

God is.
& 11 other short essays.



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1. God is

Simply put, God is.

For most of my life, I was staunchly atheist. Spirituality was a fairy tale. Experience proved to me God lives and breathes.

I use “God” to name my conception of the energy and consciousness that belies all things. It is not a “God of flesh and bone.”

To me, God is, is, and is in everything. The air we breathe, food we eat, and earth we tread on. This universe is made only of God. God is alive and lives through us.

I did not come to these conclusions overnight nor did God himself¹ to me in dramatic fashion. It was a slow process over years. God had to carve in me.

In the second grade, my classmates pressed me that God made the earth for man. I replied, “if God made the earth for man, why can’t we drink out of the oceans?” At that age, religion did not hold answers for me. Yet, it did not take long for God to start working in my life.

¹ I am using pronouns for the ease of writing and my own speech as a man, not because God has a gender. As you read, please substitute with herself, itself, or anything else. However you are most comfortable.

At the age of eight, I discovered Siddhartha and his path to enlightenment. Here was a man born a prince, destined to become a king. He had everything a person could ask for. Instead, he abandoned his riches for truth and became one of the greatest embodiments of spirituality.

Ten years later, I was in the forests of Santa Cruz, California. We went deep into the woods, far from civilization. Before turning back, we took a break and sat underneath a tall redwood tree on the slopes of a hill. As we rested, I looked up, watching the giant sway in the breeze. I felt it was conscious of our presence. It *knew* we were there. We shared that moment, acknowledging the presence of the other.

This experience marked me. The more I searched, the stronger God started to speak. At 21, I left Los Angeles for South America. I will recount a story from the Sacred Valley of Peru.

We ate the San Pedro cactus. As we journeyed with our guide through the mountains, after the first climb, we were given rapé. This pulverized mix of sacred tobacco and herbs is blown into each nostril. Like a blow dart. Receiving mine, I felt searing pain fill every square inch of my skull. Just as ferociously as it entered, the rapé pulled away and vanished. From a kneeling position I collapsed onto the ground.

I could no longer differentiate my body from the earth. Every separation had gone. My eyes were closed, yet I could see. I saw and felt a deeper state. The rocks, plants, and earth beneath me shone with brilliant light. Everything was the same.

Plant medicines are those that allow our conscious state to reach lower levels of consciousness, as in meditation. The Dalai Lama has recognized plant medicines, but also cautions they only provide temporary gifts. True, lasting sight is gained from meditation.

At 27, in one of the darkest times of my life, I found myself on my knees asking for help. I was at my rock bottom, in the pit of my addiction, and I asked the fathers of my father for help.

I was tired and sick. I did not want to keep going on as before.

I raised my eyes and a vision flashed into focus. For a moment, I saw them before me. They stood and looked down at me. They were of all shapes and sizes. They were clothed differently, but they were familiar.

They did not say a word, but I could feel how much they loved me. They were proud I had asked for help.

Then, they were gone. I called out to God to show me what I had seen was real. For a split second, I saw the same light of the Sacred Valley wash over me.

From that point on, the more I searched for God, the more God showed up. One night, camping at Cape Disappointment, God offered a warning. I learned that as one

begins to recognize God, like learning to recognize a piece of gold, one begins to recognize God everywhere.

God brought me community and tools I needed to become whole again. As I needed help, friends came. When I needed answers, answers came. When I meditated down by the river, God showed me peace.

To this day, as I seek to align my thoughts, actions, and words with God, God shows up more clearly. Nothing happens by chance. We are bound and connected to God.

Existence is constrained by what it can experience. Our brains process only what it can from our body's receptors. We are limited by our evolution and what it has managed to grasp for itself.

Though we are limited and flawed, we possess the ability to find truth. We can look beyond ourselves. We can reach out to find peace. God is here, right now.

What I have experienced is not special to me. What I have felt, heard, and seen is available to all those who go looking for answers. God calls in different ways, but we are all called. You don't need plant medicines, but you do need to go looking.

No two paths are alike. Yet, I believe all paths lead to the same place. For we all carve our existence onto the face of God.

2. Life

Nothing in this life is free, even life must be paid with death.

Life is fascinating. Peering back the film of time, we've discovered some incredible things. Each one of us is a complex organism with at least 3.8 billion years of history behind it. There, in the the billows of the earth, the first components of life were born. The song of life was allowed to sing.

