

The Answer Is A Question

or

There Are No Dictionaries In Heaven



by **John Martin Ramsay**

A Guide for Living:

At the Interface Between the Finite and the Infinite

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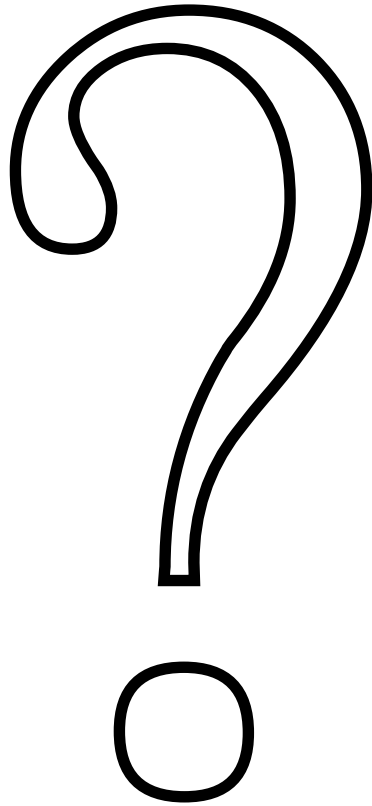
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The Answer Is A Question



Dedicated to Grundtvigians everywhere ...

including my Danish *brothers*:

Arne Rasmussen,
Henning Møller Andersen,
Hans Kelstrup
Hans Rosgaard

my sons Martin and Loren

and my wonderful wife and companion,
Bernice Hollaway Meyer

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Foreword

“Freedom is not a matter of individual rights, but is a condition of a society.” These words changed my life! I was raised believing that the United States was the land of the free and was proud to be an American. I still am! Our belief in freedom is codified in the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights. But, it became obvious as I took my place in the adult world that there were certain responsibilities I had as a citizen and as a human being which limited my freedom. The focus had always been on individual rights: **I** must be able to worship as **I** pleased, to speak **my** mind, to read what **I** wanted, to write what **I** wanted, and to meet peaceably with whomever **I** chose.

That the 9th Amendment stated that the enumeration “of certain rights shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people” was not mentioned. However, a speaker at the Hazen Conference in 1953 at Warren Wilson College in North Carolina where I took my first job after graduation from college myself in 1952 did speak about rights going hand in hand with responsibility, but freedom and responsibility were left as in conflict with each other. The view that freedom is a condition of society and not a matter of individual rights resolved that conflict.

I learned this viewpoint at a seminar on Nicolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig in Denmark in 1972 during my first trip outside of the United States. His grasp of “the human condition” captured me and he became my hero. He was the founding father of modern Denmark which is enough to warrant the title. But, his insights into Christianity and its relationship to humanity became an inspiration to me.

This book is my attempt to put the insights into my own American context. I believe that understanding them will give a new vitality to America and position us to again take a leadership role as the land of the free.

At the back of the book, I have a summary which takes a single passage from each chapter which encapsulizes the essence of that chapter. Those passages are given in **red** within the text of the chapter.

John M Ramsay
January 2, 2008

The Answer Is A Question

Chapter 1. **Questionable Theology**

In my Folk Dance classes at Berea College, I asked each student to find five definitions for the word “dance.” The students were to use a variety of sources including dictionaries, encyclopedias, textbooks, other types of literature about dance—or even make an attempt at personal definitions. It was better than having twenty-five hours in the library looking for definitions myself because the students had a great variety of approaches, gave a very broad survey of whatever literature was available in our library, and did it all in one night!

I then had the fun of assembling these definitions, selecting and arranging them into provocative sequences, and notifying those students who would be called upon to share one of their definitions in an orchestrated class presentation. I always loved that next class session. My hopes (and the College’s) were more than simply fulfilling a physical-education requirement for our students; we wanted to stretch minds as well as the body.

You can imagine the animated discussion which followed as one student would read a definition of *dance*, followed by another student whose definition had more color or was stated more succinctly. And then came definitions which disagreed emphatically with previous ones. Invariably the students would realize that *the experts* really have trouble defining dance. This realization would empower the students with the confidence needed to use their own judgment, an important step in opening minds. The next step was to call on some students who had drafted their own definitions. These were often presented with youthful alacrity and the great native and unblemished wisdom which young students can have. They were embolden to share these in class especially after seeing how much confusion there is in the literature. There would usually be palpable approval of the selected student definitions as the orchestration neared its climax.

The climax was to call upon those students who bounded beyond the confines of the assignment and submitted their personal insight instead of a definition: “It isn’t as important to define dance as to enjoy it.” Someone

would always make this observation. This student-inspired observation liberated the entire class to enjoy participating in a dance class for the rest of the term and even to possibly dance for the rest of their lives.

The paradox is that this exercise in the futility of definition does not demean our need to classify our ideas by giving them words. Giving words is a way to link our finite minds to infinite knowledge and to link person to person in a joint search for an understanding of life.

Paradoxes are part and parcel of life. Humans both love and loathe them; we find them both intriguing and unacceptable at the same time. The human penchant to classify everything is our way of forcing our world to make sense to us. Words themselves are a way of classifying the world— bagging, tagging, and analyzing each thought in an attempt to pin down the experience of it.

The act of defining words is the original form of classification for humans. It is where we must begin as we grapple with ultimate truth and it is where we finish as we try to communicate what we understand with each other. In the end, although we may not be able to define the dance of life, we can find great pleasure in the dancing and in some ways find that our dancing can express what words cannot.

Definition, when technically applied to *physical training* brings to mind bulging biceps or washboard abs. It expresses the idea that the body is made from a variety of muscles and that, with special training, each muscle can be visibly seen in what we call a well-defined body. Each muscle, in this situation, is viewed as something separate, identifiable, and capable of being developed. But when we try to isolate a particular muscle and draw its boundaries, we begin to run into problems. If we take a surgeon's knife and try to delineate the boundaries of the muscle, we would find it necessary to sever some connective tissue, to decide where muscle ends and tendon begins, or decide if perhaps the tendon is a part of the muscle. If the tendon, then why not the bone to which it is attached? Should we succeed in "defining" the muscle with our knife, we would end up with what we define to be the muscle but it would be severed from the body and quite different from the undefined muscle in place attached to a living body.

The fitness crowd, when they talk about definition, refer to a muscle or muscle groups as a visible part of a living body. The muscle can be seen and

becomes more visible as it is developed by exercising it. A well-defined body is one in which the muscles can be clearly seen as identifiable masses. The trainees do not try to define the muscle apart from the body; the use of a knife would obviously mutilate the muscle and destroy the body in the process. We are stuck with an impossible problem. The muscle cannot be treated as a finite entity with definite boundaries. It is *de-finite*. And yet we find the indefinite words of biceps and abs are useful.

Similarly, when words are severed from a living idea by making a finite definition, they become dead instead of alive. Words are of value only when they are alive, i.e. books are worthless until taken up by a living being and given life. I like the term “sleeping word” which my friend Kay Parke coined to refer to the printed word. Or perhaps the words can be danced instead of defined.

A dictionary is a morgue of mutilated ideas. Dictionaries are very useful, the results of worthwhile human effort. They facilitate communication between individuals across geographic space, differing cultures, and even across the historic ages of time. But dictionaries are still morgues of mutilated ideas; definitions remove the concepts from life and put them into a book. We need to use them as we fumble along through life. But defining them is like pinning and mounting butterflies. Once mounted, life is gone and the butterfly no longer flies.

We are less likely to make a mess of things when we are aware of our penchant to define everything, applying finite measures to infinite quantities. Being aware that we are dealing with mutilated ideas keeps us from treating them as eternal verities or ultimate truth. Dealing honestly with human life and its limitations, we will be more likely to be humble and open-minded; we will not be so likely to ride roughshod over delicate balances; we will retain our precarious position on earth and even play our role in developing life’s potentials and ameliorating any tendencies which ultimately are destructive. Dictionaries are often elevated to the level of *final authority*. They may be the ultimate authority in matters of human communication, although I doubt that any compiler has ever thought so; perhaps it was their hope, but we must finish the sentence with the caveat that dictionaries are not final authorities in matters of faith, hope, and love. Just as a cadaver is useful to a surgeon in learning how to cope with the mysteries of a living body and how to heal sickness, so is a dictionary useful in learning how to

cope with the mysteries of life and figuring out how finite beings can live with the mysteries of life in a healthier way.

The [Answer Is A Question](#) is my attempt to provide words for an idea which makes the most profound difference in how one lives. The difference is the one which gives life to what is otherwise deadly. It is an elusive concept which is mutilated when we cut it out in an attempt to define it for once and for all. Perhaps the concept is already flitting about in your mind, for we have had to touch it in discussing a definition for “dance” or defining a “muscle”— because, in dealing with definition, we are already confronted with the necessity of making fundamental choices about how we view life. Do we see life as capable of definition— a possibility if life is finite and self contained; or do we see defining life as an impossibility because life is infinite in scope and complexity?

John Muir, American naturalist, is reported to have said,

When we try to pick anything out by itself, we find that it is hitched to everything else in the universe.¹

Berni, my wife, claims not to understand these matters and, perhaps as a result, is more adept than most at seeing the meaning in things; by acknowledging that she does not understand she is leaving the door to infinity wide open-- it is closed minds which mutilate life. Berni pointed out this morning that the situation is like sex-- if you remove it from the context of love it is no longer the same; we love each other in many ways and that opens the door to unamputated sex which, because it is linked to a living love, is wonderfully mysterious. Berni also came up with the title of the book. She said a few nights ago, “I don’t understand, it seems like the answer is a question.” There you are!

The fundamental concept is that *we are finite but live in the midst of infinity*. The second chapter will deal with other wordings for this concept, wordings gleaned from quite a variety of sources worldwide. Words are our attempts to embrace the infinite with our finiteness, an impossible and yet a vital effort. If we don’t make the attempt, the door to the infinite closes.

¹ http://www.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/frameindex.html?http://www.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/writings/misquotes.html

We seek truth but realize that infinite truth is not the same as finite truth. In fact, we can see that truth when it becomes dogmatic becomes a lie because it has been mutilated— it has moved from an infinite scope to a finite limit. Truth is like a masquerade of lollipop sticks— after the sweetness is gone we are left sucking on a dry stick and a craving for more lollipops.

Words elude me. **The truth is that we cannot know the Truth. We can question everything, including ourselves, and be ready to learn and relearn truth. If you understand this, you have grasped the core message of this book.** However, grasping the core, I find, holds little hint of its *implications*. These will be explored beginning with chapter 3.

So, with tongue in cheek but with utter sincerity I wish to call this elusive but obvious point of view by the words—

questionable theology.

Chapter 2. **Spontaneous Eruptions**

What do other people say?

In a stage version of the Wizard of Oz, Professor Miracle advises Dorothy, “It’s important in these matters to close your eyes and look into infinity.” Questionable theology refers to a perspective on life which looks into infinity—innumerable, unending, indivisible infinity. Such a sight is a tricky one, like seeing with the eyes closed.

The parable of the elephant is applicable. Several blind men examine an elephant and describe what they “see.” Each one explores a different part which then becomes their definition of an elephant: “it is a ropey (the tail) animal and you can swing on it,” “it’s tall and solid (the leg) and you can put your arms around it,” “it’s a scary boa constrictor (the trunk) and can curl itself around you, gently hug you, or maybe squeeze the breath out of you.”

We humans, too, are blind in matters of eternity and are forced to focus on what we have experienced. But, the experience sometimes (often?) shuts out the totality which is too huge for our finite experience. Yet, our experiences, individual or joint, do not rule out the existence of the elephant. We describe what we feel, what we hear, what we smell, and even what we think in discrete words. We tag the experience of a tail a “tail”, of a leg a “leg”, a trunk a “trunk.” But, what is a trunk if it is not part of an elephant? When we say trunk, we likely visualize an entire elephant even though the word refers to only one part of the elephant. We could even be on a different train of thought and think of a trunk as a suitcase readied for a trip. Communication becomes tricky and requires much dialogue (and perhaps some poetry) to be effective. A single word has too many nuances created by differing experiences to encompass the elephant.

This haiku verse, which refers to computers, came to me via electronic mail this weekend...

Out of memory.

We wish to hold the whole sky, But we never will.²

² [Francis Heaney](#). Honorable mention in the competition for Computer Error Messages in Haiku. Salon Magazine, Feb 10 1998.

The difference between the infinite and the finite is akin to the mathematical concepts of continuous and discrete distributions.

Consider a distribution which has the Eastern concept of yin and yang. The idea of opposites is an attractive one to Westerners. It gives us points of reference which are indeed useful, perhaps even necessary in breaking out of sometimes one-dimensional word boxes. But the concept of two poles, even though the distribution between the poles is a continuous one, sets up another paradigm which has *an edge* to it—the extremes or poles—and therefore can all too easily close us in and keep us from seeing other constructs which have more than two poles or an unlimited number of poles and which may even be edgeless.

I prefer to tag questionable theology as a *perspective* or an *approach* to life rather than a *belief, concept, philosophy, or religion*. The perspective of the questioning mind is one which faces open doors rather than turning its back on them. One can be standing anywhere there is room for us in the universe and face doors. Any concept of interest to us can be taken and we can begin to ask questions from that perspective. Scientists and mystics alike can keep this perspective as mortals. Alternatively, they can also close their minds, turn their backs on immortal potentials and limit themselves to the confines of their own minds, awesome though the mind may be. This latter approach is the one which closes doors. Are there, then, no limits to our exploration? More on that in Chapter 4, The Human Trick.

Some people pretend to have resolved the question of a purpose for human presence on earth. But it gets tricky. Is it possible that they have *not* claimed to have resolved the question but are exploring only one solution. People can explore one solution and *still have* left other doors open. Sometimes it is difficult to tell, however, when a person has left doors open or has closed them, or closed some of them. Whether open or closed, it is vital to know which is actually the case because the most dangerous citizens are those who present themselves as being open when their attitudes and actions belie the case to be otherwise. They are the arrogant ones, the noisy dogmatists who can dominate a noisy room which has no open doors. Those who prepare for creative truth need ample times of silence, perhaps under the stars, in which to hear the unarticulated messages of the universe.

We need to be especially careful to remain open when we judge the position of others who appear to be different from us. We can and should

judge others but questionable theology would have us judge with great care and the realization that we ourselves may be wrong. Alien voices have much to teach us.

How we view others depends on our own prejudices unless we are blessed with unusual, open, loving insights. In the delightful book, The Velveteen Rabbit, a stuffed toy is a young child's favorite companion. But the rabbit becomes so soiled and hairless that it is seen as ugly by the adults. Adored by a child but abhorred by adults, the story explains that love can transform the eye of the beholder. The book even suggests that loving is a life and death matter.

The rabbit, for its part, wishes that it could become real without the pain and discomfort of losing its hair. It finally finds a reality, beyond the hairless self, in the act of love. To love—fuzzy or hairless—is to become real, is to become alive. Love of life—life with all of its inscrutable and at times seemingly ugly appearances—is a required attribute of questionable theology.

Meanwhile, mathematicians make graphs which visualize the idea of infinity. Psychologists set up similar systems to make the incomprehensible comprehensible. For example, an infinite array of items, say personalities, can be organized into discrete classes and each class given a name. Let's take as an example, the case of the sixteen Myers-Briggs³ character and temperament types. Every personality is forced by this classification system into one of the sixteen types. These classes can be charted to show that 75% of a particular population are Type E while 25% are Type I, 50% are Type T and 50% are type F, 50% are Type J and 50% are Type P, 75% are Type S and 25% are Type N. This view of personality types has its uses but it also has its dangers. The boxes impose a discrete division upon a continuous spectrum of personalities. Not everyone will fit into the boxes. In fact, there is probably no one who totally fits any box or set of boxes. The classifications tell us something about people but they don't tell the whole story or portray it very accurately. They are useful as long as we are aware of their limits and are dangerous when we step over the line, and, boxed in by their limits, are no longer able to see beyond them.

The program notes for the St. Louis production of *Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street* include some thoughts by Steve Woolf,

³ <http://www.myersbriggs.org/my-mbti-personality-type/mbti-basics/>

Artistic Director, which further illuminate the dangers of rigidity, of being boxed in by our dispositions...

In this play, power is lorded over weak individuals. Most of the characters bend whenever they are challenged, but the strong have no capacity to yield. This character fault, this rigidity, becomes a recipe for disaster. With no flexibility, breaking and snapping seem the only responses possible to extreme stress. Sweeney and Judge Turpin are so strong that they don't bend; they break, and with a snap that is as deadly as it is irrational.⁴

Lee Smith in her novel Saving Grace has Grace's father, a serpent handling preacher, say, when a young girl lies dying,

Now I can't speak for the Lord, ... but we'll all pray here together, brother, and He will let her go if He wants to, or keep her, as He sees fit.⁵

That seems to me to be eminently open-accepting either outcome but allowing for the expression of personal spirit and corporate spirit through prayer. Smith has the girl recover, an acknowledgment of the possibility of miracles. I, personally, am not comfortable with the religious handling of snakes, yet I remain open to those who are.

Later, however, Grace says,

As Daddy liked to point out, the Bible says, 'They shall take up serpents,' not 'They shall not bite you.' Daddy himself had been bit over two hundred times, so often he had quit counting. Whenever it happened, he cried out

⁴ Sweeney Todd program notes: *Great Plays Play at the Rep*, The Repertory Theater of St Louis 1997-98 Season, p. 31

⁵ [Smith, Lee](#). *Saving Grace*. Ballantine Books, First Edition, 1996, p. 33, ; original edition G.P. Putnam's Sons 1995, ISBN: 0-345-40333-9

*'Glory to God,' for he believed always in the perfect will of God, and turned himself over to it. He said that God has His reasons, which we know naught of. Sometimes He's just testing you. And when the serpent bites, you have to keep your mind directly on the Lord, and He will recover you. If you let your mind get off the Lord, you'll swell up.'*⁶

Open theology can go along with Daddy up until the point of the last two sentences when he states two outcomes, tied dogmatically to two courses of action. At that point, Daddy has crossed the line and becomes the dogmatic fundamentalist preacher we are afraid that he is. He made the assumption that if your mind is on God you're OK and if not, you're dead. The simple step across the line almost goes unnoticed, but, when it is made, Daddy's entire motivation becomes suspect, a suspicion we already entertained. Grace later confides to the reader that...

*...privately, I had always questioned Daddy's belief that a person could go out and do whatsoever they damn well pleased, and then repent and get forgiven for it, over and over again. In my own mind this made God out to be too easy, a pushover. I had never really believed that that was the case.*⁷

And at another point an older friend says,

*I know he was your daddy, but he was a bad un, I'll tell you straight out, Gracie. Why, he took advantage of everybody around here, not to mention what he done to your poor sweet mother, rest her soul. He was a blot on the church of God, if you ask me.*⁸

⁶ [Smith ibid](#). p. 36. See Mark 16:17-20 for the biblical text upon which serpent handlers base their worship.

⁷ [Smith ibid](#) p.p. 164-165

⁸ [Smith ibid](#) p 256

To me, also, it is an open and shut case!

The movie “The Truman Story”⁹ is delightfully provocative. It portrays Truman as a young man who, unbeknownst to him, lives within the finite world of a TV studio enclosed in a sky like dome. The real-life soap opera stars Truman and is controlled by the Godlike Director. When Truman grows up and finally realizes that his whole life is being manipulated by the Director, there is a power struggle between them. Humans, we are shown, were not designed to live in a controlled environment, not even if it provides security, salary, and other amenities of the good life. The screen-writers hint that even if we envision a God who will be able to protect and provide for us, we will still choose to step outside the protective shell of the finite set and into the infinite unknown, out of control, unprotected. When Truman makes that choice and steps through the secret door, the rest of humanity cheers for the daring hero. Humans crave freedom.

This craving is the force behind the concept of open theology. It suggests that **God has perhaps created us in his own image, free to explore infinity, and thereby provoking a continuous drama between the mortal and the immortal parts of our being.** The open ones are those who are free to have opinions but refrain from treating them as certainties. Our perspective needs to have eternally fresh raiments such that they are never soiled— or such that hair loss does not interfere with our vision. Our perspective needs a freedom of movement, and a multiple of colors with the infinity of hues which is necessary if we are to see beyond the rainbow. Perhaps this can only be achieved with eyes closed.

Prophets have appeared across the millennia and appear in all cultures around the world. A review of the literature, past and current, a look at other cultures and at other religions helps us explore our existence, and the exploration gives us terminology which can help us describe the indescribable.

⁹ The Truman Show (1998) Starring: Jim Carrey, Laura Linney Director: Peter Weir
http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/customer-reviews/B0009UC7QQ/sr=1-1/qid=1182707423/ref=cm_cr_dp_all_top/103-5498736-2939803?ie=UTF8&n=130&s=dvd&qid=1182707423&sr=1-1#customerReviews

The terms are useful in constructing a view of life as long as they aren't used to brick in the doorways through which we are looking. But eventually someone will use the terms to block doors, perhaps those behind our backs. Then, suddenly the terms become distorted and we only see a part of the elephant. Or we can become so captivated by a certain view that we never turn around to look through other doors.

