

Twenty-five Books

On Earth as in Heaven

by pilgrim 23

On June 29, 2018, based on a tip from a friend, I visited a house on Montreal's South Shore to look at the personal library of Roger B., a recently deceased psychotherapist. There were 20,000 books in the basement library, most of them old, picked up in used bookstores. Judging by the titles, this man I never met had the same interests as me, the same curiosities about the same things. I had a good time browsing and found 25 books to take away, most of them on the small side, many obscure and probably forgotten.

I decided to make reading the 25 books a summer project. Summer would end on September 21, which gave me 82 days to read an average of 50 pages a day. I bought several red pens to distinguish my markings from Roger's (and previous readers'), one pen for each room in the house and one for each bag I usually leave the house with. The project would be a process of distillation or pressings. I would transcribe the underlined passages as I finished each book.

I finished reading the books in early September, having lifted from them about 750 extracts. The project then became to describe the human condition based only on these 25 books but without using a single quote (except the one in the subtitle). First, I compressed these into 223 paraphrased or re-written observations, under twelve themes. Then I started to review and eliminate even more of them, ending up with 104 pieces. Finally, I added an epilogue meant to encapsulate all of it in three paragraphs.

In the context of this exercise wherein God, the Light, the Source, etc. all refer to the same unnameable thing, I chose to use the Source, the most neutral word.

One general observation: the more I worked at organizing and editing the excerpts, the more elusive and transparent they became and working with them began to feel like trying to handle or manipulate soap bubbles constantly bursting, drifting beyond reach, attaching themselves to each other, or simply losing their roundness. Most troubling was the appearance sometimes of almost total insubstantiality and the feeling that if I didn't stop handling them, they would either disappear entirely or dwindle down to one bland affirmation.

I did stop at a certain point, and this is what remained of the 25 books.

1. Imperfect

We are imperfect and see the world only through a glass darkly.

We think we are more autonomous than we are. The conditioned self is much stronger than our independent self.

We mistakenly assume that we are born superior to our predecessors, especially those in the distant past, and so we reject or ignore the wisdom in tradition.

Even though we know we are neither perfect nor perfectible, we maintain an idealized image of ourselves. This idealized image becomes a personality that dominates our presence in the world.

This domination of the personality, or imaginary self, is a state of hypnosis. We are meant to wake ourselves up, which is not too difficult in a given moment, but impossible to maintain without the help of a higher power, a teacher or a spiritual practice.

Simply knowing we are hypnotized does nothing to eradicate it. This can only be accomplished by the way we live and choose to act in each moment.

We are deeply flawed but have a capacity for greatness.

Our senses are more filters than receptors. We know this and yet still want to believe only what we can see. We want to perceive living things as solid and static, like the things we weigh and measure with our gadgets, when in fact everything is fluid and constantly shifting.

2. The Material

We mistake appearances (the material) for the whole.

The problem with the sort of materialism we also call scientism is that it wants to restrict our understanding of the world to the data its instruments can detect. As if our senses aren't restrictive enough.

In the Bible story the Devil corrupts by appealing to our pride and arrogance, the temptation to want to believe we can know it all and subdue life with our

intellects. The most prominent sceptics of everything non-measurable neglect to be sceptical about themselves and their own certainties.

We are attracted to the material world as it is to us. But when we attach to it, we float down to its level and every possession becomes a stone around the leg.

Belief in science as the ultimate truth is blind faith in unlimited progress and an imaginary future where everything has been made possible and explained by science. Science is made the religion of the material.

Matter is an illusion. Everything we see is finite: all will be taken away. Reality is spirit, not transient matter. Confusion arises because we are a mixture of matter and spirit, a link between the visible and invisible worlds. Our mission is to match the visible to the invisible, *on earth as in heaven*.

Matter needs to be transcended. Discipline can help us assert our authority and control over it, by fasting for example.

We live our thoughts. When we think only about material things, that becomes the world we live in.

The less we extend our attention into the spiritual, the more attention we turn on our own bodies, causing anxiety and narcissistic obsessions - sensitivity to external forces with evil intent.

Know-it-all materialists are in the most precarious position, not those who behave badly. They are removed from the Source, hypnotized and insulated from the unknown by their intellects. Saying there is no intelligent Source is the same as saying there is no meaning to life. A willful ignorance.