What is it that pushes life forward? Are we reaching and grasping through the dark, guided by some invisible force? Is God growing with us?

The mystery of life is perhaps our greatest quest. As I sit here in the Berlin Hauptbahnhof, waiting for a train, I marvel at the procession of people moving about the station. Each person their own, filled with stories., Each tile had its own story to tell.

Imagine all our ancestors went through. Through each stage of Earth's history, we have survived. All our past lives are within us and inscribed in our DNA. They make our consciousness and unconsciousness, and guide our actions. They will come help if called upon.

Life is struggle and often life is pain. It is one of the Buddha's four noble truths: physical existence is suffering. Nothing is permanent. Everything that comes into being must pass away. This is the incontrovertible law of life. We must breathe every few

seconds, we must drink water, and we must eat. Nothing in this world is free, not even life.

Life does not have to be struggle and pain. By finding contentment, we can achieve joy and bliss. A smile that never fades from our lips.

Truth is a radiant energy. It is why people flocked to the Buddha, solely by the look on his face. It is a state everyone implicitly understands, because peace is what we desire. Achieving this takes immense work. The Buddha likened reaching enlightenment to carving through the Himalayas with a handkerchief. It takes serious discipline. But it is possible to a determined heart.

As work is the exercise of energy, work we do for others brings us the greatest joy. Siddhartha reached enlightenment not because he was seeking for himself. He did so for all beings. He gave himself selflessly.

Sacrifices demonstrate that life is precious. It is tragic how we have been to ourselves throughout history. We have grown and our human family has spread across the globe, but we remain together. Anything that we do to each other, we do to ourselves.

Just as the hand of God moves slowly through the universe, the reaction of karma can take time. Karma may even be paid across generations. We may be personally affected by the actions of the past, whether our ancestors had a direct hand in it or not.

We have little choice in where we are born, but the actions and choices of the past dictate the world in which we are.

The more we try to evade and ignore our issues, the grander and more complex they become. We owe it to ourselves to deal with them earnestly and with courage. As someone who spent far too long in addiction, it was only once I stopped digging that I saw how deep I had gone. At least now I had nowhere to go but up. Climbing out of that hole took five years of hard work. I am grateful to have returned to ground level. It may be scary, it may seem easier to continue digging, but that is fear talking. The farther we go the wrong way, the farther we have to go to return. Eventually we must turn around. We might as well do so now.

We owe it not only to ourselves, but to all future life. They will be no different from us. They will use lungs to breathe as we have, feel the same pangs of hunger, the warmth of love, and the sting of missing a good night's sleep. They will suffer as we have suffered, they will laugh and be happy as we have. There are few greater gifts we can gain than making their lives better, by making ourselves better. It is what God wants of us.

All life is equal. We are no greater than the rock, just different. All creation holds wisdom. We are all created from the same wellspring. Life is sacred and to be respected. It is our duty to prevent unnecessary pain.

3. Death

Death is as sure as life itself. Death begins its long march as soon as we take our first breath. Even the first God will be the last God.

Following creation, the only outcome is destruction. The ancient Greeks believed that one's death was the result of how one lived one's life. If one lived a life steeped in violence, one would come to an end of similar means. If one lives life well, then one died in peace.

Is death the end of the heart and the impulses of the brain? If all life is made of God and God is the only permanent thing in this universe, are we really to die? If we return to God and God is changeless, is time an illusion?

Everything on this earth has a purpose. Every person has a great skill that no other possesses. Sometimes it takes time to find it, but it is in every being. Everyone has something to learn and something to teach. Be stout and resolute. Do not fear death.

This does not mean one should not fear God. God is love, but God is also indifferent.

Facing death, I believe it is important to live one's life to the fullest, but to live with grace and gratitude. Extend a hand to all people, give freely without expectation, and accept any gift with a smile.

Read the spiritual texts of the world and see the commonality of God that speaks through them. Be open and seek truth. Speak with different people, see the world, and experience what God has to offer.

At death there will be judgment. Judgment of one's life by God, which is, in essence, a judgment by the self. Those who lived righteously, in balance, and helped others are those who will face little judgment. Those who violate God, who betray love, and create violence and misery are those who will face God. One by one, they will be faced by those they abused and experience what they felt in every second.