David Lurie, the young central character in Chaim Potok's novel, has been boxed in by his Jewish upbringing. He becomes a very bright student and studies the ancient commentaries which the orthodox community uses to reinforce their boxes. By listening to the "voices of the centuries teaching me the Torah" David develops a very deep love for the Torah but comes to realize the necessity of stepping out of the orthodox boxes which have been constructed to "contain" it in order to more clearly embrace the true intent of the Torah's prophets and apply and strengthen their message in the modern instead of the old world. David longed to be able to discuss this point of view with his father, but the elder Lurie and David's cousin Saul are too boxed in by the terrible experiences they have had outside the box of orthodox Judaism. David's younger brother, interestingly enough, chooses to stay comfortably within the box by all physical appearances and not rock the boat. However, in the privacy of his reading he has been able to find his freedom.

The point is that the prophetic commentators have been used by the orthodox father and cousin to close doors rather than to open them—a comfortable place in the short run but a very dangerous one in the long run. The younger brother lives a lie. Only David embraces freedom, difficult and dangerous as it is, and in so doing is more truly embracing the old prophets' messages.

There are some leaders, today, who ask us to question ourselves and our personal perceptions. An instructional text on the wall at the St Louis Science Center on 29 June 1998 near an array of optical and other types of illusions in an exhibit showed that we often make assumptions that fool us. The text said,

What Is Reality?

We have been known to ask this over and over. There is probably no single right answer. And, as the exhibits show, we can be fooled.

Our perceptions of the world (what we sense, feel or understand) are important. How we make sense of our world affects many of the every day decisions we make. Thus, it is also important to know how we can be fooled by illusions. Some illusions “work” because our senses are limited. Others fool us because we have some built-in expectations or bias. Still other illusions confuse us by sending one message to our senses and a different message to our brains.

Do not feel bad about being fooled by these exhibits! Learning more about how we perceive opens up new ways of looking at the world and helps us learn about what it means to be human.

It’s all part of the Human Adventure.

Danah Zohar helps us move out of ourselves into a whole new world in a quantum leap!

If reality at the everyday level on which we commonly experience it does indeed consist of actual things like bodies and desks and chairs, while at the quantum level there exist no actual “things” but rather myriad possibilities for countless actualities, what becomes of all that potential? At what stage, and why, does one of Nature’s manifold possibilities fix itself in the world of “real things,” and what role, if any, is played by all the lost possibilities in achieving this final state of affairs?¹⁰

¹⁰ [Danah Zohar](#) in collaboration with I. N. Marshall, The Quantum Self, Human Nature and Consciousness Defined by the New Physics, p. 31

As the inadequacies of the computer model and the holographic model illustrate, the central problem of understanding consciousness in physical terms, the rock against which all previous theories have broken, is the problem of the unity of consciousness, the distinctive indivisibility of our thoughts, perceptions, and feelings. Without it there could be no experience such as we know it and no self having that experience. No process in classical physics gives rise to that sort of unity, and until fairly recently it was not a major theme in quantum physics. But now that special sorts of specifically quantum mechanical unity are recognized, both physicists and philosophers have begun to wonder whether they might not have some meaningful relevance to the unity of consciousness.¹¹

It seems to me, that human life at the interface between the finite and the infinite is both difficult and exhilarating. We have so many new realms of thought to explore that it would be chilling to close our minds to them.

Daniel Quinn, in Ishmael, says...

...there are two trees in the garden, one for the gods and one for us. The one for them is the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and the one for us is the Tree of Life. But we can only find the Tree of Life if we stay in the garden—and we can only stay in the garden if we keep our hands off the gods' tree."

And earlier (p 240)

¹¹ [Danah Zohar](#) in collaboration with I. N. Marshall, The Quantum Self, Human Nature and Consciousness Defined by the New Physics, p. 78

... We know what happens if you take the Taker premise, that the world belongs to man.

“Yes, that’s a disaster.”

“And what happens if you take the Leaver premise, that man belongs to the world?”

“Then creation goes on forever.”¹²

Berni said, "There is something in me that is in every other living thing, it can be called spirituality." Nadia Ramzy, a psychoanalyst friend, proposes that "transcendence—moving out of ego—is a goal of our spiritual journey." The finite can free itself to explore the infinite.

Robert Fulghum says (on the fly leaf of his book)...

If I was absolutely certain about all things, I would spend my life in anxious misery, fearful of losing my way. But since everything and anything is always possible, the miraculous is always nearby and wonders shall never, ever cease. I believe that human freedom may be stated in one term, which serves as a little brick propping open the door of existence: Maybe.¹³

¹² [Quinn, Daniel](#). *Ishmael*. Bantam/Turner Book c. 1992 by Daniel Quinn ISBN 0-553-56166-9, p241

¹³ [Fulghum, Robert](#), *Maybe (maybe not), Second Thoughts From a Secret Life*, Villard Books, New York 1993.

My own words

Let me put the Maybe into my own words. This will give some sort of definition to the term *questionable theology*, which remains my choice of terms for a handle. The concept needs a handle so we can grasp it.

This book is about a life which recognizes the partial nature of our contact with what is eternal and endless. It recognizes that we, all of us living creatures, are a finite part of that infinity. It recognizes that we are mortal but have immortal potential or import (and I mean to make no religious inference by using the term immortal). It urges that there are no final answers to universal questions within our worldly experience—and that includes our religious experience. Yet, our worldly experience is all we have in describing the bigger picture. It accepts that we may each be made in the image of a creator, or that we may not. However, it suggests that we can look to each living example in the creation to increase the breadth of our understanding. It rejects nothing out of hand and remains open to different ways of approaching life. The word OPEN is the important operative. Being open can encompass eternity whereas closing our minds limit us to our own personal prisons.

Chapter 3. **Rationalism is an Ism**

A friend of mine recently committed suicide. He had a brilliant mind and very successfully used it while writing in computer languages, telling computers what to do. He could even use his mind to control his own body, making his heart stop through mental concentration. But, he began to show the symptoms of mercury poisoning. He was very much concerned. My wife asked him if he couldn't rid his body of the poison through mental concentration. He responded that the problem with mercury is that it destroyed the brain and therefore the ability to be in control of one's actions. His suicide note said that he could no longer cope with a life which he could no longer consciously control. He shot his brains out on the grounds of a hospital, with a request that his organs be made available to those in need of them.

The intellectual part of the brain has a great deal to offer human society. The age of reason, the age of science, the age of technology have brought us incredible material blessings. But they have not brought us closer to being in control of the universe even though we would like to think that they have. We, as the most intelligent beings in creation, are in danger of blowing our brains out. It is sobering to realize that the lowly cockroach and possum have successfully inhabited the earth for many more years than intelligent hominids.

Intellectual constructs are called isms and are the rationalizations of finite minds. Even mysticism has its constructs. Humans have a need for formulas; they need to hang onto the tail of the elephant in order not to lose contact with the beast. Today, scientists have climbed up the tail and are beginning to take a new look at the universe, a view which seems alien to the patterns of rationalism we have developed. The new look is called quantum theory.

Danah Zohar notes that

...there is an intriguing parallel between the way logic helps to structure and focus our otherwise 'indeterminate,' flowing thought processes and the way the laws of classical physics make it possible to describe the everyday world of separate objects and causal

relationships that overlie and are the limit of quantum-level processes. Without this classical limit there would be no solid, 'real' world; without logic there would be no way to express our thoughts clearly, no way to test them against the outside world.¹⁴

Her book is a treatise on how the indeterminate (infinite, in my terminology) world coexists with that of the classical world of rational physicists (finite). I find it exciting to see rational scientists beginning to converse with academic philosophers and mystical theologians in a new collaboration. I have never been able to separate the areas of science and religion in my own life and have felt that the wisest people I have known have been able to pose questions and apply results from the broadest of outlooks without dogmatism nor without faith.

For instance, in graduate school I was intrigued by the ubiquity of “tests of significance.” These tests are based on mathematical models which rely on *probabilities* (translated *chance*). Rationalism has thus led us to test things against chance! There seem to be some philosophical and theological implications to that, but they were not part of my training to be a scientist.

The first thing I learned in graduate school is to have a healthy respect for the scientific method. Often, far too often, people fool themselves. We jump to conclusions without taking an unbiased look at the evidence. Organizing material, asking questions, keeping records, and testing for significance can lead us to valuable information, and keep us from making some serious errors. A person should not trust their own judgment, except with a healthy dose of skepticism. Certainly, science has brought us great rewards by helping us to thwart some of our biases.

The second thing I learned, and this had surprised me, is that textbooks are filled with a misapplication of the results of scientific methodology. They are rather like tabloid newspapers in their innuendo. Normally, an experiment holds true only for situations which closely parallel the original. There are always assumptions which are made in setting up the experimental situation, and the same assumptions must be made when applying the results. In our eager efforts to understand life, and control it, we often ignore the

¹⁴ [Danah Zohar](#), *The Quantum Self* (p. 77)

assumptions and apply the results of our experiments willy nilly. Really, the scientific method is not as useful as we think it is. Read Stephen J. Gould's [The Mismeasure of Man](#)¹⁵ for a look at how science has been misused with terrible consequences. We cannot depend on science to solve all of our problems and must always use our good judgment in applying the findings of science. Rationalism boxes us into a finite view of the universe.

My search for complete comprehension, even after six years of graduate school, and even after limiting the exploration to dairy cattle genetics, was left inconclusive. I was led to more questions than answers. Read on!

Iowa State University of Science and Technology initiated research aimed at a very practical problem. Should we develop two different lines of dairy cows for two different diets: (1) cows on a concentrated diet, high in corn and (2) cows fed mostly "roughage" i.e. grass, hay, and silage? Roughage is cheap and grows on land across the United States not suitable for concentrated crops; but the mid-west has an abundance of concentrates which could be fed to dairy cows. Should we breed two different types of cows— one for high grain feeding in the mid-west and one for a diet of roughage in areas not suitable to raising grain?

If different types of cows are needed for different feeding regimens, then the genes which control milk production will have different values dependent on which diet supports their expression. *Good* could also be *not good*! We call such a dependency an interaction— a genetic x environmental interaction. There is a continuing debate over the importance of such interactions— the debate of nature and nurture, of the relative importance of the genetic and the environmental.

Twins provided us with a theoretically clean way (in the rational paradigm) to measure the genetic x environmental interaction because we have two identical genotypes (the individual's collection of genes) to be expressed on both diets. An entire dairy complex was built to house the experimental herd. It was designed to provide uniform environmental conditions for every animal, as nearly as that is possible. Half of the pairs had one twin on concentrates and one on roughage. The other half of the pairs were used to measure unexplained *noise*, the "error factor," by putting both twins on the same diet. Any difference in the amount of milk produced

¹⁵ [Gould, Stephen J. The Mismeasure of Man.](#)

by those pairs, since they were both treated “exactly” the same (an assumption), would give a measure of how much variation was attributable to “error.” We could then answer the question of whether it would be fruitful to create two different kinds of cows.

Twins were purchased within a few days of birth. Only those appearing to be identical were brought into the experiment.¹⁶ Both animals of the *first* pair were placed on the concentrated ration and both of the *fourth* pair were placed on the roughage ration. The *second and third* pairs were randomly split with one on concentrates and one on roughage. If we had had quadruplets the design of the experiment would have been even more powerful, but it was reasonable to assume (here was another assumption) that interaction would be expressed in generally the same way regardless of which genes for milk production were inherited by the various pairs. We were only looking for simple, additive, measurable results, anyway.

I was fortunate to be on board when the data collected from the twins were ready to be analyzed. There were first lactation records from 30 pairs, assumed to be genetically identical (another assumption), and from 32 pairs which were identified (by blood tests) as fraternal even though they originally seemed to be identical. This was not a large number of animals from which to deduce answers, but perhaps enough to give an indication of results. A herd of 124 animals is a sizable number when thinking about the investment of funds and labor.

The resultant statistical interaction seemed to be positive when measured against chance fluctuations: from 0 to 10% of the variance of the records. But it was not “significant” according to the statistical test. It was mathematically impossible for the interaction to be less than zero unless some of our assumptions were wrong. Lack of significance meant that the differences attributed to interaction could well have been a result of *noise*, of chance fluctuations. At least, as a practical matter, this result meant that the dairy industry should continue to ignore feeding regimen in selecting sires. That conclusion justified the expense of the project.

¹⁶ The identical genotype of a pair could not be proven; differences, however, could be proven by blood-typing. Forty percent of the twins tested fraternal instead of identical. The remaining 60% could only be assumed to be identical. The *likelihood* was that they were.

This likelihood of a positive, although insignificant interaction, had significant theoretical implications to me. Working with the twins, I realized that even though the “identical” twins (monozygotic is the more precise term) likely had identical genotypes, they did not occupy the same space in the world. For instance, one member of a pair would be lying in a draft and catch a cold. This would make that animal different from its mate and possibly vulnerable, subsequently, to other ailments. Perhaps a mounting series of infections would even stunt its growth so that it could not consume as much food when it matured. In the case of another pair, with a different set of genes, the cold virus may have failed to make the animals sick. When different environmental factors begin to affect twins, a whole chain of interactions is put in motion as interaction interacts with interaction in a complex of interactions which would be impossible to sort out because they approach infinity in number and complexity. At the edge of useful knowledge, I was left with the conclusion that each individual is a unique creation, in all likelihood never to be repeated, and that the largest computer would be incapable of even approximating the myriad of “insignificant” interactions. Insignificant indeed!

Rationalism, as applied to our understanding of fundamental genetics, would not be able to give final answers for every diet and every circumstance. The world is too noisy for the assumption that it can.
Rationalism ends up being impotent when dealing with infinity.

The impotence of the scientific method to explain our world was made apparent in several other, unexpected events I had in dealing with the twin dairy cows. Heifers (young females) are naturally fearful of humans until they are handled on a regular basis such as when they are milked twice a day. When we entered a pen to catch an individual for measuring, the heifers would normally retreat to the far end of the paddock. It took several of us “cowboys” to cut out and catch the animal to be measured. Except one time. A white heifer left the crowd in the far corner, eyes wide, ears up, and head held high in a classic gesture of curiosity. Then she alone made her way over toward us. Cattle are sometimes curious about changes in their environment but seldom apart from the herd. When we visited her twin’s paddock the same thing happened again; her twin left the crowd and came toward us eyes wide, ears up, and head held high.

Such an action is so rare that we would not be able to design an experiment to show “significance.” Yet, common sense tells me that this

particular form of curiosity must be, in large measure, hereditary. The white twins had no opportunity to associate with each other after the first few days following birth. Surely, they had inherited this behavioral pattern. Rare events do not lend themselves to designed experiments even though their appearance sometimes disproves some generally accepted theory.

A similar occurrence took place in which we hunted for another set of twins, both cows in their first lactation but who were on different regimens and had not been raised together. We could not find either twin although we had pictures with which to identify them. We then discovered that both members of this pair were shy and, being small in stature, were hiding from us behind a larger cow! How unusual! Surely, the genes programmed each twin to hide from us.

These two unrelated and singular events seemed of great significance to me. Behavior and who knows what else in our world can be in the control of genetics— and yet, an individual is an individual! How can we make sense of such double talk?

The label of “double talk” belies our rationalistic paradigm. We insist that our world make sense and be “real.” We prefer decisions to potentials. Danah Zohar is right in promoting a new paradigm, one characterized by the seeming double talk of dual potentials, although I trust that she will not use the quantum perspective to box her thinking into a new paradigm which has walls of mirrored reflections.

Many classical physicists and scientists have been wise enough to utilize the scientific method to advantage without closing their minds to other potentials. They are openly humble and admit the limits of their mortality within an infinite sea of immortality. I trust that they will be equally wise in the application of a quantum perspective. A questionable theology seems always appropriate regardless of the human construct, the “ism”.

The findings I observed in the experiments with twins left me with more questions than answers. That is to be expected in a questionable theology. But this in no way demeans the progress which geneticists have made. Genetic principles can be and have been used to solve many otherwise mysterious elements of life. And we are on the verge of very exciting results in the field of molecular biology, genetic mapping, genetic engineering, etc. But, if we get carried away with the possibilities and our own cleverness and

forget that we do not understand all of the factors nor their implications, then we will be in serious trouble. Truth, when it becomes dogmatic, becomes a lie, and lies are dangerous! Wisdom requires humility.

Rationalism has brought great benefits to human society, but it has also brought great suffering. Too few have kept their minds open, too many have cut themselves off from eternity. It is good to see rationalism being put into perspective, today. It is one tool out of many possible tools to help us understand our world, but it will never exhaust all the answers; and that's my dogmatic statement for this chapter!

We, in our rationalistic mode, define an item or an event but then become uncomfortable when we find the item or event is not definable, separable, and independent. Figuring out what life is all about is like gathering together all the parts of a car: the transmission, the steering wheel, the exhaust pipe, etc. Piling all parts on top of each other does not make an operating car—the parts are not simply additive, in the mathematician's lingo. An exhaust pipe by itself does nothing. It has to be connected, it has to interact with other parts. If even one part is missing or out of place, the entire machine fails to operate properly.

A car is not made from an infinite number of parts, so the analogy is not apropos to life. But, it illustrates the idea of interaction—the relationship of part with part. The mind-set of the finite world is one of discrete parts. To approximate infinity, we envision that discrete parts interact with discrete parts. In reality, the world is fundamentally not discrete in nature but a continuous, miraculous, unfathomable, complex of ill-defined items and events. Interactions can help us grasp the significance of some limited situations as long as we remain aware that the interactions only approximate what is really going on and can be applied only in limited ways. Interactions are the finite mind's way of dealing with the interface between the finite and the infinite. Calculus uses discrete models to deduce the actions of continuous models. Humans, likewise, look at life from a discrete perspective in order to deduce eternal patterns. But there is still room for prayer!

It may make us uncomfortable not to be able to encompass (and control) all items and events, but when we come to understand how life really reflects eternity, we see that to contain life is to suffocate it, to claim control kills

what is most wonderful by crowding out immortality. Such a view is suicidal.

A friend¹⁷ found the following quote, taken from a 1988 article on Sir Isaac Newton...

...He was modest in character. He said of himself shortly before his death, "I do not know what I may appear to the world, but to myself I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the seashore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.

Measuring the universe against chance seems as foolish to me as denying the possibility of a higher power in the universe. An open mind allows for a synthesis of seemingly random processes and of miracles. The rational mind, when open, is able to accept the irrational as an outcome of our finite status.

Before the reader jumps to the conclusion that in questionable theology anything goes, I hasten to add that that is far from the case. Matters of honesty, integrity, selflessness, respect, reverence seem to be universally desired in human society. But, they have little to do with rationalism.

¹⁷ Bill McDonald

Chapter 4. **The Human Trick**

Paradoxes are an artifact of the finite. If we understood the infinite picture, the paradoxes would be absorbed. In the finite world we put things in boxes, we make categories, we set up classes. These divisions separate things into discrete bundles which we, with our finite minds, can comprehend. But divisions also take their toll by destroying the wholeness. In the infinite world, everything is linked and diversity is unified into an incomprehensible whole.

We are linked to this infinite world as a part is to the whole. A lovely winter snow scene is composed of a near infinity of snowflakes, each one different from the other. An inviting sandy beach is made up of tiny grains of sand. Without the individual snowflakes there would be no snow scene but one snowflake is not a panorama. Without a grain of sand there would be no beach but one grain of sand can cause considerable irritation by itself. The whole and the part cannot be separated without causing even greater irritations. *We humans are wont to turn our link with eternity around and look in the wrong end of the telescope without realizing that we are at the wrong end.* We think our link with eternity makes us eternal or that our link with the Infinite makes us infinite. Rather, we are individually vital and yet irritable.

What happens when we get our telescope wrong is that we lose our perspective. We seem to like to be at the wrong end and will even manipulate our thinking to give us the perspective we want. That is the human trick we play upon ourselves. It leads to all sorts of shortsighted conditions.

The broader, all-inclusive picture sees individual citizens as contributing members of society, each with certain rights and certain responsibilities. In the broad view it is not a paradox to speak of rights and responsibilities as inseparable. At the myopic wrong end of the telescope we see either rights or responsibilities, but can't see both at the same time.

The 1996 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa understands this situation and states, as well as one can in human terms, the *political* conditions which enable mortals to embrace immortality...

...We,

*...Believe that South Africa belongs to all who live in it,
united in diversity... [and who are now seeking to]*

*...Heal the divisions of the past and establish a society
based on democratic values, social justice and
fundamental human rights;*

*Lay the foundations for a democratic and open society in
which government is based on the will of the people and
every citizen is equally protected by law;*

*Improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the
potential of each person; and*

*Build a united and democratic South Africa able to take
its rightful place as a sovereign state in the family of
nations.*

May God protect our people.¹⁸

It is possible for life to bloom in a mortal world located somewhere between death and life, between slavery and freedom. Danes have a saying, “Between the dark stone and the light, life is growing.” Our human task is to keep this perspective while we work out the ‘somewhere between’ and create a beautiful bloom rather than a hideous monster.