Just as there are many self-proclaimed atheists who actually live spiritual lives, there are many faithless, dogma-wielding, scripture-quoting know-it-alls among the self-proclaimed religious.

3. Dogma

The infinite cannot be described with a finite mind. We go off-track in the wrong direction when we try to pin the mystery down with words and pretend to be

certain about unknowable things. Dogma wants to turn spirit into matter – the opposite of what we are meant to do.

Dogma is a harmful delusion. Instead of putting into action the precepts of a religion, we foster superstitions, kiss talismans, rub and fondle statues

The Devil is in the dogma that drains religion of its mystery and Light, and is used to control, insult, abuse and kill people.

When we speak with certainty about the unknowable, our intentions are always bad, ranging from patronization to murderous hatred.

Disciples manufacture dogma and contaminate the message of love and mindfulness with power. Real spiritual practice consists of deeds and attitudes, not words and dogma. Only the way we act - not allegiance to dogma, but the way we connect to the Source - is what leads to reality.

Religion is what we do when we are alone.

Written codes, mindless rituals, robes and funny hats, even the promise of heaven ... all of this is the black hole of dogma. Not only does dogma subvert and hide the truth, it empowers critics who believe they are attacking religion when they attack dogma.

Religion is an intensity of imagination, but most religious practices render the Source dull and harmless instead. Religious practice should make it easier to be mindful of underlying meanings and a Higher Power as a way of life, while making it harder to rationalize bad behavior.

Organized religions are like everything else in the material world, subject to corruption and decay and obsolescence. But intuitive love and the Golden Rule remain the unchallengeable, indestructible basis of all religion.

If not dogma, then what should guide us? Not logic or emotion. Nothing is discovered with logic or emotion. Logic produces material goods and progress, and emotion is how we experience life, but discoveries happen only through intuition and imagination. Intuition, in this sense, is not a gut reaction or a thoughtless process – its perceptions are clear and detached.

We favor logic and emotion over intuition and imagination, but intuition and imagination are needed to grasp the most important things, the indescribable.

Intuition is part of our consciousness and real consciousness is the same for everyone, which makes it a unifying force.

4. Bad Behavior

Bad behavior obstructs intuition. It is a turning away from the Source (and our mission), as when we make ourselves the center of our world (narcissism and pride) or consume or amass more than we need (gluttony and greed).

But we must not let our bad behavior paralyze us with hopeless remorse, because, independent from the inexorable law of Karma (the echo effect), the Source doesn't care about our transgressions, except in so far as they block the reflection of the divine – the Light inside. We need to marginalize bad habits by managing them, minimizing harm and striving always to eliminate them.

We crave negative emotions, even treating them as virtues or entertainment, like righteousness and the forgotten sin of mockery.

When we behave badly, the good way of living is forgotten. The ultimate messages of love and forgiveness and the Golden Rule, for example, are denied.

How do we overcome bad behavior?

5. The Light

Bad behavior is overcome by seeking and lingering in the Light.

We talk about fear of the dark, but fear of the Light is perilous. We hide in the shadows of our bad habits, protecting them.

The Light inside is the emanation of the Source, and our consciousness is the only proof it exists. The Source exists beyond time, in the void between past and present, where eternity is.

We seem designed to resist, but we need to live in the moment, because only the now exists. The past and the future exist only in our minds as memory and fantasy.

If we live life mindful of the Source, good things happen and doing the right thing is effortless, as it should be.

When we look for the Light, it must be done with humility. No struggle or process is required because the Light is actually seeking *us*. So, we simply surrender to it.

6. As it Is

How do we surrender? One way is to suspend our compulsion to judge and compare.

When we judge or hate something, we hold on to it with our attention. We need to let it go and turn our attention onto the Source.

When we think we are required to be pure, we feel terrible and ready to throw our stones of guilt at others. Righteous judgment is toxic when tinged with self-contempt. When we refuse to forgive others, we deny forgiveness to ourselves, which is another one of those things that blocks the Light.

When we retreat from judging, we catch glimpses of the world *before* a concept is formed or a verdict imposed – the world *as it is*. Surrender is the path to freedom. We are most in control when in retreat.

We need to accept ourselves as we are and not dupe ourselves by thinking we are on a path towards something better. We are only ever what we are doing right now. Change or don't change but avoid the delusion of thinking we are in a process of *trying* to change or, even worse, *planning* to change.