For every one of our actions is etched onto the face of God. There is no escape from them. I will atone for my own misgivings someday. There is no escaping this.

Death is the great equalizer. It brings souls back into balance before we rejoin God. We must be cleansed before doing so. It would be impossible to enter nirvana otherwise. Within God's consciousness all are found. We add our lives and our experiences into that great realm. Perhaps that is the point of life, perhaps that is how God learns and grows. Maybe this is why God created the universe.

Death can be our great reward for how we lived our lives, or our great punishment. What happens at that time is in our hands. No matter the burden of karma, it is up to us to do the best we can. It is important to remember that we are imperfect beings and that no one is perfect. With grace and humility, we can push forward and be

the best we can. God does and will always understand, but do not expect the scale of justice to be lightened because of God's love.

As the great poet Walter Scott said to his nephew on his deathbed, "[...] be a good boy. Be a good boy. As you lie here, that is the only thing that will give you comfort."

4. Happiness

Happiness is one face of a two-sided coin. On the one face, we experience ecstatic feelings of excitement and elation. On the other, we feel the sting of sadness and depression.

One cannot exist without the other. As the yin and yang, both sides are connected and hold a portion of the other within them. Like any coin, there is a middle spine. That middle is contentment.

Subjected to the dualism of happiness and sadness, there is only suffering. We may experience happiness and feel we have left suffering behind, but this is only temporary. Happiness cannot be sustained. Not when it depends on the release of neurochemicals in the brain. When those chemicals are used up, we are left with their absence - the withdrawal.

Generally, we ascribe the word happiness to the high we experience in the extreme of the condition. Hooked, we seek to repeat this high and go great lengths to get it. Contentment transcends happiness. At its core, contentment is joyful bliss. It is the natural state of the enlightened mind. When looking at classical images of the Buddha, he is always smiling. It is not because he is “happy”, but because he is blissfully content.

Contentment is peace. When grounded in contentment, there is no turbulence. Being content means being grounded in the present, with complete and total awareness of oneself and the world around.

What is awareness? In the Buddhist tradition, awareness means complete mindfulness in the current state. To be fully aware is to be fully awakened.

It is not hard to reach a state of awareness. Rather, it is to be completely aware at all times. To practice awareness is to practice meditation. One can try the following exercise.

Find a place to sit comfortably. One can sit on the ground or in a chair. The mode of seating is not important. It is how you sit that is important. The spine should be straight. Imagine rooting yourself into your seat and raising the crown of your head. Doing so should straighten your spine with your nose pointed slightly down. With a complete extension of the spine, the airways are fully open. When finding your position, think of the word “dignified”. Neither too comfortable nor too uncomfortable, find the balance of what is just right. Eyes may be open, or closed.

Breathe in and out slowly, finding your rhythm. The mind may want to wander. One may not be accustomed to sitting with nothing to occupy the mind. When it wanders, become aware of it, and bring your attention back to your seat. Repeat this question, “where am I now?”

Continue and let the energy of being begin to calm. Try to deepen and enlarge your breaths. Oxygen is fuel for your thoughts. The more you breathe deeply and relax, the more your mind will as well. Try to let go of your thoughts. Be present in your state of being.

One can liken the experience of the mind to the playing of a movie. We are constantly watching this movie. As we sink into mediation, the movie starts to slow down. As the frame rate slows, space starts to emerge between the frames. What is this space? What lies beyond them? This is what awareness draws us towards.

As you sit within your meditation and to slow the movie of your experience down, try to reach out into that space. Fill yourself with this awareness. Be present and unfold the experience of being. Can you feel without feeling? Can you be without being?

There is something that untangles us all within its web. It is within and without. My own understanding incomplete, but what I have experienced has shown me that it simply is. Find it and understand it in your own way. What matters is that you understand your truth.

The pursuit of happiness may lead us nowhere, but the pursuit of contentment will bring us great gifts. Being content means being veritably happy, free from the necessity of sadness. Ignorance is the source of suffering, as the Buddha said. The opposite of ignorance is knowledge and in knowledge there is contentment.

5. Sorrow

Tragedy cuts like a knife and pulls sorrow in its wake.