The dualism, the paradox, is marbled right through the meat of our muscled ability. In their Founding Provisions, the South Africans note that citizens (Article 3) are both: a) equally *entitled* to rights and privileges of citizenship and b) equally *subject* to the duties and responsibilities of citizenship. Why would mortal humans even try to see life in terms of only rights and privileges? What we are entitled to is dependent upon what we are subjected to. The two cannot be separated without rending the civic fabric.

¹⁸ <http://www.info.gov.za/documents/constitution/index.htm>

Jesus' admonition that one must be ready to lay down one's life for another is pertinent at this point. Life and death come into conflict in the somewhere-between. At times one must give life if life is to continue while at other times we struggle mightily to keep life going. Those are probably the two greatest verities— they are at the heart of the great design: cycles of life and death and life and death and life and death. The two are always present. In loving life are we also willing to give it up? Billy Graham is credited with understanding this: "His secret is simple. At the core: Are you so committed to your faith and values that you are ready to die for them?"¹⁹

I faced the same condition when I married Berni— I told her that I didn't feel a person was ready to commit to marriage unless they were ready to die for their sweetheart. I told her that I was ready to die for her. What I didn't realize was that it really meant that I should die a thousand small deaths instead of some grandiose final rite. That depth of commitment, however, is what has helped our marriage to survive and even flourish.

Berni and I jog two miles five mornings each week. This morning I really didn't feel like getting out of bed and was pretty sure that jogging would be painful and difficult; I just had no energy and my body was saying, "Don't do this!" I was telling myself that perhaps I was overdoing this jogging routine, perhaps I had pushed my heart too far, perhaps I was wearing my knees out instead of strengthening them. Berni got up, took care of some chores while I remained in bed, and then came into the bedroom to ask if I was going jogging. With this encouragement, I was able to roust myself from recumbency, ignore my body's wishes, and get myself down to the track. After all, I reasoned, I could quit at any time, and *I was aware that I could be fooling myself* about how painful and physically detrimental jogging could be. The jogging went well, we completed our two miles without difficulty, and I felt invigorated when it was over. So much for listening to my body! Yesterday morning Berni was the one who stayed in bed and I was feeling great! So, I went out alone feeling that I could set a new personal record for the eight laps around the field. However, I overdid it and, although I set a personal record, it was only for one mile, not two, and I had to walk the second mile.

¹⁹ Quoting Robert Schuller on Billy Graham's enduring influence; quoted from "Brady Bits," a byline to an article by James Brady, "In Step With Robert Schuller" Parade Magazine April 20, 1997, page 18.

The point is that it is not possible to trust what the body says. The body can be clever at shirking responsibility and finding rational excuses to avoid discomfort. Companionship, peer pressure, and routine can help combat the tendency to be irresponsible or lazy.

On the other hand, physical therapists, trainers and many others tell you to listen to your body, and theirs, too, is good advice. For instance, the [Arthritis Foundation](#) in their booklet,, advise,

A good general rule to remember is to stop exercising if you start having sharp pain or more pain than usual. Pain is your warning signal that something is wrong.²⁰

Counselors often encourage spontaneity and devise ways to help people break *bad* habits which cause unbalanced wear. But, *good* habits are to be encouraged! The problem is to know which is which.

What can one use as an anchor in such a kaleidoscopic world? We each have our personal anchors. Sometimes those anchors rip loose, or we are forced to cut loose from them during a gale, and to replace them with new anchors in calmer times. It is nice to be anchored but it is also nice to lay back and float through the fascinating turns of the kaleidoscopic world. In the world of questionable theology there are no absolutes, no permanent anchors. It is important to set anchors but also to be ready to haul them up for relocation. Change seems to be the only constant. Yet, we know that things which enhance life are right and things which destroy life are wrong. Matters of honesty, integrity, selflessness, respect, reverence seem to be universally desired in human society because they enhance life while deceit, irresponsibility, selfishness, hate, and a complete lack of reverence for anything are destructive.

If it is true that we humans learn of the immortal through our mortal experience, then we can understand why people who considered that the world is flat like a table, which has edges, would expect that one could travel to the ends of the earth and fall off the edge. Their experience was too limited.

²⁰ [Exercise and Your Arthritis](#), [Arthritis Foundation](#) p.13

There were those who could see further, encompass a broader view, and understand that a flat world was not the only way to look at things. Those who asked questions and left the door open beyond the limits of their experience developed insights which prompted Columbus to sail west to get east, Magellan to actually sail around the world and many others before them to set sail upon uncharted seas. It took great faith in something beyond the self and a willingness to die in the pursuit.

The sky looks blue to us and, a few years ago, was assumed to go on and on and on into space. When astronauts sailed beyond the earth's atmosphere they found that the sky is blue only to those on earth; their vision was broadened and their experiences became evidence for new theories. The sky still looks blue to us but we are also aware that the blue color is only our earthbound atmosphere and so we approach blue sky with a new attitude. As we have looked deeper into space and used new tools to help us look in new ways, our understanding of the universe has taken broad leaps which will allow yet greater visions. We are even thinking beyond linear reasoning.

None of these developments would have been possible if we had closed our minds and limited our view to the world we already knew.

And yet we fail to learn the lesson. We so easily slip into a dogmatic stance which closes off further explorations. The unfamiliar is scary. But, once we realize the consequences of our limited finite view, we become eager to be open, to welcome new experiences, and to reach as far as we are able in probing into the mystery of life. To slip back into a dogmatic stance in our life puts us in danger, like Sweeney Todd, of "running amok in it".

We are often running amok and yet, there is a bright side, as Timothy Ferris puts it,

*wrongheaded ideas and ill-fated theories can lead,
however fitfully, to genuine advances in knowledge.²¹*

There will be blind alleys, wrong directions, detours, and other errors in negotiating the maze of life, but as we explore all of life's potentials we come to understand better what is required of us, which paths seem to be good, and which destructive avenues we should avoid. Negative results are

²¹ [Ferris, Timothy](#), *The Whole Shebang*, p, 108.

useful in that we know not to pour too great an amount of our limited energy into those avenues.

Always, there is the need to keep an open mind, to know there is something beyond the blue. We don't know when we are wrong and when we are right although we are prodded or enticed to follow one path or another.

Astronomer Margaret Geller is reported to have said,

I have a strongly held skepticism about any strongly held beliefs, especially my own.²²

²² [Ferris, Timothy](#), *The Whole Shebang*, p. 155

Chapter 5. **The Past is Gone Except it Isn't**

Albert Brooks (playing John Henderson in Paramount Pictures 1996 movie Mother) tells Debbie Reynolds, his movie mother,

*That past is plopped all over our lives.*²³

Plopped is a good choice for an adjective because it suggests the inescapable, incomplete, seemingly random, pervasive, inscrutable, complex, and muddy influence of the past on the present.

The present could be called “this instant of eternity,” another paradoxical use of words (how can an instant be an eternity?) to describe our condition of life. Yet, it is living in the fleeting moment where we find our opening to touch eternity.

Eternity is, bear with me, like a head of hair, although for the most part mine happens to be bare of hair! A strand of hair is made from past moments added cell by cell. The past cells need to be groomed, cared for, washed, and conditioned. As each strand lengthens the past moments shine; there are highlights and that glow, coming from a past connected to the living present.

But, when hair is cut it ceases to grow. It becomes static because it will never get longer, it is curtailed. We can make a wig of dead hair, dress it, color it, brush it and even put it to use in some theatrical farce, but it somehow lacks the excitement and adventure of living hair attached to a tossing head.

The past in reality is time never to be revisited except as virtual reality. Yet, the past is revisited virtually every moment. The dead past only has relevance and reality in the living present. We humans do not like such ploppy, messy situations. We speak of telling the truth about the past. We speak of history as dates, locations, personalities, and we set up shrines to the events associated with them. Who knows what actually happened? We make our guesses but there is always a spin on what has happened depending on what our current needs are and which living person is giving it a voice.

²³ <http://www.imagesjournal.com/issue02/reviews/mother.htm>

On the other hand, the present moment sometimes blinds us to an understanding of what regulates, dictates, and urges us to behave as we do; what is literally behind our actions. We wishfully think that we can ignore the past and start each day as “the first day of the rest of our lives.” Yet, in reality, the present is never free of the past—not even if you shave the head. It will grow out again just as straight or curly as in the past. The only way to get rid of the past is to kill the present! Again, we humans do not like such messy situations.

But, in this book we are now used to messes. In fact, it seems to be our *minds* that are messed up, playing tricks on us! If we could look at the past as something only understood through the present, and could look at the present as a complex of creative potential taking hold of what has been delivered to us—if we could accept this messy situation, then we would have much greater success with history and much greater success in creating improvements to living. A questionable theology frees us from debilitating human dilemmas and tickles us instead with the much greater challenge of working out ways to a better life.

History is like a bridge from the past to the present. It may be a narrow or a broad bridge; it may be a strong or a weak bridge, well constructed or flawed, utilitarian or fanciful. It may lead to nowhere or it may lead up the mountain even though we can only guess what is at the top. We build the bridge and it will reflect our character. Looking at history in this way allows us to make use of what has gone before without putting up a barricade at our end so that traffic on the bridge ceases.

It is often useful to take the negative approach. Although we cannot say what truth is, we can, within limits, say what it is not. We do have a finite experience with time, e.g. 1776 designates a different time than 1775. Saying this should not imply that what happened in 1775 was separate from what happened in 1776, but by getting mixed up and saying that something that happened in 1776 actually happened in 1775 is possibly careless, perhaps dishonest, and certainly misleading. Even though we are not certain of what truth is, intentional lies and carelessness eventually undermine the climb up the mountain or the journey through the woods.

Modern Denmark’s founding father, N.F.S. Grundtvig, wisely used the term *historico-poetic*. Linking history and poetry recognizes that history is always part fantasy, always interpreted, always mythological. Failure to recognize this mythic quality is what makes many history courses so

uninteresting, boring, and useless. Young students innately understand that the past has no meaning apart from their own lives. History becomes relevant only as it helps shed light on life. This does not imply that there is no need for honesty or for careful scholarship; these traits can keep the bridge in repair; but the honest scholar who is wise enough to keep an open mind, is ready to repair, ready to redesign, and even to tear down what has been built and will make the greatest contribution a scholar can make. Enlightened people will put the knowledge to use.

History is a story told by storytellers to listeners who are present; the interaction between storyteller and the listener is always present. Therefore, each time the story is told, it is never the same. Every time the teller tells the story it is a different time and every time the listener hears it is in a different time. History is not static or it is not history. We can take parts of history and put them in a museum; we can *can* the story by putting it down in print. But then the hair has been cut. In the museum and in the book, history is dead until someone alive gives it life and the life they give is from the present, not from the past. Unless history is connected to the living, it is mutilated just like the muscle severed from the body and placed in a jar of formaldehyde or the hair cut off from its tossing head. There is no way to bring back the past other than to have the living reinterpret it, relive it or try to relive it. And, there is no reason to revive the past unless it speaks to the present.

But here we come to a new role for history, for the historico-poetic; it enables us to see the heights and depths to which human life can aspire. If we believe that there is some purpose, some grand design, or some colossal experiment in human life or just simply in life, then history provides the window through which we can catch glimpses of that purpose, design, experiment or happenstance possibilities. The incredible experience of life, of being alive, of being aware or conscious of self, is such a stupendous fact that it is difficult for me to write it off as meaningless. It is through history that we seek the meaning.

It is possible to dismiss life and to destroy it; that we must allow. But to accept a grander plan requires entry into the realm of faith, i.e. embracing the unknown. Since we know that we are alive, since we are conscious beings, it is rather difficult to dismiss ourselves, although some people do just that. Fortunately, it is normal, and apparently has been throughout the ages, to speak of a God of life and to seek an understanding of that God. History

helps us accumulate insights into divining what life is all about. We do have the option to go through life ignoring historical perspectives. We can go through the motions of life. Or we can participate in the greatness of its adventure.

History comes to us like life itself. There are stories which focus on individuals; there are stories which paint broader strokes and speak of nations, or cultures, or epochs. Grains of sand and a myriad of snowflakes one by one create a bigger picture which is worthy of contemplation. My Granny was fond of the verse, "Little drops of water, little grains of sand, make the mighty ocean and the pleasant land."

Quantum theory deals with time and states of being. At any point in time, electrons (or anything else) can be observed to be in either one state or another, or perhaps another, but they cannot be both at the same time. Until a point in time when a state is observed, things have potential to be one of several things. But once observed, i.e. once measured, once experienced, once the point in time has occurred, the potential is gone. This is true because time/history cannot be recaptured with its potential intact.

This gives us a problem when we look at history, the same problem facing the quantum physicist. We can observe what has happened, but the observing changes what has been observed because by observing it, the potential evaporates.

History depends upon the tools we use to measure it, just as the state of an electron depends on whether we measure it with a wave detector or a particle detector. But once it has been measured, time has gone and we cannot go back and measure it again. We can only create artificial historic scenarios. Those are made from our current point in time and require us to choose our tools of measurement.

Have you seen the movie Amistad?²⁴ The climax in its development comes in the statement by Cinque and later reiterated in less precise terms by John Quincy Adams, something to the effect that, "I am the entire reason for the existence of my ancestors." Today it is our turn. As we live, our predecessors come alive, albeit in modern dress.

²⁴ <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0118607/>

We equate past and present, but time does not work that way and the past can never be actually captured, aside from entering a time machine; yet in the same breath the past is always with us and the present is never free of it. I wholeheartedly agree that "we can put too much emphasis on permanence as a value in itself, forgetting that what is transient can also be beautiful, precious and meaningful in its own time." Living in that transient moment is exactly my point. The problem comes when the past crowds out the present. Then the needs of the present are ignored. When the present ignores the past, people are left unaware of that which can illuminate the present and we are left in the dark.. In both cases the "vital and alive" is paramount, which is exactly what "the reason for the existence of his/her ancestors" expresses so clearly, albeit shockingly.

New phrases are needed so that we can deal with concepts, freed from the confines with which the past will fetter and color the big picture. The past should not be allowed to hide the remaining pieces of the puzzle—those not yet in place. If we are only looking backward to the past, we will see only the pieces of the puzzle which we have put into place. This is a tricky puzzle, we may have pieces in the wrong places.

J.B.S. Haldane said,

*The universe is not only queerer than we suppose, but queerer than we can suppose.*²⁵

Only by standing on the accumulated insights of the past, by placing the past underfoot, can the past become a peak from which to peek beyond. We would be foolish to reinvent the wheel but would never reach the moon if we limited ourselves to wheeled vehicles.

²⁵ [Haldane, J.B. S.](#)

Chapter 6. **Does Questionable Theology Embrace or Tackle Religious Faith?**

Questionable theology is neutral when it comes to religion. Religion, as a concept, is as fraught with constructs as any other concept which is stuffed into our word-boxes. Communication about it is extremely difficult because belief systems go beyond words alone. Questionable theology listens, and then tries various approaches to religion. It neither assumes nor denies the existence of God. **Questionable theology is about realizing our infinite possibilities and realizing that human potential in the face of our limitations.** It does not create a vacuum— a condition achieved in a closed container— but instead opens life up to life beyond itself.

Angelus Silesius (1624-1677) believed that...

...God is Indefinable, at once All and Nothing, Being and Non-Being. Before our Creator, we are nothing and yet it is only in us as the image of God, that God can see himself.²⁶

Religious leaders

I had hoped by studying the various religions of the world that I would find brothers and sisters through the ages who had the realization that we can only see eternity imperfectly. Isn't this what Paul meant when he said that now we see through a dark mirror and will only know as we are known in some other existence? Certainly there have been many religious leaders endowed with this sort of intellectual humility. It is a humility coupled with a reverence for life which questionable theology implies.

²⁶ [Brosse, Jaques, Religious Leaders, Chambers Ltd. NY, 1988](#), p.5.

Saint Augustine (354-430), I understand, was wary of Christianity until he was 32 and then, after conversion, seems to have kept an open mind, constantly seeking a dialogue between the creation and the creator, a...

...spiritual journey which leads the finite being to infinity. ... We will look as if we were going to find, but we will never find without always looking.²⁷

Gregory of Nyssa (335-394) says...

...Our spiritual nature exists according to the image of God, it resembles what is beyond it: being incapable of knowing itself, it reflects the inaccessible character of God.²⁸

Dionysius the Areopagite (5th-6th centuries) wrote that...

...Our knowledge of God comes firstly from the study of names dedicated to Him, but must go beyond that study, for any definition of God would be to limit the transcending unlimited.²⁹

René Guénon (1886-1951) wrote...

...Any teaching on the inexpressible can obviously only suggest it with the help of borrowed images which aid contemplation.³⁰

²⁷ [Brosse, Jaques, Religious Leaders, Chambers Ltd. NY, 1988](#), pp. 9-10.

²⁸ [Brosse, Jaques, Religious Leaders, Chambers Ltd. NY, 1988](#), p.37.

²⁹ [Brosse, Jaques, Religious Leaders, Chambers Ltd. NY, 1988](#), p.45.

³⁰ [Brosse, Jaques, Religious Leaders, Chambers Ltd. NY, 1988](#), p.56.

These are ample examples of religious leaders with open minds living at the interface between the finite and the infinite. Sometimes, however, they begin by being open and then, when that leads to some new insights, they jealously guard those insights and stop looking. This is dangerous because life is not static; what is a useful truth at one time or in one circumstance may not hold true at other times or in other circumstances. Oh yes, we wish there were those fixed truths, but I claim that that is a human foible! It is the old human trickster again.

Much inspiration can be found among the religious leaders of the world, but I understand why Krishnamurti (1895-1986)...

...systematically rejected all religions because he believed that people took refuge in them and that they presented an obstacle to the personal search for truth.³¹

Indeed, a large percentage of religious leaders alienated those around them or were exiled, ostracized, burnt at the stake, and not recognized as religious leaders until after their death. To add insult to injury, their *followers* more often than not misused their mentor's insights and, horror of horrors, turned them into new dogmas (see [Chaim Potok's](#) quote, p. 24)!

Hinduism recognizes the distinction between the finite and the infinite. Life, it contends, is a progression from the finite to the infinite. Much of Hinduism is aimed toward aligning one's life to be open to the leadings of what is infinite. The Hindu prayer which begins, "Oh Thou, before whom all words recoil," recognizes that words are human attempts at the infinite, but are never complete in their comprehension— Smith says, words "...are indicators that point us in the right direction without delivering us to our destination."³²

But, as with all other formal religions, much of Hinduism, despite its insight into infinity (the state of Brahma) "need(s) pictures almost , to

³¹ [Brosse, Jaques, Religious Leaders, Chambers Ltd. NY, 1988](#), p.111.

³² [Smith, Huston](#), *ibid.* p.47.

provide traction.”³³ Hinduism then begins closing the doors it has opened and puts life into a series of picture boxes such as:

personality types–

intellectual, emotional, active, and experimental

age stages–

student, householder, retired, and renunciation

one’s station in life (caste)–

Brahmans, organizers, producers, and untouchables

or sorted according to–

physical, conscious mind, subconscious mind, and spirit

Overlooking the stumbling blocks which these boxes often become, the Hindus have used them to provide a wealth of practical methods to enable the individual to be open to alignment with or participate in a state-of-being marked by some degree of synchronization with the infinite. Smith calls it, “to discern the self’s deep-lying divinity.”³⁴ Human constructs are required in order to deal with life. If we are able to keep the constructs in perspective, they can help instead of hamper the movement of human society.

Here are some of the Hindu methods.

1. Jnana yoga is designed for the intellect. In it a person listens, then thinks, and then sublimates self to reach for infinite space in which to operate. God is then envisioned as impersonal.

2. Bhakti yoga is based on feelings rather than on thoughts. God is to be loved. Such love, in bhakti yoga, is developed with the help of myths, symbols, and rituals. Myths can explain what the intellect cannot discern, symbols can wean the attention from the worldly and prepare it for the infinite, and rituals can help replace the mundane with a deeper entry to things eternal.

³³ [Smith, Huston](#) *ibid.* p. 47.

³⁴ [Smith, Huston](#) *ibid.* p. 26.

3. Karma yoga seeks spiritual union by actively working as a producer or as a loving servant. The work must be performed without the expectation of personal gain. It must, instead, be spiritually motivated, a motivation beyond the self. It is not selfish.

4. Raja yoga uses a series of steps including the lotus position, breathing control, powers of concentration which shut out the world, and finally still the mind itself. “When all the senses are stilled, when the mind is at rest, when the intellect wavers not— that, say the wise, is the highest state.”³⁵

Hinduism, then, is built upon a realization of the finite nature of human consciousness and a basic affirmation that there is an eternal, divine, state which is both beyond us and yet within us. In addition, it provides us with numerous practical methods of dealing with the interface between the finite and the infinite. Hinduism seems to hold the same basic assumptions as those of questionable theology. But in Hinduism, as in Christianity, followers often play the human trick and close themselves off from the very state they pretend to embrace. The caste system has been a terrible result.