Our duty is to live now, with the riddles of suffering and inequality unanswered. We need to avoid idealizing and postponing in anticipation of (or in comparison to) an imaginary perfect world in an imaginary future.

We need to penetrate the thick crust of habit to reveal the beauty in the ordinary. To look at the world as if seeing it for the first time, with the fresh eyes of a child, as fresh and imbued as a dream.

We need to awaken our sense of wonder about the incredible things we can do – the mystery of our senses, of breathing. We need to be grateful for the miracle of simply being alive. This is the key to happiness, because it is impossible to feel gratitude and anxiety at the same time.

The way we choose to live determines the life we live. And, paradoxically, we change attitude by changing the way we live. We change the way we live when we focus attention on the Source.

How do we control our attention?

7. Attention

We control our attention by replacing bad habits with good habits, which themselves will constantly need to be adjusted or replaced as they become increasingly meaningless and reclaimed by routine.

Routine exists because order and progress depend on it, but routine makes us mechanical and the mechanical personality is not conscious – it's hypnotized, asleep.

We have three centers from which we function, each demanding our attention: the body, the mind and the emotions. Sometimes we function in harmony with two of these centers, but almost never with all three, which means we are almost never in control of our attention.

We need to rise above the three centers and live our lives as much as possible uncoerced by their incessant demands.

We need to rise above and establish control over the complaining, comparing and judgemental mind by setting the default to gratitude.

We need to rise above and establish control over the emotions with generosity, love and forgiveness.

We need to rise above and establish control over the body by cultivating good habits, such as taking time for meditation, prayer, contemplation. We need to eat slowly and mindfully, savoring and sharing food, adjusting the act of eating to the

natural tempo of digestion and conversation. We need to establish control over this animal part of us by occasionally fasting.

We need to *look* at things slowly too, slow enough to penetrate; and we need to stand or sit still sometimes, let the world spin around *us*, let it notice us and speak to us.

When we commit to good habits, we live by the laws of work and creativity, not the law of accident, governed by incidental routines.

Ritual (without dogma) is a good habit when it helps us see that the past and future do not exist. In this state, the self steps aside and what we do in the moment can become a habit tomorrow.

Prayer is the best and most attentive habit.

8. Prayer

Prayer is consciousness of the Source and thanksgiving (basically the same thing).

There is power in the acts of worship and supplication.

Prayer is formal acknowledgement. Once the Source is detected, it needs to be continually acknowledged to make its presence real.

Prayer helps in the continuous battle between our lower and higher selves. It strengthens faith in the Source and mindfulness of higher purpose.

Prayer is spiritual healing, better than psychotherapy. It is an occasion to ask for forgiveness. Prayer can bring peace of mind, feelings of trust, commitment and allegiance.

We can ask for anything in a prayer, as long as we remove expectation with the words *if it be thy will*.

Prayer is private, between us and the Source. It brings us into contact with the Divine by inviting doors to open, bridging the things that separate us.

9. The Self

The self is the principal thing that separates us from the Source. We can't function without it, but the self needs to be transcended to make and maintain contact with the Source.

We need to *die to the self*, a process that begins with looking at ourselves clearly, which is difficult because the difference between who we are and who we imagine ourselves to be is shocking.

We need to see beyond our conditioning and past experiences, especially the idealized image of ourselves, the image we sustain by comparing ourselves to (and judging) others.

We need to subjugate and silence the commentator (the judger) and see the world as it appears when we are not there (as it is).

The World needs our discernment and assessment, not our judgement.

Judgement separates us from the people and things we try to place beneath us. We need to become like children whose unseparated world is full of wonder.

We need to liberate essence from the dominion of personality. This dying to the self is important at any age but crucial towards the end when temporal death approaches.

10. Death

Dying to the self can happen naturally as consciousness (like everything material) begins to dissipate into formlessness, detaching from earthly things, melding with the unconscious. As our bodies and physical desires begin to dissipate and fade away, surrender comes naturally.

Aging is transitional, like puberty in reverse. Instead of resisting, we need to embrace the different kind of blossoming that is possible when biological (material) purpose starts to fade.

But even in old age, with death imminent, we pretend it's not going to happen. Age is not *just a number*. Without bitterness, we need to embrace the fact that everything we can see is *meant* to die.