We live in a magical world. One in which we are alive, where we experience the beauty of life, and share in a collective experience. But there is a dark side. There cannot be grace without sin, cause without effect, and peace without violence.

There will always be a yin to the yang and a balance to the counterbalance. This is a fundamental law of our universe. Every action has an equal and opposite reaction. Many of us have seen that we reap what we sow. This does not mean, however, that everything that happens to us is a result of our own actions.

This is part of the law of karma. Just as energy cannot be created nor destroyed, it is simply channeled into something else. Just because a perpetrator has died, for example, the karma of their life does not simply go away. It will continue. We are fundamentally connected.

Some of us had the good fortune to be born into a place where the karmic scales were tipped in our favor. Some may be born into a fragile equilibrium, or, worse still, the scales tipped against them. This is not the individual's fault. This is a result of karma. No one decides their life. We are victims of karma, whether good or bad.

Addiction, especially physical addiction, is a maze of torment. It is during these instances that individuals need help from the community. Help cannot be forced upon them. Help must be freely wanted and accepted. It is important to always be ready to help those who earnestly desire it.

We are so intrinsically linked that failing to help transfers the consequences unto ourselves. Each one of us suffers when someone sits on the street shooting up drugs, selling their bodies, or descending into madness. Their pain is our pain. We will reap the karma as surely as they will. Human society has grown so large it may feel as though this is not the case, but it is so. We cannot stand by in judgment and let our brothers and sisters destroy themselves. It is not what God wants for us. It is our humanity that compels us to help others. We must do so.

Whether in the depths of addiction, depression, or vanity, we can be free of the sorrow that grips us. If we can work ardently within ourselves, then we can bring compassion into our hearts. We may be floating bits of matter wandering around the reaches of space, but we do matter. It is important to stick together.

Sorrow may be the result of suffering, but it need not end there. We would not know suffering if we did not also know joy. We can rise above our suffering and transform our pain into something greater. I believe it is important to remember we are never alone.

By aligning ourselves with our best practices, we can work to undo our chains. Many of these chains were laid before we were born and we awoke within them. This bondage may lead to suffering, but only as we remain ignorant of its bind. In learning to recognize this we can escape from sorrow. As we grow and unburden ourselves, like the air stewardesses tell us: go and help the next person.

6. Family

We are not all lucky to have been raised in a perfect home with a lot of love. 90% of the abuse faced by children in the United States comes from someone in their family or someone they know. Instead of being in a place of trust and safety, far too many suffer at the hands of those who are supposed to protect them.

The consequences of this abuse are far-reaching and affect every part of society. Without the stability that comes from being in a safe home, these children know only a world of chaos and pain. How earth-shattering it is to be abused by those we love. We are predisposed to loving our family. Sometimes this love is unrequited, or even worse, betrayed. The fundamental building blocks to an individual are thus tarnished. These children may act out and seek to numb their pain.

Such abuse is hard to face. Seeing the abject abuse hurts the heart and mind. Sometimes we want to turn away from it, in an attempt to protect ourselves. Sometimes we deny and try to sweep things under the rug. Doing so makes us no better than the abuser, for we allow it to continue.

Family is important. Whether the family we were born in, or the one we choose, family is paramount to the individual. So many of our issues arise from the family. It is only natural that the solution be within the family.

Let's look at one of the most famous family squabbles - the division of Abraham's family. Sarah was unable to have children and told Abraham to have a child with their slave. Ishmael was the firstborn. Later, Sarah had a child, Isaac. Sarah convinced Abraham to banish the slave and Ishmael. Isaac begot one line that led to Moses and Jesus; the Jewish nation and the Christians. Ishmael begot his line, Muhammad and the Muslims. All family.

Around the world we worship God, though God takes many names. We share this. We travel the same world. It pains me that our road is filled with so much suffering. We are family and we cannot be leaving anyone behind.

This universe is based on love and sacrifice. We owe it to ourselves and to God to strive forth. We must live up to the ideals passed down to us. As family, we must care for each other and help all who need it. The purpose of wealth is charity and wealth comes in many forms. We may be wealthy in personality, health, or artistic acuity. No one person has everything figured out. It is necessary to put our strengths together and we can accomplish our goals.

7. Greed

The purpose of wealth is charity. To use it for anything else is to feed the insatiable beast of greed.