The impossible but critically important task of providing a bridge between the finite and the infinite has been tackled most often, around the world, through meditation.

We living human beings are mortal. We recognize that fact with a word. But words can feed cerebral exercises which subvert the facts. In various ways we give “lip service” (again we have a phrase for the idea) to our mortality but, in fact, either treat ourselves as immortal or else reduce immortality to our mortal lives. When we become ego-centric, the totality of the universe revolves around the self; the gravity generated in such a situation is very grave. It is difficult to juggle the ego—the mortal life we *know*—with the *incomprehensible* universal which we can only glimpse. Yet it is vital to an enlightened or *inspirated* society to keep the two in near perfect balance. Contemplative, simple silence is one way to encourage the balance.

I contend that the term *immortal* is generically intended to refer to the inexplicable. But as soon as we name it, we, as finite beings, begin to explain it; the inexplicable is too uncomfortable for cocky humans. We are

³⁵ [Smith, Huston](#). *ibid.* p 38, quoting from the [Katha Upanishad](#)

wont to say that we are made in the image of God (and that may be true) but, immediately we set about to make God in our image, a switcheroo which becomes tantamount to playing God ourselves.

To Christians, God quickly becomes “our Father” which gives God a gender and causes us to see him as an old man with a white beard and flowing robes. The Presbyterian catechism prodded me to go beyond that childish view and to see God as a spirit. God then became a wispy ball, like a comet in the sky; how else can a child envision a spirit? For a time, as I matured and the comet disappeared, I ceased using the term God. Truth was relied on to replace the term God to express ultimate concepts.

But again, a picture seemed necessary. I had had a course in geometry, so Truth became like a straight line, replete with theorems, definitions, and proofs. I had had experiences in which I felt that I was on that line, on the wavelength of Truth— and there were other times when I felt that I was out of sync with the universal. Then I began to realize the possibility that there are many truths and so my line for Truth became broader and more like webbing than a single line. I still clung to the idea that there are discernible truths—that is, possibilities and limits which could be depicted as a web with many possible crisscrossing paths, but also within boundaries—the edges of the web. At age 41, I was suddenly able to accept that humble humans cannot be certain about truth. We all have glimpses of the truth but no one has a monopoly on it. We don’t know when we have it and when we don’t and don’t even know the limits of the web of possibilities. It opened up a limitless universe of boundless possibilities and has been very exciting.

There are many, many theologies held by people, perhaps a unique one for each person. A cursory survey of some of them will help communicate what is meant by “questionable theology.” It seems that this attempt to:

- embrace the infinite with the finite
- take the eternal perspective from our mortal situation
- resolve the paradox of earthly diversity with a cosmic unity
- link people to God...

is the thrust of every religion and even of science. It is exciting to see our contemporaries probing ever more deeply into our universe, extending our experience, and opening new doors for the visionaries.

How are we to explore what is beyond us? Only by exploring ourselves!
Avicenna (980-1037) wrote...

*...Gain knowledge of the self, and you will know your
Maker.³⁶*

In the Tibetan Book of the Dead we find...

*...if I could only realize that any apparition is but the
reflection of my own conscience.³⁷*

Realization is the operative which keeps us on track— keeps us turned
in the right direction— keeps us from playing tricks on ourselves.

The Christian prayer for “Thy will be done *on earth* as it is in heaven,” is
a call for devoting major attention to life here on earth, the living present to
which we are tethered.

³⁶ [Brosse, Jaques, Religious Leaders, Chambers Ltd. NY, 1988,](#), p.12.

³⁷ [Brosse, Jaques, Religious Leaders, Chambers Ltd. NY, 1988,](#), p.13.

Chapter 7. **The Living Word**

Let's put life into a perspective. The connection between the past, present, and future is rather like an image I have of truckers traveling up and down an Interstate Highway. Most of them have their citizen band radios turned on and they are conversing among themselves. I envision a bit of humor which one of the jokesters among the drivers shares as he/she passes by. The joke is picked up by truckers within three miles. They chuckle with delight at the spin it puts on life as they roll up or down the Interstate. They, in turn, retell the joke, perhaps adding to it, or leaving something out. In this way, the joke is refined, changed, evolved and kept alive; it augments or diminishes as long as truckers find it funny. The joke actually hovers in the air somewhere along a spot of the Interstate Highway, say at mile marker 1999. Truckers come within range, hear it and pass it on to another as they roll on. The joke remains in its surreal space at 1999 so long as it retains its ability to delight truckers. Its very existence depends upon delighting those trucking along the Interstate.

That describes the condition we living beings are in—the living, pulsating, always in flux, always nourished by those who have gone before, present. 1999 (replace this with NOW) may seem surreal but it is the only spot where the joke lives. NOW is where infinity intersects life. Life continues only if we embrace it in the present. If we let it go, we die.

What we know is the window on what we don't know. Our life is the only experience we have had. It is the only experience we have with eternity. Our experiences provide us with sufficient building blocks for the creation of fantastic constructs both real and imaginary. Giving our most diligent attention to the living present and its possibilities gives the firmest foundation upon which to demonstrate what we humans can *achieve*, and possibly what our *purpose* is. To go beyond this life— this present— this gift— and make confident claims about what is beyond it is fraught with peril. As [Charles Frazier](#) puts it in his novel Cold Mountain,

what she could see around her was all that she could count on.”³⁸

³⁸ Charles Frazier. *Cold Mountain*. The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1997. p. 50.

It is the “bird in the hand” which we have the power to nurture or to kill. We can cultivate the trucker’s joke or we can let it die.

During his homily on Easter Sunday 12 April, 1998 at St. Matthew the Apostle Church in St. Louis, Pastor Fr. Matthew Ruhl gave an unequivocal affirmation of the insight that life is our arena for dealing with *all* matters of human concern. He asked us to suppose there was a man who was offered a million dollars to be deposited to his account upon his death. Fr. Ruhl said that the man declined the offer saying, “Of what use would a million dollars be to me after I’m dead?” From this, Fr. Ruhl went on to say that God loves *life*...

...The resurrection is about life. What good is God when we are dead? Taste the resurrection in this world. Life is what God is all about. The resurrection takes place right here, St Matthew's, right here in The Ville [an inner city area of St Louis in need or ‘revitalization’].

The living word, then, is the present word, the spoken word coming from the mouth of a living person. It is linked to the past and the future but it is only present in the present. It is the concept of the trinity.

F. Calvin Parker in his book *Christ in a Kimono*, has a most interesting chapter entitled *God on the Noh Stage*. He draws parallels between ancient, ritualistic, Noh theater in Japan and the Christian concept of God as a trinity. Parker says the vision underlying Noh cannot be put into words just as the vision of God cannot be told, but through the juxtaposition of the three main characters of Noh theater, or the three proposed aspects of a triune God, a glimpse, a feeling, a surreal understanding captures us. It is this mysterious, undefinable essence which gives life to Noh and to concepts of God. Parker says...

...If Noh were to lose its mystery, it would lose its beauty and cease to be Noh. How much more so with God! In Noh we encounter the mystery of the unseen world; in the greater theater of life we encounter the mystery of God. We are overwhelmed and overpowered by the Wholly Other. Though words fail us, we know the experience is

*real, for we leave with a spring in our step and a fascination in our heart.*³⁹

Parker also points out that “our tongues labor under great poverty of speech”, but that St. Augustine spoke of Father, Son , and Holy Spirit as “three persons...not that it might be spoken but that it might not be left unspoken.”

Parker’s book underscores the great importance of culture in communication, particularly in communication about imponderables. Words are discrete vehicles which keep us earthbound unless they are given wings by the cultural inheritance in which they have developed. Many of the arts do just that; they make use of words but go beyond them with song, poetry, or theater. These arts, indeed all arts, are dependent upon culture for content. That is why we speak of the *living word* and the *mother tongue* in questionable theology. Communication about eternity or infinity must take place with words that are invested with our cultural heritage yet are free to go beyond themselves.

I trust that I have not given the impression that we should quit trying to put our thoughts and feelings into words. We must. We have no other means of exploration. To quit trying would be death. But it is equally disastrous to confine ourselves to words that have no life. Where can we find a balance? Only by trying this or that, by searching for new ways at the same time as we hold onto the old. Paradoxes are the mystery of life—the interface between the infinite and the finite. We use our own words, the words of our ancestors, the words of the artist, and the words of our comrades as we embrace life, and thereby we retain our tenuous hold upon the saga of human existence as we roll on down the highway.

³⁹ [Parker, F. Calvin. Christ In A Kimono, 1998](#) by author Kearney NE, p.52.

Chapter 8. **Your Neighbor as Yourself**

An open society is a society for life. It is a society in which there is trust in life— and that includes the life of others as well as the self. A society in which there is little trust is a society for death. But, again, we must be careful of tricks of the mind. A trusting society does not rely on *blind trust* — we do know that there is not just one kind of trust and that some trust is good and some is bad!

What kind of trust am I talking about? It is trust based in the belief that we are better off with a healthy dose of respect for the views of others as well as a continuous, and very natural testing of our own views. We naturally see out of our own eyes. That's the way we are designed. But we have additional, crucial forms of in-sight. It takes some effort to attempt to *see through the eyes of others*. We know that it is valuable to take another point of view. Enlightened trust is a consequence of such a viewpoint.

Cosmologists like Timothy Ferris are aware that unity and diversity are difficult concepts for Westerners. Ferris discusses how diverse structural entities such as “galaxies, clusters of galaxies, superclusters, and enormous bubble walls surrounding low-density voids”⁴⁰ can be coupled with ideas about homogeneity in space... “So the universe as a whole may be isotropic and homogeneous, but on smaller scales these characteristics break down.” The same can be said for humankind. There are universal characteristics of people the world over and yet they are clustered into identifiable groups which we call races, ethnic groups, nationalities, families, nuclear families, etc. In the end, however, each individual is an individual but still a member of the human race. How could it be otherwise? What is true in space is true for those who occupy it.

Our job is to find recipes for living together which will avert disaster. Living together peacefully does not imply passivism. It does require that we view ourselves with our own eyes as well as the eyes of others. We alone do not make up the human race. The admonition to “love thy neighbor as thyself” is necessary in a peaceful world. Finding the balance which teeters on the operative, *as*, requires constant adjustment and fine tuning.

⁴⁰ [Ferris, Timothy](#), *The Whole Shebang*, p.146

It is not possible to know oneself without the backdrop of knowing others. *Know yourself and the truth will set you free* is the freedom from selfishness which helps create a free society. If we do not see ‘that of God’ in the life of others, we doom ourselves to a lonely death. **By welcoming those different from ourselves we expand our grasp on exuberant life.**

Neale Donald Walsch says...

...Today we shall find God together. That is always the best way to find God. We shall never find God apart. I mean that two ways, I mean we shall never find God so long as we are apart. For the first step in finding that we are not apart from God is finding that we are not apart from each other, and until we know and realize that all of us are One, we cannot know and realize that we and God are One.⁴¹

The following description of a dance performance by an ensemble which did not use music to hold it together was submitted to an internet network interested in country dancing...

...When we worked on dancing it in the Radost Folk Ensemble, we developed a 6th sense about when the movement would start, how fast it would accelerate. Staying together is made even more challenging by the fact that the women look down and away from the circle and cannot see the other dancers. You simply have to learn to use kinesthetic sense as a means of staying together without visual cues and without musical cues. The bonding that took place working on the dance, and the power of the piece itself comes from the silence, and the magic of total, flawless ensemble that comes from within and not from the external source of the music. We BREATHED together. We paused together, we took

⁴¹ ⁴¹ [Walsch, Neale Donald](#). *Conversations with God, an uncommon dialogue, Book 2*. Hampton Roads Publishing Co., Charlottesville VA 1997. p. 3.

another breath and abruptly, without warning or signal, began again together. I lived inside the skin of 9 other dancers when I did that piece. Each dancer gives up something of him/herself to the circle. You allow the circle to be you. It takes tremendous trust of the other dancers and a willingness to shed your ego. You merge with your partner, you stop being an individual dancer and become a tenth of a circle.⁴²

Individual understanding is seen as the building block of life; yet, one block does not make a building. Life is at its finest and is most complete when individuals are open to cooperation, both with other human beings and with the rest of the natural world, i.e. cooperating with life is seen as a sacred duty.

Daniel Quinn in his book Ishmael has Goliath, a full grown captive gorilla, explain (to gorillas in the wild) that...

...family is like a hand, of which they are the fingers. They [wild gorillas] are fully aware of being a family but are very little aware of being individuals. Here in the zoo there were other gorillas— but there was no family. Five severed fingers do not make a hand.⁴³

⁴² Bestock, Vicky, Wed, 14 Jan 1998 09:00:16 -0800 (PST) From: bestockp@oz.net
Reply-To: ECD@SSRL04.SLAC.Stanford.EDU. Subject: dancing in silence

⁴³ [Quinn, Daniel](#), Ishmael Bantam Book, 1993, ISBN 0-553-56166-9, p 12.

Chapter 9. Using and Abusing Ethnicity

Ken Johnson, de-facto squire of the [Capering Roisters Morris Side](#), a group that performs ancient English ritual dances, recently explained to a group of children at the St. Louis Zoo some of his observations about our costumes...

Like any uniform, our costume has the purpose of making us look the same and making us look different. It makes us look the same as each other, so that we look like we belong together, yet makes us look different from everyone else.⁴⁴

That is the view to which questionable theology leads. We humans have a need to belong to finite groups (even if they are indefinite) and also have a need to be different. Why? Because belonging to a group brings us a cultural inheritance— each new generation does not have to rediscover fire or reinvent the wheel. But, we also embrace differences so that we don't stagnate.

It seems like a conundrum to be simultaneously different and the same, but by now the reader is hopefully ready to find an excitement in these riddles which expose the great wisdom of life, riddles which we cannot solve but can marvel at.

Gene Griessman, in his delightful reenactment monologue portraying Abraham Lincoln, has Lincoln speak to today's audience...

Learn to get along with people who are different from you. If you ever meet someone who thinks exactly the same way that you do, one of you is unnecessary. In fact, based on what I've been reading about cloning, you might just be a sheep. There could be another ewe.

⁴⁴ Johnson, Ken. Notes for explanation between dances at the St Louis Zoo 3 April 1999.

Let me tell you how I came to value diversity. I grew up on the frontier. In the little communities of the frontier, we welcomed people if they knew something that we didn't, if they could do something that we couldn't. One person could shoe a horse; another could make a shoe. One person could grow corn; another could mill it. One could teach. Another could learn. We tolerated one another because we needed one another. Our differences made us useful to one another, held us together and enabled us to raise our standard of living.

I took that same philosophy to the White House. I chose people for my cabinet who knew more than I did— and never lost an opportunity to remind me of it. My Secretary of State was a man named Seward. He was a former Senator; a college graduate, my biggest rival for the nomination. Often I would ask him to come over to the White House to tutor me.

My cabinet members argued with one another, gossiped about one another, ridiculed one another and me, and some of them hated the others. But together, our combined knowledge and expertise was great.

The easy thing to do is to surround yourself with people who look like you, think like you, talk like you. Managing diversity is hard, but the benefits are enormous.⁴⁵

Quantum physics might shake our minds loose from their limiting cultural moorings and prepare them to accept new insights.

Zohar says...

⁴⁵ [Gene Griessman](#), Ph.D., World-Class Presentations On High Achievement. Copyright 1993, used with permission.

...Perhaps more than anything else, quantum physics promises to transform our notions of relationship. Both the concept of being as an indeterminate wave/particle dualism and a concept of movement that rests on virtual transitions presage a revolution in our perception of how things relate. Things and events once conceived as separate, parted in both space and time, are seen by the quantum theorist as so integrally linked that their bond mocks the reality of both space and time. They behave, instead, as multiple aspects of some larger whole, their “individual” existences deriving both their definition and their meaning from that whole.⁴⁶

So it is with the individual and the group, the family and the community, the ethnic group and the nation, the nation and the world. We are human beings, a state which we share in unity with all humans (Donald Johanson says we have 99.9% identical genomes) and yet we are each separate to some extent (0.1% ?). It is another of those paradoxes which we have set up for ourselves as we seek to become the center of the universe instead of a part of it. We are not the center of the universe but neither are we apart from the universe.

Ethnicity adds a richness to the fabric, it is the color of life; it is the variation which allows us to explore all of life’s myriad possibilities. But when that ethnicity, that individualism becomes nationalism or racial supremacy and sets us apart from humanity, apart from the relationship to the infinite universe, then we begin to limit life and destroy its possibilities. Are we open or closed? Do we maintain a questionable theology?

Life can be looked at in different ways, and that is good! When one way doesn’t work, we can try another perspective. Perspective—that is a good sounding word—but we have other words which also recognize the fact that human beings have the ability, in fact the necessity, of assuming a perspective. We say that someone’s view of life is slanted, or we say, in the

⁴⁶ [Danah Zohar](#) in collaboration with I. N. Marshall, The Quantum Self, Human Nature and Consciousness Defined by the New Physics, p. 34

terminology of advertisers, that a spin has been put on something. Spin has a negative ring to it because it implies a conscious manipulation and we free beings don't like to be manipulated.

When a baseball pitcher puts a spin on a ball as it is thrown, the spin determines, in part, the directional pattern of the ball. The same is true in life: the spin we put on our life determines, in part, its directional pattern. That is what self-perception and self-image are all about. The perspective we take makes a considerable difference in our lives. And we have a choice in the matter. That is why it is good that life can be looked at in different ways.

To not have a perspective, to not put a spin to our life, lets us drift out of control and at the whims of other forces. Sometimes that is necessary as we try to find ourselves or need to make a change in direction. Danah Zohar talks about coherence and chaos. In chaos, we drift at the whims of other seemingly random forces. In coherence, we martial forces into a pattern which brings order and direction. Both states are useful. Coherence is vital to life and is to be desired and encouraged most of the time. But when patterns become out of sync, when patterns become destructive, they will fall apart and a period of chaos will ensue allowing new patterns to develop. This is an astounding and wise arrangement in nature. To me it shows a wisdom "out there" which makes me reverent.

Sequences of chaos and coherence are built right into the very process of life. The genes which establish the pattern of our individual lives go through phases of coherent alignment as the chromosomes ready themselves for meiosis followed by the chaotic, seemingly random recombination which occurs during fertilization. This wise arrangement allows life to meet the challenges of a shifting environment in which chaos and coherence coexist.

This entire book is a plea for keeping a flexible perspective on life. I have seen friends with a rigid faith fall apart when the least crack appears in their faith. They have no repair/adjustment equipment. If flaws and cracks are expected from seeking a safe haven in the infinite realm, they would not be so devastating. A strong spin on life is to be encouraged because it gives a strong sense of direction; but, fortunately the pitcher has a choice of what spin to put on the ball. There are a variety of spins which can be applied in all situations. Self-image is a spin on life which is a vital form of coherence.

Integrity, honesty, humility, reverence, generosity, trust, responsibility—there are many coherent spins which give direction to life.

Culture is the corporate equivalent of self-image. Ethnicity provides us with a group spin, a group sense of direction and is also a necessary part of life. Ethnicity should be celebrated and cultivated. But, there are limits.

When ethnicity becomes exclusive and rules out other perspectives on life, open doors are slammed shut, adaptability is lost, and ethnicity is misused. The religions of the world ordain humility, perhaps the most overlooked religious concept in today's world. If human life is seen as sacred, then the varied expressions of life must be accepted except when they become destructive. We are correct, within this view, to encourage human rights. But judgment must come with great care and humility. Judge not that you be not judged is from the wisdom of the ages. Coherence and chaos reside side by side and are never satisfied or perfectly still. Judgment should perhaps be replaced with nudgement; there needs always to be a recognition of the limits inherent in our personal point of view whether individual or corporate.

Ethnic genocide is immoral as well as insane. Humans face enough challenges without exterminating each other. We may face natural challenges as great as the dinosaurs and need to be prepared to show our God-given intelligence by continuing to explore life from every perspective, hedging our bets with a diversified portfolio, keeping an open mind, and encouraging every bit of ethnic diversity the earth can accommodate. **Collaboration and cooperation are to be encouraged. Self-centered feelings of superiority are the result of closed minds.** Open minds embrace that which is different because of what the differences can teach us—both about ourselves and about other means of dealing with life.

Jim Wilson, in his 1936 book describing experiences in being the first person to drive a motor vehicle across central Africa, expresses his own perception of cultural differences after making the trip.