Memento Mori (remember death), because our attitude to death influences our approach to life.

Death is proof that everything we see is impermanent. We live differently when we are conscious of this, with a higher sense of urgency, aware and grateful to be alive.

Awareness of death suppresses the self, the main obstacle to the Source.

Civilizations die too, and terrible things happen, but it's never a bad time to be alive.

It is difficult to conceive of our own death because it is impossible to imagine our own non-being. We can't imagine non-being because it doesn't exist. Life is eternal.

11. Eternal Life

Something survives the end of our minds and hearts and bodies. The soul is our consciousness, which is also existence itself.

But only those who imagine they have a soul can experience one, only those who imagine eternal life and destiny can experience them. Eternal life is union with the Source, participation in creation.

We are seeds that need to open and let grow what is inside. But, like all seeds, only a few will open and carry on, continue to grow. Those who don't, survive only as separated strands in the cosmic weave of constantly flowing creation. Others, who do the opposite of what they should, drift down into the fire and survive only as indistinct particles. Reincarnation and Karma answer the riddles of inequality and suffering. Everything has consequences.

If eternity is understood not as endless time but *beyond* time, the concept of eternity in the moment begins to make sense.

12. The Meaning and Purpose of Life

Finally, we have the answer to the most important question. First and foremost, the 25 books assert that there *is* a purpose and meaning to our lives. The consensus is that the meaning of life is to *live* it – as much as possible mindful of and in relationship to the Source.

We are different from every living and material thing around us, the only creature that can stand up, saunter, and contemplate the world, itself, and the Source.

And we have a mission, a *purpose* we share with the Source. Our purpose is to *transubstantiate*, to spiritualize the material world we encounter. We are a bridge between Creation and the Creator, and in this sense, we participate as both creations and creators.

There is an element of the Divine in each of us that empowers us to transubstantiate. This divine element is consciousness, which is the essence of who we are, even though no scientist, philosopher, saint or genius of any kind has ever had any idea what this thing we call consciousness is because, like the Source, it cannot be expressed in words and is therefore unknowable.

We are empowered to *name* things, which has a fertilizing effect. Our words imbue the things around us. And when we imbue something with meaning it becomes meaningful; when we assign purpose, there grows purpose. Evil occurs when words are used to imbue ugliness or when they are frozen into dogma.

We create things we call art and if we look closely, we can see that perfect form creates essence. We don't capture the beauty in things with art and attention, we release it, by removing the static, taking the edges off the chaos and rendering form.

To participate in creation, we need to engage our consciousness by willfully directing our attention, which is continually being pulled downward or into distraction by what we call the *self*, the robotic, built-in thing that is incessantly generating self-serving impulses.

And so we are compelled to die to the self (our material, animal nature) and merge with the Source (which is already in us). We sense that this world needs our personal struggle for reality of spirit, that this is in fact why we exist.

Matter is condensed spirit. We need to release the spirit trapped in matter because this is what creates new life, which will then itself be subject to death and continual renewal. It is our duty to find and release the beauty in things, living or not. Over and over, for evolution to continue, the inside is re-united with the outside. We are meant to participate in this process by striving always to deepen our understanding of ourselves.

Just as we evolve when we deepen our understanding of ourselves, so does the Source.

In most languages, the word spirit also refers to breath. The Source breathes creation out, then breathes it back in. We breathe just like the Source, but not when we are detached from it. We participate in the Source (eternal life) only when we are mindful of it.

If we fail to distinguish ourselves with mindful attachment to the Source, we will dissolve back into the general substance of creation to be recycled indiscriminately. To the extent that we act in harmony with this mindfulness, we experience eternal life.

Epilogue: Walk the Good Path

Humans are imperfect, we are prone to lose ourselves in the material (and even try to change the spiritual into material). We behave badly and avoid the Light, but we are capable of anything, even perfect surrender. And we are capable of seeing the world as it is, of controlling our attention with love, gratitude and good habits, the best habit being prayer, which is conscious awareness of the Source and the will to make contact with It and participate in destiny and creation.

We need to metaphorically die to the self and embrace the knowledge of physical death in order to change our attitude to life with this knowledge that some things survive the end of our hearts and minds and bodies, that life is eternal.

Finally, we see that in the end what we know is that there *is* a good path and that the good path is always the better path, better because that is where we find joy and meet eternity.