is hard, the birds are singing—and turns it into sensation. It becomes "personal bodily opinion" as to what is happening, how to evaluate it, and how to respond. This amazing cognitive advantage creates **the basis of empathy and cooperation** and those unique capabilities—that extraordinary divine gift—has allowed our species to transform our world through art, science, and technology.

⁴ Science refers to this "phenomenal consciousness," which is the subjective, qualitative aspect of an experience – what it feels like to have it.

⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9QWaZp_2I1k

The possibilities that flow from that gift are only realized through our actions, our doing. Those actions are subject to influence, bias, and the distractions a sensation-based reality can offer. To walk our path requires that we assess mental stories created spontaneously in response to stimulus. Those stories are modulated by something in our psyche that, unchecked, can create a crystallized notion of self which limits perception and understanding and cuts us off from the divine by mistaking ego-gratification for spiritual service. When we consider “the experience of the self in the here and now,” we must be mindful of what we impose on the moment. As seekers on the path, we must learn to respond with what the moment requires, not with what either expectation or unconscious conditioning⁶ demands. That is the secret of wu wei, of being in flow.

There is no separation between doing and being in that Taoist notion. Such is the nature of Taoist non-duality, which sees everything as a unified whole, understanding that all apparent opposites are interconnected and interdependent, each containing the seed of the other and arising mutually to form that unified whole⁷. Such is the nature of “flow,” which is a call to flexibility. I repeatedly talk about developing a baseline posture of malleability as part of our practice. That baseline is without agenda, easily embraces paradox, and should be our default. As seekers, we must be mindful of things that obscure our capacity to understand the moment. Sometimes that thing is our idea of self and the ideas and behaviors we defend.

What is the story we tell that describes our experience of the self in the here and now, and who tells it? When we tell a different story, we create different possibilities for a different self. Reality shifts. Remembering that there are other ways to experience the moment increases our capacity to perceive its true form, to see the things hidden in plain sight that may lead to the divine.

As part of our ongoing practice, we can use simple questions to help align our actions with our intention:

- What story am I telling about this experience, and who is telling it?
- Am I responding to what this moment requires or what my conditioning demands?
- How can I remain open to possibilities beyond my current narrative?

Asking whether you are serving the present moment or your constructed identity can illuminate an ego-story and create space to determine if something is an automatic reaction versus conscious choice. Practicing a deliberate shift in perspective by considering other viewpoints exercises the ego’s natural adaptability and prevents rigid crystallization. Rather than fight or ignore the ego, we must listen to it for information, as it often signals growth opportunities or unconscious fears worth examining. By choosing to serve Truth rather than stories about self-image, we become

⁶ We’re *all* subject to implicit social conditioning, what’s known as “implicit bias.” An implicit-association test (IAT) is used to measure unconscious associations between concepts. You can test yourself with a variety of IATs at <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>

⁷ Their Yin Yang symbol, the Taijitu, illustrates that interwoven interdependence as a visual reminder.

capable of meaningful communion with the Creator, whether you conceive of the Creator as mind, force, source, or presence.

We must continue to shed expectation and fear and to create the being who walks our spiritual path effortlessly, openly, and with joy. Only by stripping away the encumbrances, the fears, the expectations, and the limits can we become capable of meaningful, compelling storytelling. Once we become *that* being, once our hearts are truly open, we'll understand if there are things that still require doing.

As part of our practice, we will continue to be malleable and not lock ourselves rigidly into narratives. We will be mindful of expectations and be open to whatever process best suits our intention. As we continue to build our spiritual toolbox, to which we'll now add the ego, let's remember that we are responsible for understanding how to use the tools within—which, framed in the metaphor of non-duality, means “understanding the tool that we are.” The better we understand the design and function of a tool the more it is available for creative use. Let's always be mindful of process and aware of going as far as we can, or should, in the moment.

Let's pause here, my friends. We'll continue with our process and path the next time.

As always, thank you, Creator, for the gift of today with all that it entails.

Honor the Creator. Honor the creation.