Expeditions sometimes report trouble with the natives, finding them sullen and unwilling to cooperate. I think this must be a fault of the traveler himself, for West Africans as a rule are pleasant, courteous, good workers,

and easy to get along with—if one has enough respect for them to learn their customs and avoid outraging them and enough pep and genuine interest in the human race to have a little fun with them from time to time. Good humor is catching—and I have never found true dignity incompatible with informality and good fun.⁴⁷

Ethnicity can be looked at as a joyful treasure which provides a framework hammered out by the forbearers of the human race. **Differences allow us to live beyond ourselves, and fill the historic treasure-chest of life with resources about how to live in other situations.**

I love the color, sound, and taste of international folk festivals! And I am reminded of McNeil's introduction to his book⁴⁸ on Scottish cookery where he says that standardization is the antithesis of culture. That insight is especially appetizing when applied to food; how would *you* like the diet we feed our cats—daily servings of Pro-Plan, unvaried, for life? They are doing well on it—apparently it is a coherent diet. But, for me, I don't want to lose a single nuance of flavor with which to titillate my tongue even though I also have my staples and favorites. Variety is the spice of life even if it isn't the bread of life.

The Dailai Lama says...

...I always believe we are the same; we are all human beings. Of course, there may be differences in our faith, or we may be of a different color; but we are human beings, consisting of the human body and the human mind. Our physical structure is the same, our minds and our emotional nature are also the same. Whenever I meet people, I always have the feeling that I am encountering

⁴⁷ Wilson, James C. *Three-wheeling Through Africa*. Bobbes-Merrill Co. Indianapolis and New York. 1936. (used copies of the book may be found by searching <http://www.abebooks.com/>)

⁴⁸ I cannot find the book! Did I make it up? Help me via email to johnberni@sbcglobal.net

another human being, just like myself. I find it much easier to communicate with others on that level. If we emphasize specific characteristics, like I am a Tibetan or I am a Buddhist, then there are differences. But those things are secondary. If we can leave the differences aside, I think we can easily communicate, exchange ideas, and share experiences.⁴⁹

It seems that we must first and foremost approach each person as a unique gift from God. If our foundation is always based on that premise, other problems of ethnicity will dissipate. Find our common ground first; it is the soil of our existence. Then cultivate our different gardens such that they respect the work of other gardeners, including the instructive garden of the natural world.

Back in 1940, a nearby patch of wild strawberries, incredibly sweet and aromatic, was unusually prolific. It was a glorious time for a 10 year old! We picked gallons and had them fresh for several days—on cereal, on shortcake, and every fifth one or so going from pluck to mouth instead of to pail. After a few days we had had the experience of a lifetime and did not need to ever have it happen again. I was fed up with wild strawberries. Fortunately, the strawberry season lasted only two weeks and that patch was never revisited. The nice thing about nature is that each season has its fruit. We were ready for new tastes, although, I must admit that now, 60 years later, I toy with the idea of following the strawberry season around the world for one year!

Daniel Quinn, in Ishmael, says, “there is no *one right way* to live. . . You must absolutely and forever relinquish the idea that you know who should live and who should die on this planet.”⁵⁰

⁴⁹ [Lama, His Holiness The Dalai and Howard C. Cutler. The Art of Happiness, A Handbook For Living.](#) Riverhead Books, NY, 1998. p.4.

⁵⁰ [Quinn, Daniel.](#), *Ishmael*. Bantam/Turner Book c. 1992 by Daniel Quinn ISBN 0-553-56166-9, p248

And Gene Griessman, in his own words, says in A Creed for Citizens of a Diverse World...

I believe that diversity is a part of the natural order of things— as natural as the trillion shapes and shades of the flowers of spring or the leaves of autumn. I believe that diversity brings new solutions to an ever-changing environment, and that sameness is not only uninteresting but limiting.

To deny diversity is to deny life—with all its richness and manifold opportunities. Thus, I affirm my citizenship in a world of diversity, and with it the responsibility to...

**Be tolerant. Live and let live. Understand that those who cause no harm should not be feared, ridiculed, or harmed—even if they are different.*

**Look for the best in others.*

**Be just in my dealings with poor and rich, weak and strong, and whenever possible to defend the young, the old, the frail, the defenseless.*

**Be kind, remembering how fragile the human spirit is.*

**Live the examined life, subjecting my motives and actions to the scrutiny of mind and heart so to rise above prejudice and hatred.*

**Care⁵¹*

⁵¹ [Gene Griessman](#), A Creed for Citizens of a Diverse World ©1993

Chapter 10. **Applying Questionable Theology to Education**

In exploring the difference questionable theology requires in day to day choices, I am presented with the problem of verbs. I really don't want to say I *believe* in questionable theology; how can one believe in everything and in nothing or in only a part of something? *Accepting* questionable theology is too bland. *Embracing* questionable theology— I use embrace too often. May I instead *hoist the sail* of questionable theology? Life is like the wind, it has its patterns, it has its doldrums, it has its storms and is full of surprises and delights. Under the sail of questionable theology, we are now going to explore the sea of education.

Sailing under questionable theology will determine seemingly innocent but actually definitive pedagogical methods.

Let's start with our classic educational legacy which pretty much dictates our classroom methods and architecture. The pedagogy of a classical education is a legacy we inherited from the Romans. It comes from a paradigm of rationalism. There are numerous attempts to break out of its mold and to mold something new and free from past mistakes. For, we are finding that education when closed in by our rational, finite, mortal bent, diverts energy from life to the never-never land of here-to-fores and here-afters which smell of death. The great Danish pedagogue, N. F. S. Grundtvig railed against schools of death. He championed, instead, schools for life—the folk schools.

Folk Schools celebrate free inquiry into the here and now. They discuss civic responsibility in the here and now. Free inquiry *and* civic responsibility?—in questionable theology we don't let discrete words create a dichotomy in our thinking.

Teachers, as well as students, must remain open to learning about the infinite, immortal possibilities of life if education is to teach what is required of us. Teachers are only mortal humans just like their students. Teachers are not Gods. In fact, as Margaret Meade pointed out, in the fast pace of change

in modern times, the old need to learn about the present from the young because the recent past is already out of date.

Exams carry the wrong message. They infer that there are right and wrong answers or right and wrong questions. This interferes with the educational responsibility of students and teachers to explore life. Folk schools do not use exams to measure education's success or failure. Folk school educators believe that life is at its best when people: students, teachers, administrators and the public keep an open mind. But how do you educate someone to keep an open mind? This type of education happens individually and from person to person. It is not so much something you teach as something you share. Actions do speak louder than words. Giving an exam can all too easily teach the wrong message. Textbooks with their dogmatic stance so often entomb instead of free the mind.

The pernicious potential of education to *dead*en and its concomitant potential to give *life* was sprung upon me anew after my retirement. On my first day as a substitute teacher, 19 Sept 1997, I found the public school classroom in University City, Missouri to be much the same as my classroom in Micaville, North Carolina 42 years before—some kids come across as well mannered, sweet and sharp; many others seem frivolous, asleep or dull; a few are very troublesome and make it difficult for everyone else, including the teacher. Our systematized, classroom-oriented educational system has its pluses, but it also has many problems which can be addressed within the system only with great difficulty.

I had been asked to substitute in a 7th grade life science class with 30 students crowded into a science lab which did not have enough spaces for each student to have a chair at a lab table; four students were placed in solo chairs scattered in the corners of the room. The assignment, left by the regular teacher, who of course didn't know me from Adam, stipulated that the students were to spend an hour and a half reading a textbook introduction to the subject of *classification* and then to write out, in longhand, all the questions at the end of the chapter as well as to answer all of the questions in longhand. This scenario placed me in a very difficult position. I was to be a watchdog or baby-sitter; there was no room for the dialogue necessary in a folkschool. In addition, I had to wing it since my only preparation had been to glance at, as I entered the room for the first time, the assignment written on the board and then at a textbook which I acquired from one of the students as he entered the classroom. I had no idea what the textbook

contained and I could only refer to the roll for names of the noisy group before me.

I thought it best to begin with some dialogue. That way I could establish myself as a friend, as someone interested in life in general, and in the life of the students in particular. Otherwise, I would by default be their adversary which is what the students have been trained to expect. As friends, we could learn together. I told a funny story first to try to establish a relationship. Then I gingerly broached the assigned subject of classification. I did ask that we discipline ourselves, one person speaking at a time, including me. I suggested to the students that we first try our own hand at grouping things into "classes" and only then to see what the author had to say.

“What shall we classify?” I asked. One student suggested, “People.” I asked what characteristic we should use to divide people into groups—like height or age. Another student said, “Color,” and I thought, “Oh boy, John watch out!” But I have great faith in youthful intelligence, so I gulped and said, “OK. How many colors shall we use to make our classification?” “Two,” they said, and it should be noted that there were only three students in the class who would be classified as "white". “I assume you are talking about white and black.” They nodded that that was their intention.

I lettered BLACK on the chalkboard to the left and WHITE to the right, then orally, with their help, defined black as absorbing all light, and white as reflecting all light. I drew a line between BLACK and WHITE and noted that we could indeed measure skin color by the amount of light reflected from the skin and thereby place each person’s result somewhere on the line. They were obviously interested in this very personal exercise. I was warming to the subject as well.

“You want to divide people into two classes, black and white. Where should we place the dividing line?” The class rather quickly decided on 50/50.

“If we have two classes,” I pursued, “that means that all of those to the left of the halfway point are classed as black and all those to the right are classed as white. Is that alright?” There were students who objected to this, pointing out that there are light shades and deeper shades, and one fellow said that sometimes whites were pink. So I drew another line perpendicular to the first to accommodate a measure of redness.

I pointed out that we could have arbitrarily chosen to draw the line at 40/60, 95/5 or at any other spot. The divisions did not remove anyone from their distinctive color nor from their place on the line. Skin color, like most things, can fall anywhere along a continuous scale and even onto three, four or more dimensional charts. Where we draw the lines if we want to divide things into classes is our choice, not God's. "Where do you think we have drawn the line in the United States?" I asked. "Is that fair?"

It became obvious that life is not so discrete that it can be put into our boxes or groupings and furthermore, when we do put things into boxes, we create problems. What, then, is black and what is white? Can we instead say that we are all human rather than dividing us into black or white? That class went well and the students gained a crucial insight which was not included in the textbook description of classification systems!

So much in our educational system, so much in our culture gives us the discrete view and ends up doing great damage as doors close. Education based on questionable theology will keep the doors open. Blacks and whites will see each others as brothers and sisters in the common task of enhancing life, each bringing a different color, a fresh or different point of view, or contributing a different set of resources.

Separating people into two categories may yield some useful information. But it is limited in its usefulness because of the broader picture which includes the spaces between the categories and envisions the overarching inclusive principle.

In Grundtvig's words...

...Learning will be misleading, particularly among educators, if it is not juxtaposed by the culture of a people, which compels learning to recognize the life here and now; the culture of the people will become superficial if it is not kept alive by learning.⁵²

⁵² Knudsen, Johannes, ed. Selected Writings, N.F.S. Grundtvig, [Fortress Press](#), Philadelphia, 1976. p.25

People are not monkeys destined to imitate other animals or, eventually, to imitate themselves. People are marvelous and wondrous creatures in whom divine forces are proclaimed, evolved, and clarified through thousands of generations. They are a divine experiment, which demonstrates how spirit and dust can interpenetrate one another and be transfigured in a common, divine consciousness. We must view people in this way if we are to have spiritual scholarship on earth, and thus are humans regarded wherever the Mosaic-Christian spirit has been the inspiration.⁵³

There is a tenacity to culture which is paramount in the lives of many of my students—enough to dictate the tenor of the classes in which I have been a substitute. It is a culture bequeathed from centuries of oppression. Black students have inherited, culturally, all sorts of survival techniques for living in spite of authoritarian rule, and, in a way, to win over it. It is almost as if many blacks don't feel comfortable except in the role of a slave laughing behind the back of his or her master, or finding other ways to "kill" the master. Respect is not in the equation when you've been enslaved so long.

What kind of school can change that? One on one I am doing fine and at times I have even succeeded at breaching the cultural barricades in a classroom of students. But, America is in deep trouble. How can we redo an educational system to go beyond the cultural divisions we have inherited? How can we move into a new era of human enlightenment which recognizes and respects the common humanity which is our inalienable right?

Everyone in a folk school classroom is a resource in surveying the heights and the depths of the dance of life.

Education is training which passes on cultural content from one generation to another and, in addition, makes new contributions which make that culture relevant to the present. The training is comprehensive because it addresses life; insights in one area influence attitudes in other areas whether by intention or by default. Education is definitely a matter of teaching

⁵³ Knudsen, Johannes, ed. Selected Writings, N.F.S. Grundtvig, [Fortress Press](#), Philadelphia, 1976. p. 26

attitudes. It is attitudinal training. “Knowledge” (content, facts) is never unbiased when it used, and if it isn’t used it doesn’t exist. That’s my stereotype for this chapter!

I have been a teacher most of my life. When I began, at age 22, I followed the patterns of education which I had experienced, choosing for models those teachers whom I most admired. My entire experience with formal education had been classroom oriented and each classroom was a container for a particular subject. Most of this training was sedentary and simply a mental exercise in memorization. **The teachers I admired most were those who were able to take me beyond the classroom and engage my dreams, my energy, and my whole life, even though I was confined to my seat.**

Something about the specific education courses which I took in college in preparation to be a teacher angered me. They did not match theory with practice. We were asked to teach by the problem solving method but it turned out to be teaching by formula. Theoretically, the students were to pose problems and become engaged in their solution, but instead the students quickly realized that they were to play a game of second guessing the teacher. Our professor was so out of touch with this reality that he told of triumphantly holding up a *blank* sheet of paper when his students called his hand one day and asked him to take the more direct route of giving them the answers he already had on his lesson plan. The blank sheet of paper proved to himself that he was open whereas the students knew that he had a prepared agenda even if it wasn’t on paper. The generous students didn’t argue with him and went ahead to tell him what they knew he wanted to hear.

It was this same system which allowed my supervising teacher to be dishonest and claim visits to the students’ home farms which he had not made and pad his expense report. It also enabled students who were sucked into the game to sell their 4-H yearlings for unrealistically high prices to the local bank in the name of encouraging promising farmers. On paper, the students’ yearling projects showed farming to be a lucrative enterprise, thus setting the young men and women up for failure in the real world. Blue ribbon winners would all too soon learn that it is not practical to groom, shampoo and curry a herd of beef cattle. What the students were really learning was how to play a dishonest game. I did not want to be teaching such attitudes.

It was not until I came across the Danish folk schools that I could clarify in my mind what was wrong with much that is called education. It took years after being enlightened to devise different approaches for use in the classes which, I acknowledge, the system did provide for me.

As one example, in my college level classes at Berea College, the system required me to give grades. I had to devise a way to give grades without letting the grade become the motivation for students—students who were already on the path of working for a grade instead of an exploration of life. I wanted education to be an exciting adventure which would create attitudes to last a lifetime; not a game which ended when the grade was given.

I designed something like the contract method. Failure would result from not meeting the requirements, a D from meeting requirements but poorly done, a C from meeting requirements in average fashion, a B from doing the required work well, and an A from doing everything diligently and going beyond the required in a way that showed a personal investment in the subject. The requirements were homework assignments, but no tests. A card file was to be developed and had to have a consistent format, but the contents was left up to the student.

Students cheered when I told them there would be no tests. I'm sure that all intended to get an A as they started out. At the end of the second week of class I would have to remind the students that the results depended upon personal initiative. We had no syllabus and no text book—nothing to memorize for the teacher.

We did have a subject: Folk Arts As An Expression Of Society. Each student was allowed to explore whichever area of folk arts they had an interest in. I found that they appreciated this freedom. Many, for the first time, were given encouragement to follow their own interests instead of being forced to complete some else's requirement. Most did not want to waste their time learning something they considered useless. Who does want to waste their life? I did appeal to the students to be fair to me and invest as much in my class as they did in those with tighter ways of measuring 'progress.' Their response was a great encouragement to me. I had the feeling that they appreciated the trust I placed in them and through this were learning to respect themselves, a prerequisite to taking responsibility.

My course outline was divided into storytelling, folk songs, folk dance, and handcrafts. I had tools to which the students would be exposed in each section. They had a great deal of freedom in how to use the tools. However, I also had a 'hidden' agenda. I had a list of principles to which I hoped the course would lead, such as: respect, trust, responsibility, honesty, tolerance, and an understanding of the causes of prejudice. In fact, I had come to believe that prejudice was the result of ignorance and I had high hopes of providing a remedy.

The clearest example of how this approach to education could change lives happened when we were in the folk song subject one year. I had assigned the students to learn what they could about three of their favorite hymns. The library was the tool although I warned them that there are gaps in the resources acquired by any library.

The next class was a lively one for there are many very interesting stories (e.g. Amazing Grace) which have been set down in various collections. The students were eager to share with each other what they had learned. Most of my students were Bible belt Christians and had grown up with gospel music which has roots in the songs of the Great Revival and tent meetings. But, I noticed that two students, Mike and Anne, were not animated; it showed in their faces. My goal as a teacher is not to lose a single student, so I asked Anne what she had found. Her background was American Lutheran which hymns come from a different, high-church pool. She was from Michigan, not from Appalachia like my other students. The class listened politely as she told what she had found about her own hymns.

Then I asked Mike about his research. "We don't believe in using instruments in our church and I couldn't find anything about the songs we sing," Mike said as he told us that he was from Beattyville, Kentucky and belonged to the United Baptist denomination. Then the period was over.

The United Baptists are one of the older sects and not as ecumenical as their name might lead one to believe. They do not use instrumental music in their worship, relying only on the voice, the human vocal instrument which God had given. They have a song leader and sing in unison, but with much ornamentation. I couldn't wait for the next class to begin.

Without saying a word, I put on a special record. As soon as the chanting “lining out” of a hymn on the recording began and the sonorous wail of the congregational response swelled, Mike, who was a strapping basketball star, shot upright in his seat and said, “That’s what I was telling you about! Where’d you get that?” Of course, the entire class was immediately electrified, a wonderful condition for education about to happen. I asked Mike if he knew the hymn. He assured us that he did. “What is the hymn, Mike?” I asked. He listened intently, and so did the rest of the class. “I can’t quite get it,” he said.

“But you know it,” I persisted.

“Yes.”

I told him to listen for the next chant when the precentor lined out the next verse for the congregation. Mike’s response was, “It must have been a bad tape recorder.”

“No, Mike,” I replied, “You are listening to a recording made on the Island Of Lewis in Scotland and they are singing in Gaelic!”

We learned that Mike’s father is the song leader in his eastern Kentucky church and that his grandfather edited the collection of hymns in the United Baptist Songbook. The song leader in a church is the only one with a book. He chants one line at a time to give the congregation the words. They respond in unison, using a familiar tune, but with individual ornamentation which creates a very special sound: ponderous, ebbing, flowing, and powerful—it is very heady.

I was pleased to point out that The Westminster Assembly in 1646 debated whether to continue lining out hymns for Scottish Presbyterians and then affirmed the custom. Congregational singing was an important result of the Reformation’s wresting control of the worship service from the church hierarchy. Congregational singing is still a part of most Protestant services.

Mike and his classmates were unaware of this part of church history but found it quite exciting. Mike was shy about his church experience and certainly had found little in the college experience to make him proud of his background. When the students asked him for a demonstration of the singing, he quickly declined.

“Do it for us, Mike,” they persisted.

He countered that we wouldn’t know the tunes.

“But you sing Amazing Grace, don’t you?” I put in.

“Do it for us, Mike,” the class insisted and we promised to help him.

So, for the first time in his life, Mike, son and grandson of song leaders, led a hymn by lining it out and we responded in unison.

It was nearing the end of the class period but was the right opportunity to pull out one of the principles in my special file. I took over the class, sharing a matter that I hold to be personally important (teachers are permitted to do that and at Berea College we were encouraged to share our faith). I asked the class to think back to the the opening of the class when I put on the Scottish recording. “What were your thoughts and feelings as you first heard that sound? Do you feel differently about it now? How do you think Mike would have reacted if you had blurted out your first impression? We are ready to learn about prejudice. Prejudice is mostly a matter of our own ignorance. Be very careful when responding to something you may not understand because you may be showing your own ignorance. Instead of saying, ‘Ugh, that sounds terrible,’ say, ‘That is a new and different sound to me. Tell me more about it.’ The universe is unbelievably vast and our grasp of it so insignificant. If we will keep an open-minded approach to everything, we will have opportunities to learn much more than if we dismiss anything out-of-hand even if it seems weird, distasteful, or foreign. And you, like Mike, have much in your own backgrounds to be proud of.”

Understanding ourselves is a first step to becoming wholly human. It isn’t until we understand and accept ourselves that we can truly understand others. But, we can’t accept ourselves until we accept those who are not like us. This should be the bedrock upon which our educational system is built. A system built upon examinations and credentials destroys life’s potentials. Examinations and credentials can be useful tools, but when they take over, as they have in most formalized western education, they stifle our development by telling us that someone else knows better than we ourselves what our lives should be about. Such a message distorts the spirit or kills it and leads to irresponsibility. Standardized testing despoils life’s potential.

Learning, like life, is an activity which thrives under free association of person with person within a context of mutual respect. This, then, defines for me what a folk school is. A folk school is not limited to a classroom; it

can happen anytime, anywhere that people are learning from each other in an atmosphere of mutual respect. I once put on a conference entitled “Folk School Where You Are.” Some Danish pedagogues questioned this definition and would limit folk schools to residential schools for people 17 years old and up; they were describing the structure of the Danish *folkehøjskoler*. I argued that the structure has played the human trick and the cart has gotten before the horse. Structure is necessary baggage but it is only worth carrying if it is useful for the trip. Where are we going on this trip? If it is a trip of exploration, we aren’t sure just what we will need, so we seek companions who have varying skills as we travel by sailboat, on foot, by spaceship, or by any other means which will expand our search for what it means to be human. But, it is much harder to explore when the cart gets in front of the horse.

I like the design of internships which my brother, Bill Ramsay, developed first at the Oak Ridge Institute of Nuclear Studies and later for the Southern Regional Education Board. Students were given real jobs. The jobs were designed with the students’ timeframe and personal interests in mind. Agencies hired the students, usually to do some research, problem solving, or experimental work for which the agency had a need but lacked the human resources. Each student had an agency supervisor but was also linked with an advisor at some institution of higher learning. The student was given the time to tackle the work but also to reflect on it. A report was due at the end of the project. This was no ivory tower. Neither was it a menial task. The students were a part of real life problems but were also expected to apply the rigors of academics. Almost always, the students got so personally involved in their project that they put in far more time than could reasonably be expected, and ended up with useful results. The experience was often so intense, even though it was only for one summer, that it led to a career.

I believe that one of the most damaging events in American history was the publication of James B. Conant’s book, [The American High School Today](#)⁵⁴, in which he called for an elimination of the small high school. Consolidation contributed to the breakup of small communities and this has put schools out of touch with community and family life. A whole host of problems have followed in the wake of this social change. I once suggested

⁵⁴ [Conant, James Bryant, The American High School Today](#). McGraw-Hill, New York 1959, pp. 37-38.

to three western North Carolina counties which were considering building a single consolidated regional high school that they consider an alternative plan. There are advantages to consolidation as well as disadvantages. My plan was to build the consolidated school but to scale it down and have only 1/3 of the students attending on any one day. Students would attend the consolidated school two days a week to enroll in the wide range of offerings which a large school makes feasible. The other three days a week the students would attend community schools staffed by two teachers and covering all grades. The community school would be like the old one room school in that older students would be able to help younger ones. It would be small enough so that the entire school could get on their bus for a field trip. It would be close enough to home so that students could walk to it and parents could participate in its programs. One of the teachers would drive the bus to the consolidated school, be an ombudsman for the students at the big school, and be able to relate what was learned there to the community school program. The other teacher would have two days in which to prepare community programs for the students; one spent with other community teachers gaining ideas and inspiration and the second lining up resources. The school officials could not try something so outside their experience.

Successful development of human society is dependent on people who are willing and encouraged to utilize their creative energies for the task. We will take a look at Denmark as a case study in Chapter 13.

The following statements summarize the points being made in this chapter.

1. In folk school education, teachers, as well as students remain open to learning about the infinite, immortal possibilities of life.
2. Teachers and students learn together, listening as well as speaking, one person speaking at a time⁵⁵ .
3. Folk school education is training which passes on cultural content from one generation to another and, in addition, applies that culture to present conditions.

⁵⁵ Missouri teachers were advised to talk 20% and listen 80% at a recent teacher's conference—but of course the presenters didn't do that! ...that old human trick, again. Giving lip service will not get you off my hook!

4. Folk school education views life in its entirety and is aware, when it removes each aspect for special scrutiny, that blinders have been applied; they retain side-view mirrors on their boxes.

5. Folk school education can happen anywhere there are two or more people sharing openly.

6. Folk school education relies more on oral than on written. The written is not excluded but is awakened from its sleep and given a voice.

7. Folk schools realize that grades and credentials can be useful educational tools but that there is a real danger when they replace the goal to achieve the highest and best for which humans have a capacity by limiting it to obtaining a high test score or a paper certificate.

8. Folk schools build cohesive cultural communities of shared experience, but also affirm life in all of its rich variety and seek to thwart that type of standardization which is deadly.

9. Folk schools champion that which basically contributes to the daily life of people in general. Academic exercises are not considered worthwhile if they do not lead, in the end, to productive life enhancement.

Chapter 11. **Applying Questionable Theology to Economics**

Does our outlook make any difference in economics? You betcha!

George Soros, American immigrant and global financial wizard, started his rise inspired by Karl Popper's open society.

“Popper proposed a different form of social organization, one that recognizes that nobody has access to the ultimate truth. Our understanding of the world in which we live is inherently imperfect and a perfect society is unattainable. We must content ourselves with the second best: an imperfect society that is, however, capable of infinite improvement.”⁵⁶

Freed from the classical capitalist economic theories, Soros has made billions.

He developed a concept of reflexivity, “a two-way feedback mechanism between thinking and reality.” and applied it to economics.

But, Soros does not stop there. His view of life frees him from the economic box, so he is able to view society from his broader vantage point with an open mind. He notes that open societies are...

...in contrast to closed societies⁵⁷

and he calls for giving weight to social values. Substitution of “money for intrinsic values,” he claims, endanger the entire economic system. Global regulation is needed but Soros urges that social values ought to guide the

⁵⁶ [Soros, George](#), The Crisis of Global Capitalism, The Open Society Endangered. Public Affairs, New York, 1998, p. ix

⁵⁷ [Soros, George](#), *ibid.* p. 195

regulation. He has put his money where his mouth is and has become a philanthropist second to none, promoting the opening of societies around the world along with a focus on human values.

My father, John G. Ramsay, was a Christian. However, he differed from many of his contemporaries by seeking “what’s right” instead of “who’s right.” *Who* places a *person* in the place of judgment. Seeking *what* is right is a collaborative effort among people. He applied this outlook to his economic endeavors and founded the Religion and Labor Foundation which published *Economic Justice*.

Dad’s grandfather was a mining engineer and enjoyed the living standards accorded to industrial management. He was cousin to Erskine Ramsay, Birmingham philanthropist, with a background that paralleled that of Andrew Carnegie, although at a more modest level.

My dad was raised in a fine house on the more affluent side of the tracks. But, Dad also could see the inequities across the tracks which were generated by industrial economics. No doubt this sensitivity was in part spurred on by his Christian upbringing. And then came the Great Depression. He saw, firsthand, the backwash of selfishness. **Dad was a loyal and patriotic American but he could also see that some Americans twisted a belief in “free enterprise” (which he spent his life defending) into “freedom to enterprise” (which he spent his life trying to enlighten).** He was certain that there was “enough for everyone’s need but not enough for everyone’s greed.” He looked at technology as a potential blessing for humanity and commented, “We are back in the Garden of Eden and don’t know what to do about it!”

As we have seen in previous chapters, an outlook which is open, whether in a Garden Eden or in a less than perfect world, requires that people work together for the benefit of all.

Blinders cause us to focus on short-sighted, short-term results and thereby allow long-term opportunities to pass us by unnoticed until it is too late. Soros sees the connection between a free society and reaching for human potential. He has spent billions in trying to free people from social and political repression. But, his experiences show that money is not enough, or there is not enough money to free people’s minds.

Grundtvig said ...

...As long as the spirit of the people advances by giant strides, it is undeniably on its feet, and as long as it performs what the people call great deeds, it is powerful; and even though all these giant strides be in the wrong direction, and all the great deeds dangerous bits of daredevilry, life is none the less better than death, power infinitely better than powerlessness; as long as there is life there is hope for the best that life can achieve; and as long as power exists, a nation, by means of a higher degree of enlightenment, can hope to correct its mistakes and lengthen the days of its existence.” [For this reason Grundtvig hoped that England, pressed by the competition provided by Russia, would] “admit that she was on the wrong path in sacrificing hundreds of thousands of human beings to her machines [of the Industrial Revolution]... and then, the same will to fight that created these machines will also understand either how to destroy them again or how to place them in a serviceable and servant-like relationship to human activity and human happiness.⁵⁸

Ted Koppel, on his ABC program Nightline 9 Feb, 1999, discussed a company which applies unusual principles to develop new products. To me it was a super description of questionable theology in operation. The company, IDEO, uses a team of individuals. The individuality of team members and a spirit of fun is encouraged as a new project is begun for a client– during the show it was the development of a new design for shopping carts. Ideas are tossed into the cache and a premium is placed on fresh approaches; nothing is too crazy or bizarre– a premium is also placed upon a sense of humor. These ideas are then posted and individual members go around voting on each idea with a colored sticker. The top ideas are then parceled out to subgroups for development and several different prototypes are constructed in secret and then unveiled. The team discusses the results

⁵⁸ Thaning, Kaj. *N.F.S. Grundtvig*. Det Danske Selskab, Denmark, 1972. p.103.

and a committee of the whole puts together a final product which is then constructed as a prototype to be shown to the client.

Embracing different approaches, trusting the creative process, understanding the need for joyfulness, combining individuality with a common effort—all of these match what would be expected from an economic system under questionable theology.

Chapter 12. **Applying Questionable Theology to Politics**

A consequence of questionable theology is a democratic society. **When one believes that the answers to a search for God's kingdom on earth can only be developed by a joint effort, we have defined the basic premise of democracy.** We are never sure what utopia should be like because no one has a monopoly on truth, thus it is that through our joint experience together as a society we create the quiltwork of the good life. Each citizen must participate, make a contribution, ask questions, become informed, vote, take personal responsibility, and yet be open to the voices of others, the wisdom of the ages, and possibilities for the future.

Questionable theology can accommodate people from all political persuasions, both avid liberal and ultra conservative. Conservatives can be open-minded or closed-minded. Liberals can be open-minded or close-minded. Open-minded people will listen to others and learn from them. Their world is expanded and also sharpened. Close-minded people limit the world to their own finite view.

Democracy is always in flux; conditions of society are not static; no laws can be forever immutable. The laws we devise to give structure to anarchy and chaos must be continually changed, fine tuned, discarded, and renewed. A continuous eye toward the enhancement of life is the social challenge because living within a finite world in the midst of infinite possibilities requires that we develop some sort of cohesion. Solutions can at times crystallize into cohesive patterns which will persist for an extended time, but even crystals have a way of dissolving and then recombining when conditions are right.

Humans desire a sense of security, the predictable continuity which comes from cohesion. They also desire freedom and its chaos. How can we operate in such a confusing situation with its mix of chaos and cohesion? It is important to realize that all the laws in the world will not create stability.

Neale Donald Walsch puts it well in his book. Conversations With God...

...I repeat, you must take care not to smother yourself in laws trying to guarantee people a chance to breathe! You cannot legislate morality. You cannot mandate equality. What is needed is a shift of collective conscience. Behavior (and all laws, and all government programs) must spring from Beingness, must be a true reflection of Who You Are.⁵⁹

Daniel Quinn, in Ishmael, says,

You can't change these things with laws. You must change people's minds."⁶⁰

Freedom is a prerequisite of questionable theology. In an open society people can be encouraged to change their minds only if they are free to consider a full variety of options. The deliberative process is the proper means to this end.

Today the House of Representatives is to vote on four articles of impeachment. Henry Hyde, Republican chair of the Judiciary Committee, gave an eloquent speech which clearly stated his moral basis for seeking impeachment. He said that the very foundation of our democracy is the rule of law and that President Clinton has broken that law and must be removed from office. Hyde, curiously, made a distinction between lying and lying under oath. This inferred that there is a distinction between the moral and the legal. Hyde sided with the "rule of law."

I contend that democracy has two more sacred foundations than the rule of law: 1) God or conscience and 2) the will of the people. Honesty is a virtue—on that lofty note Hyde and I agree. Honesty, however, cannot be legislated and is not dependent on the law. Laws are often changed and have often been wrong. But, honesty remains a virtue. Lying may be offensive

⁵⁹ [Walsch, Neale Donald](#). Conversations with God, an uncommon dialogue, Book 2. Hampton Roads Publishing Co., Charlottesville VA 1997. p. 135

⁶⁰ [Quinn, Daniel](#). Ishmael. Bantam/Turner Book c. 1992 by Daniel Quinn ISBN 0-553-56166-9, p. 249

and it may even be an offense. Lying under oath is an even greater offense. There seem to be degrees of lying under legal systems but I'm not sure about degrees of lies and virtue under God.

We would like to believe that a lie is a lie, simply and clearly, but that desire grows out of our need for definition. Yet, we have seen that definition mutilates eternity. Where can we turn for guidance when we are turned loose like this? The great wisdom of democracy is its reliance on the mind of the "people" as the best and only foundation to stand upon; all other foundations rest on dogmatism. The will of the people may be shifting sand, but if we believe that the universe is the creation of some great creative force, call it God if you will, then the people as an expression of that force are likely to develop, corporately, a stronger expression than any one individual. The corporate expression will change with the times. It will be influenced by individuals, but only if the individual has influence over people—with their acceptance. Abraham Lincoln understood that democracy is government *by, for, and of the people*. That view of democracy is one in which the political system is in line with open theology.

I am certainly in sympathy with the need for laws and have considerable respect for the legal system which Western Civilization has developed. The development of trial by jury is quite in line with the perceptions of questionable theology. The final arbiter in conflicts is in the hands of ordinary citizens led by the wisdom and precedents history has provided. As I understand it, the jury can pass judgment which goes beyond or even against precedents. That is where freedom leads, that is the result of being open—of not having definitive answers. The reliance is finally placed on the wisdom of the folk. There are, of course, dangers and juries will not always make the right decision; but that is as good as we can do.

There is a greater judgment which goes beyond the jury, and that is the will of all of the people. Jurors are only a sampling of the people. People, individually and jointly, have to decide what they will put up with. If *sufficient* numbers feel strongly enough to take action, or to prevent action, no power on earth can thwart them short of mass, worldwide extermination, which today is a terrifying possibility. Will we allow the extinction to happen? That in part depends on how we govern ourselves. God is likely watching us and may have contingency plans for the world in case we do ourselves in.

Freedom is a requirement even though freedom is also as elusive as any other term we have devised. Freedom cannot be defined as a matter of individual rights; it is more a condition of society. In a society based on open theology, government will seek to foster and guarantee freedom of press, religion, speech, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for all. I would go so far as to claim that these rights are universal. However, it must be noted that the tolerance which such a society seeks must also extend to societies which are not so tolerant. Governments which are of the people, by the people and for the people can take many forms; they do not have to even be democratic as long as the people are willing to live within that system. One country has no right to force another to work out the solution to life and living copied from its own model. There are many models which can be and should be devised.

There is a lot at stake in the trial now in progress in the United States Senate. We have developed and inherited a system which hopefully supports honesty, respect, fairness, responsibility, unselfishness, and even love. These attributes of individuals and societies suffer when the legal system fails to support them. If the President is permitted to lie, honesty is dealt a severe blow.

However, honesty, respect, fairness, unselfishness, and love are not wholly contained within legal structures. Throughout human history, laws have been used to bolster selfish, irresponsible, unjust, evil, and even violent demigods. In the United States, slavery was endorsed and enforced by legal means and, even after it was declared illegal, Jim Crow had its day in the courts of the land. No, these matters are beyond the pale of law. Laws can encourage and reflect upon a society dedicated to honesty, but cannot enforce it.

On Nightline Wednesday 13 Jan 1999, Ted Koppel led his viewers through a powerful program called *In Their Own Words*. The program played the voices of aging slaves recorded in the 1930's under one of the government works programs. One of the young white interviewers asked Fontaine, an ancient but riveting former slave, now 101 years old, what he would have done if he had been given his freedom as a young man. Fontaine replied by correcting the youngster, saying that freedom is not something you can *give* another person; you can *take it away* from them but you cannot give it to them. Freedom is something you receive at birth.

That is the viewpoint of open theology. People, all people, are born free. Freedom allows the exploration of what heights and what depths human nature is capable of, and we can't even define heights and depths! We can only work out our salvation together and alone. Will we be able to make progress towards that goal or will we forfeit our place on earth? Governments are our effort to answer this question.

Governments only reflect the will, or lack thereof, of the people.

Governments, then, in open theology must lead, encourage, bolster, reflect, and rely on the wisdom and best judgments of its citizens. Attempts to manipulate, influence, ignore, and thwart the wisdom of the people must be resisted by the citizens.

Citizens, on the other hand, cannot be apathetic, disinterested, irresponsible, or silent. They need to take responsibility as human beings. This is serious business but also requires a sense of humor and humility. Humor and humility are also traits which come when we acknowledge our juxtaposition of finite within infinite.

Chapter 13. **The Danish Experience, a Case Study**

The Danes provide a case study of a society based on questionable theology. N. F. S. Grundtvig (1783-1872) is considered the central figure in turning Denmark around from a loser to a winner. He came to understand that life is a wonderful mystery in which humans thrive best if they are free to explore its depth and breadth. That is the basic tenet of questionable theology. Let's explore his legacy in Denmark and take a look at how questionable theology makes practical differences in the fabric of that society.

Denmark consistently ranks first among the nations of the world in an *Index of Social Progress*⁶¹ commissioned by the United Nations. The index is computed using 45 different measures which indicate quality of life. Life expectancy in Denmark is very high. Infant mortality is very low. Literacy is one of the highest in the world. The standard of living in Denmark is one of the highest in the world. The Danes say, "None have too little and few have too much." Poverty is almost unknown. In another study, Denmark is also judged to be the "least corrupt country in the world,"⁶² scoring 9.94 out of 10.

These achievements have been made without benefit of natural resources;⁶³ Denmark is a flat, windblown country and the soil is naturally poor. How the Danes have done so much with so little intrigued me. Their success during the past two centuries must have come from the human potential. *If it happened among the Danes, I reason, perhaps similar achievements can be made elsewhere.*

I propose that the achievements of the Danes came from rank and file citizens empowered with an unusual understanding of the human condition. They seem to me to be a living exhibit of what happens when a group of people sees life as wondrous and open-ended instead of already defined.

⁶¹ [Estes, Richard J.](#) Index of Social Progress, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1995.

⁶² Transparency International, Berlin, 1997

⁶³ ...until oil was discovered in the North Sea in the 1970's.

Here is a case study of a people who fundamentally live by questionable theology.

I have had the special privilege and advantage of visiting Denmark many times during the past 26 years in connection with developing and managing a cultural exchange program. I have learned a great deal from both sides of the exchange, both taking folk dance teams to Denmark and then hosting Danes in the United States. The intercultural learning turned very personal with the marriage of my son, Loren, to Inge-Lise, one of the teenage dancers in the exchange. Now I have two Danish grandsons to learn from!

The Danish-American Exchange has given me a particularly useful vantage point from which to compare Danish life with American life. Danes and Americans are very much the same in many ways and, I sense, are in a pattern of convergence. We share many of the dilemmas facing the modern world: pollution, alienation, aging, globalization, mass communication, rapid technological change, etc. Are there significant differences in Denmark which can provide enlightenment to Americans as we cope with life's options? I believe there are.

Sports, Danish style

Let's start with sports. The character of national sports seems to be a useful indicator of a country's soul.

Every village or community in Denmark has a sports club which is in some ways the social center of the community. The dominant sport in these clubs is rhythmic gymnastics. Gymnastics groups are organized for all levels of society: for young professionals, for middle-age women, for middle age-men, for teens, for mothers and toddlers, for senior citizens, for family groups, etc., The groups meet throughout most of the year.

In what way are Danish sports clubs grounded in an open theology?

They are democratically organized by each community. Physical, social, economic, and other facets of life intermingle in these clubs, but they remain mostly neutral in respect to politics or religion; questionable theology is

uncomfortable with dogma. Each club features an array of activities such as community theater and international work as well as sports. But, sports, especially gymnastics, seem to dominate. The activities are organized to be inclusive instead of exclusive. Questionable theology believes that all humans are children of the Creator and that each is thereby a window to the Infinite; therefore none should be excluded. Competition in Denmark is downplayed; what can be created by jointly pooling insights will reach levels which lonely individuals cannot. Danes do not see themselves as loners but as members of a creation and they have cultural means of keeping themselves from climbing on top of each other. I was told, before I made my first visit, that Denmark would be a socialist country. I found that not to be the case. It is more correctly classified as a cooperative country in which citizens participate freely and voluntarily.

The sports clubs are like cooperatives, They are owned by local membership, not by stockholders or wealthy owners, and each member has one vote. Nor are they operated as government facilities. They are not commercially driven. They are staffed by volunteers most often trained by a national federation of the clubs, the Danish Gymnastics and Sports Organization.

Danish gymnastics are different from the sports in most other countries. In Danish gymnastics, everyone participates. When I say everyone, I mean everyone. This type of gymnastics looks more like a huge, athletic, modern dance and has hardly any features which resemble Olympic style gymnastics. It is spectacular to watch because of the large numbers in an ensemble and because of the amazing feats they achieve. The human strength in corporate form is not lost on spectators. The skill, beauty, and strength of one individual is multiplied a hundred times, a thousand times, and even every four years 40,000+ times when the great national sports festival is held.

The participants demand skilled and creative instructors. As an American, I noticed that there is considerable competition for appointment as an instructor, but obviously not for the pay since there isn't any. Perhaps it is for the prestige that goes with the appointment. But, the Danes don't look at it this way. Leadership selection in Denmark arises more from the needs of the people than from the ego or wealth of the would be leader. In a society based on questionable theology, the ego is balanced by community; in fact, the individual is seen as a part of the community. The focus is not on

the self. Rather than individuals competing for the job of leading, the entire community seeks for the individual who can provide a focus, inspire, and present technical expertise most effectively. Danes, I noted with pleasure, are likely to choose young members capable of developing into excellent leaders. Leadership, to a Dane, requires a collaborative effort between the participants and the leader, with the participants supporting the leader. Can you imagine what a delight it is to lead such a group? There is less of an expectation for the leader to single-handedly fire up the group. In questionable theology, collaboration of the individual with the community is the natural result of looking to life—the individual as well as the corporate—for the paths which lead to life’s greatest potentials.

Those chosen to be leaders are almost invariably of the right character, pleased to be able to serve the community but not needing to fan their own egos. Danes, because of their innate perspective on life, are comfortable with who they are and don’t require continuous adulation. Steven Borish, in his important study, discusses this Danish trait in a chapter called “The Cultural Code of Modesty and Humility.” Borish quotes from a popular Danish play Erasmus Montanus by Ludwig Holberg (1684-1754) “...that expresses the main point... ‘

The first rule of philosophy is Know thyself; and the further one advances, the lower the opinion one should have of himself, the more one should realize what there remains to be learned.’”⁶⁴

Let’s make a digression in order to make the point about how different Danish gymnastics is from American sports. Americans, at least as portrayed in the news, are characterized by professional sports. Many destructive attributes have surfaced from this type of sporting. Commercially driven, it appeals to selfishness and greed (both traits focused on self instead of others) in addition to what we wish were ideals of sportsmanship. True, some Americans have been turned off by the scene of multi-million dollar players on strike because they are being ripped off by vastly wealthier owners. However, the fact that enough Americans continue to support such a system and keep it lucrative, is evidence of a commitment

⁶⁴ Borish, *ibid* pp. 253-254. For a more detailed explanation of this characteristic Danish self-deprecation see his Chapter 7.

to the competitive individual where success is measured by the dollar (a finite measure) rather than sportsmanship (unmeasurable) which focuses on others.

Competition, in the sports clubs in Denmark, adds zest to life, but the underlying basic faith is in cooperation; competition is sprinkled on the soul like pepper added to a basic stew, but the Danes don't eat pepper by itself!

When the Danes hold their huge national sports festival, the Landsstævne, it is the Danish alternative to the Olympics. Landsstævne is given full coverage in the Danish media and the whole country becomes caught up in the Danish brand of sports activity for a long weekend. One in every 130 Danes attends the event as a *paying participant* and twice that many come as spectators. It is an unbelievable spectacle, opening and closing with all 41,000 participants, in varied, colorful, form-fitting exercise outfits, orderly taking places on the large stadium field in the selected town. It is a tremendous act of solidarity—healthy Danes standing shoulder to shoulder on Danish soil.

The Danes have achieved a precarious balance between the self and selflessness. We have no adequate words for such a balance. Danes know that self image is vital; if you are *nothing* you have nothing to contribute to life. However, if self becomes selfish, life suffers. Life is corporate, there is no place for greed nor any place for neglect of the self.

Similarly, Landsstævne seems to say that without a sense of nationality, without a national sense of life, life is diminished for all nations. Without national pride the Danes would not have survived aggression from the south. Countries, just like individuals, need a good self image. Yet, there is no room for greediness among the countries of the world and the Danes are noteworthy for their open-mindedness and generosity in world affairs—note their stance in the United Nations. They not only celebrate life at home but send aid in the form of funds, technicians—and Gymnastics instructors—around the globe to expand the celebration of being human.

This business is precarious because without an open-minded perspective, the Danes would become no better than other nationalistic countries which fail to see the balance between self and selfless. It is out of the experiences with Germany, both militarily and culturally, that the Landsstævne developed. Landsstævne becomes a healthy mixture of saying, to the

Germans and the world, “We are Danes, we are strong, and we are united—don’t mess with us,” and the equally important balance to the equation, “We Danes are human beings, we are joyful and beautiful, just as everyone in the whole world can be—isn’t it great to be alive?” At the Landsstævne, spectacle follows spectacle as club after club show the routines they have invented and perfected.

Participants at gymnastics exhibitions are well trained to present a great program. The team has an in-built capacity to adjust and cover for a teammate who is ailing or absent. When the men line up for some of their spectacular aerials, they automatically shift their order so that the best performer is saved for last. If someone feels shaky and someone else feels fired up, the group shifts their order. Part of the excitement which comes across is the collaborative nature of the exhibition with individual following on the heels of another individual in a crescendo of rapidity which ends with an extraordinary feat. A solo performer is denied this.

The Landsstævne of 1988 was in Slagelse and is remembered as the wet one—it rained throughout the event and the fields were a sea of mud. What impressed me was the depth of commitment the Danes displayed in the face of discomfort. They stood patiently in soggy, uncomplaining lines waiting to enter the stadium in turn. Danes are highly disciplined but the discipline comes from within, from the view of self as part of a bigger picture. One unfortunate woman, looking lovely with her blond hair, trim body, and immaculate leotards, was positioned in a mud puddle on the field during her team’s show. She didn’t hesitate when the routine called for her to lie down and roll over. Instead, as she became smudged with mud, she had a smile on her face and seemed to glow with the knowledge that she was upholding her part of the show. Human beauty was visible through the messy earth and her part in the overall picture was unusually evident!

Robert's Rules of Order, Danish style

I attended the board meeting of DDGU (now DGI) in 1981. It was not like any other annual business meeting I had ever attended. The Danes, including the leadership of the sports clubs, have a highly organized society. When individuals see themselves as the ingredients in a stew, they know that

all ingredients are needed for the stew to taste just right. This particular “stew” was to be served at 7:30 PM and it, the meeting, began exactly at 7:30. Delegates hadn’t started arriving at Fuglsø Center, DGI’s training camp located on a peninsula which forms one side of Ebeltoft Bay, in any numbers until after 7:00. Yet, at 7:30 five hundred and fifty delegates, from all parts of Denmark including some of its 100 inhabited islands, were in place, seated, and quiet. They expected the meeting to begin promptly and it did. This is another verity which results from questionable theology—people usually get what they expect or will allow, it depends on their commitment. Danes are committed to working in concert and each one holds up their part.

Arne Rasmussen, chairman of the organization, simply stepped up to the podium (no need to call the meeting to order, no need to rap the gavel) and, as is normal in many Danish gatherings, asked for one of the songs in the ubiquitous folk school song book. The singing was spirited and sonorous—you can hear Viking voices in the strength of Danish singing. Then Arne sat down and Niels Gregors Olsen and Julius Bidstrup, two ‘parliamentarians’, conducted the meeting. The Danes do, in fact, call them *conductors*, not parliamentarians—the chair person is expected to be the inspirator, the leader of policy and, the Danes contend, must be free from the management of the meeting itself. Dictators are not needed, or permitted, in a collaborative life. The conductors managed the process. Arne was called on to give an issue speech which was followed with a break, a normal feature of Danish society. As delegates enjoyed a choice between coffee and tea and what we call Danish pastries but which the Danes call Vienna bread, they could informally discuss the issues. Opportunities for social interaction are imperative in a society where the group is valued as much as the individual.

Friends told me that the formal discussions which followed, when the meeting reconvened, were the most important part of the meeting. I, as an American confronting a foreign culture for the first time in my life, wondered how five hundred and fifty people could discuss anything. The discussion was open to anyone. Those desiring to be heard merely stationed themselves on a bench to the conductor’s left and took their turn. There was no time limit placed on the speakers other than that imposed by the speakers on themselves and what they knew the listeners would allow; however, no one spoke more than five minutes and I had the feeling that any who took advantage of the situation would not have been tolerated by the delegates. A filibuster would be unthinkable! The conductors kept things moving along and inserted enough levity to release tensions and ventilate the lungs in

laughter. The chairman was given the opportunity to respond to points raised about halfway through the evening and by 12:25 AM, when the meeting adjourned for the night, thirty-one delegates had had the floor and all five hundred and fifty delegates showed enough self-discipline (because of their grasp of what an enlightened life requires?) to still be in their seats. The meeting ended with a song.

This “discussion” format was continued all day Saturday as issues were formally addressed from many points of view and informally discussed during breaks for coffee, lunch, coffee, and dinner. Saturday evening, however, was arranged to be more light-hearted with both a skit, which played with the issues, and a dance into the wee hours of the morning. The “discussion” then continued Sunday morning.

It wasn't until Sunday afternoon that the assembly got down to the official business of electing new board members and passing the national organizational budget. Both of these seemingly crucial functions of the annual meeting were relegated to the closing hour or two of the meeting. One delegate, in a tone familiar to me, expressed his frustration that these voting matters were not to receive the same opportunity for discussion as other issues and complained that the meeting planners had given priority to a skit and dancing on Saturday night instead of using the time to discuss the merits and deficiencies of the budget. Julius Bidstrup, as a conductor, rose to this challenge in typical Danish fashion. He suggested that the delegates sing number 131 in the Songbook! It was a song about an unhappy lover on a Saturday night. The delegates virtually sang the complainer down. Had there been a need for discussion I am certain that they would not have sung and that Julius Bidstrup would never have suggested that they do so. Danes grow up in a society which is sensitive to the finely tuned give-and-take required of cooperation.

As to the issues discussed Friday night, Saturday, and Sunday morning, I was perplexed. No motions had been made about the Government's plan to pay instructors of community recreational facilities even though (can you believe this, my American compatriots?) the organization seemed united in opposition to this because, they said, the use of volunteers encourages ordinary people to take charge of their own needs and to build for themselves what they feel is best. Neither was a policy set concerning contracts with third world countries, which the Danes generally show an interest in helping to develop. No vote was taken to establish an organizational policy

(requested by youth delegates) concerning disarmament; many members did not want the organization to be involved in political issues while others argued that any social activity implies actions or inactions which can be considered political. A wide range of views, representative of the national spectrum from conservative to liberal, was obviously present.

“We don’t vote—we discuss. We don’t speak unless we have something to say—we listen.” I was told by one of the Danes. By listening, Danes become educated, knowledgeable, and able to see other points of view. By speaking, Danes show responsible citizenship and contribute to the collaboration necessary to fumble intelligently through life. By not voting, each member is free and responsible to go back to their local club and use their best judgment in addressing local needs. Strong local communities make for a vibrant and resilient nation. By voting, policies would be set in concrete. By voting, *majority* becomes *monarchy*. Instead, at the DDGU annual meeting, all heard the issues but all were still free to act according to their conscience. This results from a theology based on trust in the sacred nature of life and a respect for all of God’s varied children.

The organizational chart hanging in the coffee room of the training center showed the theology graphically— there was no hierarchy, instead there was a series of nested boxes: a large, dominant central box in full color, representing the local clubs at the heart of the organization; then a supporting peripheral box for the regional organizations, in halftone; next the national board of directors tying the organization together; and finally the light outer layer for supporting functions such as the annual meeting, field consultants, national office, training center, and magazine. The outer layers were peripheral and thinly drawn. The membership was the core.

Economics, Danish style

[NPR’s Morning Edition](#) aired the idea of “industrial symbiosis” during its program on 31 July, 1997. They used, as an illustration of the concept, the industrial relationships which have evolved in Kalundborg, Denmark during the past 20 years.

Kalunborg's Power Plant, the largest in Denmark, steam drives the turbines to make electricity for the community. In most plants as the steam cools, the energy remaining in the steam is lost. The steam exiting the Kalunborg plant, however, is not lost but is piped into town to heat homes and offices instead of into the atmosphere or cooling lagoons. Some goes to heat the fermentation tanks at Novo Nordisk, a pharmaceutical company and one of the biggest insulin producers in the world. Some steam is also piped to Stot Oil, a refinery, where the heat is used to help break down petroleum into gasoline. The refinery, in turn, delivers purified cooling water and excess gas back to the power plant. Years ago the gas from *Stot Oil* was simply burned off in the open air. Now the power plant burns the gas and doesn't have to burn as much sulfur laden coal.

The pollution from the millions of tons of coal the plant does burn must be scrubbed, trapped in a sludge of calcium sulfate. But, calcium sulfate, gypsum, is exactly what is used to make plaster board. So, the sludge is now delivered daily in a fleet of trucks to Plaster Board where it is turned into the plaster board like that used to finish practically every wall in new homes today. A fish farm also gets some of the power plant's heat which warms the fish ponds which makes the fish grow faster, especially in the winter. Novo used to dump organic waste from its fermentation vats into the ocean. The government banned that practice and now the plant delivers it free to local farmers as fertilizer saving each farmer an average of \$50,000 a year in fertilizer costs.

Before we get too impressed with the altruistic implications of all of this, I better quote some of NPR's interviewees...

...Jørn Christensen, former manager of the Novo Nordisk Pharmaceutical Plant says,

Of course in the beginning, few farmers dared to take this [fertilizer]. Your other ones were very skeptic about this (sic). But farmers are just like stockholders, dominated by two sentiments: fear and greed. In the beginning, the fear is dominating. But when they see it works, the greed will take over. Then they can't get enough... It is not a charity. This has been done because it made sense. Also economically. We made money on this.

But, Dan Charles, the reporter, counters,

“Christensen says he assumed this kind of cooperation was common. It just made good business sense. But in fact it’s rare, if not unique. This small Danish town on the shores of the Baltic Sea has become famous among environmentalists. They say Kalundborg represents the world’s best hope for more sustainable industrial development. By linking their enterprises together and recycling each other’s waste, the companies in Kalundborg cut their consumption of ground water by a million tons each year. They saved tens of thousands of tons of oil and coal and gypsum. And they don’t have to dump so much waste.”

Nicolas Gertler, author of a graduate thesis on industrial ecosystems at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and others are now trying to see if industrial symbiosis could get a foothold in the United States. According to Gertler, the executives in Kalundborg themselves say that they were able to cooperate because they lived and worked so closely together. Christensen says, “We know each other in many ways, having children in the same class or playing golf or tennis or whatever.” Charles notes that in the United States managers watch their competitors, not their neighbors. Could this be a result of a difference in outlook on life?

It seems to me that the shortsightedness of fear and greed are ingredients wherever people are found; but so is the desire to cooperate and take the long view. The difference between the United States and Denmark is perhaps mostly one of degree or perhaps even perception. In this line of thinking it should be noted that Danish television is state owned and regulated and thus more inclined to take the long view whereas American television is dominated by commercial stations and inclined to be short-sighted. It should also be noted that this feature on Kalundborg was aired in America on [National Public Radio](#), not commercial broadcasting. Could the commercial networks find the highly competitive battle for ratings crowding out some of their longer term concerns about life in the United States? What does self-perception have to do with economic well-being? The Kalundborg experience seems to say that it has a great deal to do with it.

Denmark has worked miracles through cooperation. Coming out of a feudal system at the beginning of the 18th century the Danish peasants and their leaders, many inspired by Grundtvig, cooperated in taking a poor, acid, windblown soil and, by planting windbreaks, setting tile drainage lines, and applying lime, created an agricultural economy which is still a model for the rest of the world. Agricultural products though now only a small percent of the national product are still marketed through farmer owned cooperatives.

People is a resource which every country has, so, what happened in Denmark can happen anywhere. Denmark had no wealth of natural resources other than its people. If other countries can capture the essence of what made the difference in Denmark, it is titillating to consider what might happen to the standard of living and the quality of life around the world in our lifetime. It could depend on releasing the potentials of humans from petty, worldly, self-imposed fetters by looking at life in a new, more open way.

Education, Danish style

American paleoanthropologist Donald Johanson makes an informed case, in his book From Lucy to Language⁶⁵, that human evolution is different from other species because cultural behavior in humans is passed on

...the plasticity of learned cultural information is a true hallmark of being human...

He notes that cultural evolution is not passive but must be learned by giving words to ideas, thoughts, and feelings, e.g. by teaching using language, a “symbolic mode of communication.” He contends that it is a relatively recent capacity of humans for cultural feedback which has finally given *Homo sapiens* the edge during the last 2 million years of hominid evolution. Other Hominidae have played their part on earth, sometimes for long periods, and then have disappeared except for the fossilized remains.

⁶⁵ [Johanson, Donald](#) and Blake Edgar, *From Lucy to Language*, Simon and Schuster New York 1996 ISBN 0-684-81023-9, p. 21.

Education, the paleoanthropologists have determined, is one of our distinctive and most powerful tools in succeeding as a species in this ever changing world. The Danes seem to have done uncommonly well at using this tool.

Almost everyone credits the Danish folk schools⁶⁶ as the tool by which Denmark, in a grassroots, bootstrap operation, remade itself from cultural and economic impoverishment—culminating with the loss of Slesvig-Holstein in 1864 to Bismark’s Germany—into one of the most successful countries in the modern world.

Not only were the Danish folk schools the major factor in the turn-about, but these schools were a result of the direct application of the questionable theology of N. F. S. Grundtvig to the institution of education.

Simply put, folk schools are schools whose structure reflects the view that adult humans, both alone and in concert, have a natural capacity and desire to embrace, explore, and enhance life. It is because of the “in concert” concept that the schools are called *folk* schools. In Denmark, these schools are normally short term residential experiences for anyone 18 years or older. They give no credits, no credentials, and no examinations because they believe that these formalities interfere with and stifle the natural capacity to embrace, explore, and enhance life. The technique of folk schools is to find out what a student is interested in (awaken), develop excitement about these potentials of life (enliven), and then to share in what others have learned (enlighten).

This process in Danish folk schools happens during a course which lasts only a few months. There are just over 100 folk schools in Denmark today and approximately 12% of the population choose to attend a folk school course sometime during their lifetime. But, 12% is enough ‘yeast’ to leaven the entire loaf.⁶⁷ It has been the Danish experience that once a person has

⁶⁶ *folkehøjskoler*, literally folk high schools, but Americans delete the ‘high’ because the schools are normally for students above the age of 18; ‘high’ referring instead to what we term ‘higher education.’ To further complicate matters, *folkeskoler*, or folk schools if translated literally, refers to what we term as ‘public schools.’ In this book the American term ‘folk school’ will be used as the equivalent of the Danish term ‘*folkehøjskole*.’

⁶⁷ Borish, *ibid.* p.205 Borish calls it a “significant minority”.

been inspired with an open approach to life they are “like a clock which has been so tightly wound up it will never cease running.” In short, folk school students become wound up citizens and leaders.

It was through these schools that Danish agriculture reached astonishing standards of production, quality, and efficiency. The schools did not at first teach technical agriculture, they taught farmers to think, to care, and to collaborate. The Danish Landrace pig actually received an extra set of pork chops through a concerted selection process by self-organized pig farmers. A quality Danish egg, served for breakfast in England, could be traced back (for quality control) to the farmer who oversaw its production. Danish agriculture became the backbone of the Danish economy during the change from feudalism to a modern democracy. The loss of Slesvig-Holstein precipitated a reaction that what has been lost outwardly must be gained inwardly.

The transformation was accomplished by forming cooperatives. The first successful cooperative creamery was formed by a group of farmers in Hjedding in 1882 and by 1902 the smokestack of a creamery became a landmark in virtually every Danish village. Olive Campbell, visiting Denmark in 1921-23, observed that it is to “...the folk school, and its children, the farmer’s agricultural school and the Husmandsskole, that the student, be he economic or social in his approach, must turn finally for an explanation of the Denmark of today....Somewhere behind cooperative organization is faith in one’s neighbor and a practicing belief in the good of the many.”⁶⁸

Campbell claims that the folk school,

...stands for a philosophy of life, not primarily a method of teaching. The living center and essential of the folk school seem to me to be these— a deeply religious motive and a purely democratic base, or if you will, a real love for the people which is the purest kind of democracy and religion. Without them personality is only capitalized

⁶⁸ Campbell. Olive Dame. The Danish Folk School, the MacMillan Co., New York, 1928, pp. 47, 318, and 335.

*power. Freedom becomes a mere choice of methods instead of a free path to heart and mind.*⁶⁹

I was duly impressed with the folk schools when I when I first visited Denmark in 1972.⁷⁰ The most intriguing experience was when I visited Kolding where a new Communist folk school was being built. At that time, Americans were still paranoid about Communism. I marveled that the Danish government not only permitted a Communist School to be built, they even subsidized it! Here was a test of “a deeply religious motive and a purely democratic base, or if you will, a real love for the people...”

According to the national legislation governing folk schools, folk schools are privately incorporated residential schools. To qualify for government grants, they must attract enough students to maintain 75% of the school’s capacity; they must operate at least 32 weeks during the year; they must keep their facilities in appropriate physical condition; and they must submit the school’s curricula—although there are *no* stipulations concerning subjects or weekly number of class hours. Thus, a Communist school was permitted and subsidized.

The schools are given subsidies of up to 85% of their operational expenses and even provided with loans of up to 50% for the cost of erection or purchase of buildings, renovations, and improvements! The school Board of Directors must raise one-sixth of the amount to be used and the plans and drawings must be approved by the Ministry of Education.

This is a typical Danish arrangement—the Government is used to encourage people to put their interest into action, monitoring the activity but not dictating its direction. In an open society, the people must be given every opportunity to explore life.

But, for the Government to encourage a Communist school? I wondered what the Danish *people* thought about that! A Communist school could promote a revolution, bringing down the very government which supported it. The invariable answer I got was, “Of course we should let such a school

⁶⁹ Campbell. *Ibid*, p. 334.

⁷⁰ I was, at the time, Director of the [John C. Campbell Folk School](#) which Olive Campbell had founded in the mountains of western North Carolina in 1925 to apply the Danish concepts to American conditions.

be built. It may have some ideas which need to be tried out.” Such is the trust which Danes have for public wisdom! If enough Danish citizens could be found to establish a school to explore and promote communist ideology, they should be encouraged to do so. If the citizens found it useless, it would die a natural death.

The leaders of Kolding folk school were busy with construction when I visited and not interested in talking with a bigoted American. So, I joined them in pushing a wheelbarrow and hefting cement blocks for one of the residential units under construction. It had been designed to accommodate a variety of family units, including single parents—not the normal dormitory-type rooms found at most other schools, in those days, which had no provisions for students with families. During the morning coffee break the leaders were obliged to talk with me. I learned that they were going to be as bigoted as I, intending to explore subjects with a communist coloration to the exclusion of other political possibilities. Danish society was open to exploring communism but the Communists were not open to other systems.

What happened? The School began with great hopes but ran into increasing difficulties and finally closed its doors. I am reminded of the connection between a national school system which relies on questionable theology and natural selection as applied to survival of hominids. An open society provides the proving ground of natural selection in matters of cultural inheritance as surely as natural selection applies pressure to genetic inheritance.

More of an American but a little Danish, too

Because of my fascination with Denmark, you can understand (aside from imponderables like love) that my son married a Dane and lives in Denmark. You can also see why he might say to me, after living there for several years, “Dad, Denmark isn’t what you think it is!” This was Loren’s greeting to me when I arrived in Denmark for the 1981-82 school year and my first extended visit. During the year, I came to more fully understand what was behind the Danish successes in education, sports, and economics which I had until now observed only from short term contacts as coordinator

of the Danish-American Exchange between 1973 and 1994. I could also see some of the problems.

Loren told me that he was glad I had come to live in Denmark instead of just visit so that I could understand some of his disappointments and frustrations in trying to adjust to life in Denmark. It isn't a utopia! After nine months of living in Denmark, I was able to tell him that I was more of an American than before. This brought a broad smile to his face because I'm sure that Loren had experienced being a square peg in a round hole. I couldn't help but contrast my approach to life with that of the Danes— how impatient I am, how much I prefer to be doing than to be planning. I found, much to my surprise, that I didn't want to change that characteristic! I got so tired of discussing, discussing, discussing—Americans would have completed a job while the Danes were still making plans. My experience has been that Danes, themselves, are also attracted to the vitality and energy of *doing* Americans.

On the other hand, Americans need to plan a bit better and not run roughshod over everything. During our frontier days of 'unlimited' resources many Americans reveled in opportunities, but, looking back, are not proud of how Indians and Africans were treated. Roughshod is too mild a term to describe that era.

When I told Loren that I was more of an American than when I came, I added, after he smiled, that now that I had been in Denmark for nine months, I was a little Danish too! The only way that I could be more of an American and in addition a little Danish was that I had become a bigger person. I had learned that we cannot fully understand *ourselves* when we live only within a closed cultural system. It had been important for me to leave my own culture in order to understand it better. I was able to see my fetters and my strengths for the first time.

This is the application of questionable theology! By embracing all human cultures under the sun, by asking questions about those we do not understand, we expand our understanding of life's human potentials as well as its limiting foibles. We do not gain understanding until we first embrace what is *unknown* and give it a try.

N.F.S. Grundtvig, who was a feisty theoretician, put it this way...

... Whether a Christian or a heathen, a Turk or a Jew, every person who is personally conscious of a spiritual nature is a marvelous enigma and will reject nothing merely because it is wondrous and apparently as much without explanation as the self. On the contrary, wonder attracts such people in an irresistible manner because it reflects their own image and offers the hope of finding the solution to their personal enigma. Answers, they know, cannot be found in situations where comprehension is apparent. Such people, of one faith or another or even of no faith in divinity whatsoever, will not be attracted to educated people whose wisdom is so apparent that it can be appropriated in an hour of memorization or even taught to smart dogs. People seeking answers to questions are attracted to the dim and profound natures whose thought is profound and intuitive, whose emotions run deeper than any probe, and whose enthusiasm carries beyond themselves. Such persons who defy the Roman enlightenment are yet plentiful in our Nordic countries. As lecturer and author I have met a good many.⁷¹

Danish Resistance, the Nazi Occupation, and Danish Jews

One of the least know but most important stories coming out of World War II is about the Danish resistance to Nazi occupation. On September 18, 1943, Hitler ordered the deportation of Danish Jews to “their final solution,” the death camps. Arrangements were made for a round-up on the nights of 1-2 October but rumors were already circulating in Copenhagen despite every effort to keep the plans secret. Jews by the thousands went underground. In the end, the ship which was to hold 7,500 had only 202 on board, mostly old and sick people. Those left in hiding back on land had to be rescued by their non-Jewish neighbors. Quoting from [Denmark](#)

⁷¹ Knudsen, Johannes, ed. Selected Writings, N.F.S. Grundtvig, [Fortress Press](#), Philadelphia, 1976. pp. 22-23. I have given the gender free rephrasing I am sure that Grundtvig, an early champion of equality, would have desired.

History, Vol. 2, by Bent Rying and published by the Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs⁷² :

Resistance [to German occupation] everywhere put all else aside in order to concentrate on aiding the fugitives. Yet it was characteristic of this emergency operation, this— one might say— popular rising, that a wealth of spontaneously formed new illegal groups arose and soon came to play a big and important part in the common effort. The operation did not have an overall command, but there were many participants and promoters, who though they might cross lines and create confusion and misunderstanding, nevertheless succeeded in building up operational organizations on both sides of the Sound [with Sweden]. It was constantly faced with danger and difficulties, but it was rarely short of funds. The work consisted in locating Jews who had gone into hiding and perhaps finding other accommodation for them until they could be got safely— despite their nervousness and risk of discovery on the roads or trains— to prearranged places on the coast, from where they were shipped on dark autumn nights, in an almost regular service, across to Sweden. Many of the crossings were made from open beaches by motorboat, or in fishing vessels, from small harbors all along the coast or from the southern islands to the north of Sjælland. Several hundred people might sometimes be taken at a time in dredgers, or concealed in the holds of bigger vessels. A few were helped across to Gothenburg by Resistance groups on Jutland. On the whole, the transports were accomplished with few accidents or mishaps. The most serious disaster was in the north-Sjælland fishing village of Gilleleje, where the

⁷² [Denmark History, Vol. 2](#), by Bent Rying and published by the [Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), pp. 384-388.

Gestapo surprised a convoy in the harbor and from there were led to a hundred or so fugitives concealed in the church loft. During those weeks the Gestapo seized in all over 200 Jews, who were deported with many of their helpers to German extermination camps. But by late November the great majority— 95 percent— of the Jewish population had reached safety in Sweden along with many other ‘wanted’ people. German patrols had by this time been greatly augmented, but the rescue services had become even more skilled in evading the pursuers, among other ways by constantly changing times and places of meeting the Swedish contact vessels. By the end of the war they had got about 20,000 fugitives to Sweden, including over 10,000 in October-November 1943, or nearly 200 every 24 hours.

Danish gentiles showed the depth of their belief in the sanctity of life with this remarkable embrace of their neighbors who were Jewish. They put their own lives on the line quite in contrast to those who were not willing to lose their own life in protecting the life of those who were “different.”

Modern conditions are shared by both Denmark and the United States

As we become a global society, Danish and American cultures are converging. Five years of English is part of the normal Danish public school curriculum. American movies, fast foods, and pop songs are increasingly a part of living in Denmark.

During my year as a guest student/teacher at a series of folk schools, I was asked, at one of the schools, to lead a group of students interested in producing a video about Denmark. A regional program made cameras available to groups such as ours and would even help with editing when we reached that stage. The students wanted to produce a satire, using me as the “fall” guy. I told them that anything critical of Denmark would have to be self-criticism; it is unseemly for a guest in a country to be critical of anything

except the self. I was amused with the various scenarios the students devised.

The story line began with an American's arrival in Denmark to visit his aging aunt. We obtained cooperation from the driver of a public bus to allow me, the American, to "disembark" from his bus during its layover at the local bus station. I got off with five large suitcases which were stowed in a small car by "my" Danish cousins, first-cousins-once-removed. There was no room for all of us along with the baggage in the typically small car and, since it was stalled, the self-centered Danes prevailed upon me as the congenial, big American to push the car. The next scene was of me finally pushing the car to the front of the cousin's house. My cousin and her husband welcomed me and then sent her teenage children off to get supper for the family from Burger King; she herself was unable to eat with us because she was off to the local sports club for her gymnastics class. The children were wearing T-shirts with CALIFORNIA and PRINCETON across the chest. After supper the man of the house suggested drawing straws for the job of cleaning up the dishes and was shown cheating so that he could watch Dallas on TV.

It was arranged that on Saturday I visit my old aunt in a pensioners home, which are state supported and very well run, as is almost everything else in Denmark. We actually brought an elderly neighbor, acting as "my" aunt, into the folk school and made the room look like a home for the elderly. She was a lively old soul and played her part admirably. She bragged on Denmark and how it looks after its senior citizens. "In Denmark, we are well taken care of," she explained, "They wake us in the morning and help us get dressed, they feed us, bathe us, and tuck us in bed at night. Denmark is a wonderful land," she crooned. She asked about her sister in America and I had to explain that it is much more difficult for the elderly in America. Unless they have lots of money, the facilities do not measure up to the delightful conditions in Denmark, where there are all sorts of activities, support systems, and enrichment programs for the elderly. "Denmark is a wonderful land," she crooned again and again until I finally changed the subject and asked about life for the youth in Denmark. "Denmark is a wonderful land," she crooned again. "In Denmark, the young are well taken care of," she explained, "We wake them in the morning and help them get dressed, we feed them, provide for them, and tuck them in bed at night." That is how many Danish youth feel about their life. They long for challenges.

For the Sunday morning scene, my class solicited the cooperation of the priest of the local church. I, as the American in the video, insisted that we go to church on Sunday morning. The scene opened with the priest, in his Lutheran ruff and robe, giving some excellent counsel to Danish society, the sort of things that Denmark needs to hear about itself. As the camera backs off, it is seen that the church is empty except for one person and, as the camera zooms in, the video ends with the realization that there are no Danes listening to the priest, only one lonely American— me!

At one point, going against my own counsel, I suggested to the class that they add a scene about Danish attention to physical fitness coupled with the unhealthy Danish habit of smoking. I suggested that the video include a planning committee having animated discussion about the importance of Danish-type sports activities to the health and fitness of Danes. All of the committee members around the table in the boardroom would be smoking, and smoking, and smoking, until the smoke would obliterate the picture. The students, however, vetoed that idea; Denmark was not yet ready to give up smoking. The Danes lag behind the Americans in discarding smoking habits. I find it interesting that shucking the cigarette habit has happened in America without prohibition but through education which, with free choice, results in a change in behavior. Freedom works in America, too and the Danes have something to learn from us!

Convergence between the United States and Denmark in the global society is apparent at more sophisticated levels. Crime is on the rise, drug use is an increasing concern, farms were going bankrupt during the 1980's just as in the United States, deficit spending by the government and the balance of payments were putting stress on social programs. Pollution and other environmental concerns are just as real in Denmark as in the United States.

But, reaction to some of these problems has been different in degree in Denmark and could prove instructive to us in the United States. Automobiles, the major source of air pollution, are discouraged in Denmark. Retail sales taxes on purchasing an automobile double the cost of buying a car in Denmark and car owners are faced with high taxes on gasoline—gas costs four times as much in Denmark as in the United States. The government encourages public transportation as the alternative by subsidizing it so that everyone can travel inexpensively by bus or by rail.

The resulting savings in petroleum imports is a big factor in keeping Denmark's international balance of payments manageable.

It has seemed to me that as the world shrinks in size, the larger countries have much to learn from smaller countries. Denmark is a small country, less than half the size of the state of Kentucky; yet it has twice as many people as Kentucky. Population density is more than four times that of Kentucky. Denmark can show how to live well with less. Even the change from a monarchy to a democracy was made peacefully, without bloodshed. Denmark has achieved a good balance between self-interest and human interest generated by a view of life which embraces all of life including all of its questions and seeking for answers.

But, two young Danish guests who read this chapter, reminded me anew that a balance is a precarious place to be. They approved of my statement earlier in this paragraph that the Danes discuss too much and said that they often feel like saying, "Let's get on with it and make a decision, There are other things I would rather be doing." They, like all humans, would like to be free and spontaneous, unfettered by communal constraints. And yet, I found myself cautioning them that there is no way to have an organized, orderly society without giving up some freedom and investing personal time into communal concerns. We can't have individual freedom and a functioning society without achieving a balance. Furthermore, we can be unhappy with the precarious nature of the balance and wish to move more towards unconstrained spontaneity or toward the security of rigid controls. Alternatively, we can accept the precarious nature of the balance and relish the challenge of keeping things in reasonable balance. The Danes who accept what I call questionable theology are, in Denmark, known as the "happy Danes." I suggest that those of us who are dissatisfied with the way life, who haven't accepted that they can't have both the absolute security of predictability and unlimited personal freedom, have added an element of unhappiness to their lives. A happier life can be had by adopting a questionable theology!

Chapter 14. **A Personal Story**

Risse, my second wife, died of cancer after a life-and-death struggle with the grim reaper. For six months following her death I was weighted down by the enormity of the loss. Risse's chief characteristic was her love of life, of people, and especially of her granddaughters. She wanted so much to see Katie and Betsy, identical twins, through college, established on a career path and parenting. She wanted to see where they were heading with their lives after having given such loving attention to them during their formative years.

She fought the cancer valiantly and never, even to her last breath, lost her hope to "be there" (as the TV commercial puts it) for these two girls. I took a leave of absence from Berea College so that I could fight for her life by her side. It wasn't easy. The medical monitoring, the various treatments which were applied, and the cancer itself—none were pretty. There were times when I would have given up— even welcomed an end to the struggle. But, Risse chose to live and I respected, even admired that choice.

After two and a half years we lost the battle. After the funeral and taking care of the required legal adjustments, I joined my sister and her husband on a trip to Arkansas to visit their daughter and her family. Then I journeyed to Denmark to be with my son and his family. I needed to get away from the failure, to let my wounded spirit heal, to apply the generous love of family members, to sit alone under the Danish sky with larks' exuberant cadences high overhead. But, too shortly, I had to return home to face unanswered questions ... alone.

One night, after a citizens' forum about world affairs in which John Ed Pearce, Risse's favorite *Courier Journal* columnist, painted a hopeless, dismal view of the world's economic, moral, and social condition, I went home alone. I could have gone out with friends to discuss the only remedy Pearce offered: "in small, little ways try to remove yourself from the evils of the system." Or as Mother Teresa once said, "We can do no great things; only small things with great love."⁷³ Somehow the time had come for me to face the fact of being alone and of the necessity of taking responsibility for my own life rather than running to others for comfort and answers. Oh, how

⁷³ Piburn, Gregg, "A Husband's Story," *Arthritis Today* May-June 1999, p 61

we humans long for answers! At first I couldn't face the big question even though I "knew" there were no answers. The human spirit bounds well beyond intellectual consciousness. I did know that I couldn't go to others for help; John Ed Pearce had told us that he had no answer to the problems we face. Nor could I face the problems alone. I telephoned my other son, who lived in Berea, and he and his wife sensitively invited me to come out to be with them even though I simply asked if I could come out to see them. They turned off the TV and gave me their full attention. We didn't discuss weighty matters; I don't even recall what we chatted about. They were my last resource outside of myself and I somehow had reached the end of the rope. I was finally face to face with ultimate reality—*I was not in control of the universe*. Perhaps it was Pearce's insistence that he had no overarching hope of resolving the world's problems other than making small, seemingly insignificant personal choices; perhaps it was the safety net of love with which I had been surrounded. Whatever, that night I apparently let go of the rope.

When I returned home alone, a great weight had been lifted from my shoulders! Risse and I had loved briefly, fought death, and lost. How could one accept that? **Somehow, the necessity to figure it out was taken from me that night.** Not only was responsibility for Risse's death taken from me, so was responsibility for all the ills of the world, even those beyond the ones so convincingly outlined by John Ed Pearce.

My mother often spoke of "acceptance," and I thought that I understood what she meant—that we do not always understand what God has in mind but by faith can accept whatever happens. Yet, my faith was rather ego-centric and I assumed that I did know right from wrong and had a responsibility to set the world aright. This implied that I knew the mind of God. That kind of faith, which put personal limits upon God, put a tremendous burden on my shoulders. I saw myself as a special emissary of God Almighty to the world—a heavy responsibility indeed.

Now, my view of acceptance broadened considerably. I no longer tried to second-guess God; I could accept the world as it was and is; I was demoted from special emissary to an equal rank with all of God's creatures. I had fought death and lost; I couldn't understand why and suddenly had no need to understand. I could revel in all of life's experiences.

One option at this point was to loose my faith entirely. Instead my faith deepened and broadened and I finally, truly, was able to let go. I believe, now, that that is more likely what my mother meant when she talked of the importance of acceptance.

By letting go, I was no longer required to make sense of it all. By accepting God's creation as given, and as I experienced it in small little ways, life became a marvelous adventure and death an inscrutable end of my small part in it. The lives of all people—those I understood and those I did not understand, alike, became new windows into the divine arrangement of God's universe.

I was still responsible, perhaps even more responsible than ever, to use my life in the highest and best service accorded to my understanding. I did not change my commitments to being honest, generous, loving, and faithful. But, I did so with great joy. I became a joyful person, delighting in the great vistas and the minute details. So much of the adventure of life is filled with joy. Not having the responsibility to understand everything and realizing that my own perceptions might be cockeyed, meant that even the gruesome, painful, violent parts of life held less threat and had new lessons to teach.

We live, we die.

Some love, except I can't be sure they do.
Some take a chance or don't.
Some step into the unknown and life responds or it doesn't.
Some step into the unknown and become unknown.
Some speak, and they are understood or misunderstood.
In the end, life and death are filled with wonder.

Are there no answers, then, only questions? Maybe the answer *is* here, buried alive. This realization has freed me from myself and allowed a love of life far beyond myself. Death has no hold on such a life.

Summary

Chapter 1. Questionable Theology

The truth is that we cannot know the Truth. We can question everything, including ourselves, and be ready to learn and relearn truth. If you understand this, you have grasped the core message of this book. So, with tongue in cheek but with utter sincerity I wish to call this elusive but obvious point of view by the words—questionable theology.

Chapter 2. Spontaneous Eruptions

God has perhaps created us in his own image, free to explore infinity, and thereby provoking a continuous drama between the mortal and the immortal parts of our being.

Chapter 3. Rationalism is an Ism

Rationalism ends up being impotent when dealing with infinity.

Chapter 4. The Human Trick

We humans are wont to turn our link with eternity around and look in the wrong end of the telescope *without realizing that we are at the wrong end*.

Chapter 5. The Past is Gone Except it Isn't

Only by standing on the accumulated insights of the past, by placing the past underfoot, can the past become a peak from which to peek beyond.

Chapter 6. Does Questionable Theology Embrace or Tackle Religion?

Questionable theology is about realizing our infinite possibilities and realizing that human potential in the face of our limitations.

Chapter 7. The Living Word

What we know is the window on what we don't know.

Chapter 8. Your Neighbor as Yourself

By welcoming those different from ourselves we expand our grasp on exuberant life.

Chapter 9. Using and Abusing Ethnicity

Ethnicity adds a richness to the fabric, it is the color of life; it is the variation which allows us to explore all of life's myriad possibilities.

Chapter 10. Applying Questionable Theology to Education

Education is training which passes on cultural content from one generation to another and, in addition, makes new contributions which make that culture relevant to the present.

Chapter 11. Applying Questionable Theology to Economics

Dad was a loyal and patriotic American but he could also see that some Americans twisted a belief in “free enterprise” (which he spent his life defending) into “freedom *to* enterprise” (which he spent his life trying to enlighten).

Chapter 12. Applying Questionable Theology to Politics

When one believes that the answers to a search for God’s kingdom on earth can only be developed by a joint effort, we have defined the basic premise of democracy.

Chapter 13. The Danish Experience, A Case Study

Denmark consistently ranks first among the nations of the world in an *Index of Social Progress*⁷⁴ commissioned by the United Nations.

Chapter 14. A Personal Story

Somehow, the necessity to figure it out was taken from me that night.

⁷⁴ [Estes, Richard J.](#) *Index of Social Progress*, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1995.