Greed leads only to misery. Why else would Jesus and the Buddha teach people to give up their possessions? Material possessions get in the way of spiritual practice, they are distractions.

All things are made by God and given by God. Hoarding them for one's selfish purpose, rather than God's purpose, is a sinful thing indeed. Most, if not all, spiritual texts give credence to the fact that a rich man will have a harder time entering the kingdom of heaven than a camel walking through the eye of a needle. It is universally understood that wealth leads to no spiritual enlightenment. Material greed is far removed from the realm of God.

As has been touched upon, our compassion and our ability to work together is what make us human. We are unique to Earth in this way. The frequency of this universe is love, not hate, and certainly not greed. We exist because of selflessness and sacrifice, not because of avarice. Greed is therefore one of the great sins, one in which people hoard what is freely given from God.

We assign worth to things, but the worth is fictitious. Value is because we decide what is and is not valuable.

Before the almighty, material wealth is meaningless. Are they then valuable? We can adorn ourselves in gold and fashionable goods, but what lies beneath may be vastly empty. Materials do not make happiness. They are a high that fades. Like any addict, one needs more to feel satisfied. But there can be no satisfaction. This is impossible.

How bizarre we are, while so many of our brothers and sisters suffer. Just as there can be no pleasure without pain, there can be no wealth without poverty. We are the creators of the misery that lies about us.

Across cultures, we have assigned value to objects we found precious. From the shells of Native Americans to compressed tea leaves of ancient China, we created orders of currency. It seems we have a desire for purchasing power, to be recognized, and admired. These systems imply self-satisfaction comes from outside the self, that one needs things to be happy. To be successful, one must be so in the eyes of others.

It is not because the Buddha was adorned in gold that people flocked to him. It was not because Jesus wore fine linens that people followed him. It is not because Muhammad wore golden rings that people listen to his word. They had interior wealth. Their hearts were solid gold from their own fortitude.

Greed, like the other great sins, is a bottomless pit that cannot be filled. Nothing is ever enough for the addict. We are willing to sacrifice anyone and anything to reach the next high. How many of us would fail the test of greed?

Many of this world's problems are linked to the pervasiveness of greed. We have become worse off due to our unfettered addiction to wealth. The stratification of society has increased and in the United States, more people are living on the streets in destitution.

Extreme poverty is dropping around the world and conflicts are becoming less frequent, but I believe we could have extinguished those long ago. With the stroke of a pen, the ultra-wealthy of this world could end poverty. By reinvesting their wealth whence it came, they could be humanity's heroes. The only way to be immortalized is to be selfless. Alexander, Cesar, and Napoleon are not celebrated as highly as Jesus, the Buddha, and Muhammad.

Let's look briefly at the three above tyrants. Through their actions, millions lost their lives. The ancient Greeks believed the death of an individual was the consequence of their actions. Look at how each one of them ended. Alexander died far away from home at a young age, knowing nothing but the cruelty of war. Likely at the hands of his own men. Cesar was brutally assassinated by his fellow senators. Napoleon died in pitiful exile. These men are nothing to be envied. Surely, they had many gifts, but they chose greed over grace. Imagine a world they had done the opposite.

We are still locked in the death race of greed today. The United States is facing a dark future due to its addiction to unchained wealth. For almost 50 years, social services have been steadily bled dry. Mental hospitals have been closed, pouring mentally unwell

people onto the streets, and preventing the care of more in need. The tax rate of the ultra wealthy has fallen from as high as 91% in the 1950s to less than 10% today. In 2021, as a small business owner, I made \$40,000, net. I paid close to 30% in taxes. I paid a higher tax rate than billionaires and higher than President Biden, who paid 26% on \$650,000. Our system is skewed and broken. It is un-American to not pay one's fair share and contribute. But it needs to be done with sense. In a way that stimulates the whole, rather than strain the few.

It is insulting we find ourselves in a world where the billionaires are cutting important services from the people's government. These cuts eradicate systems that contribute to the nation's well-being. The government claims to cut down on excessive spending. How silly, when the only solution is to reform the tax rates and reflect what they once were. The 1950s were a golden era for America because the ultra-wealthy paid their fair share. I believe it is only logical that those who make their money off the system, reinvest into the system so that it may continue. When you spread the wealth around, *everyone* benefits, including the ultra-wealthy.

Billionaires would not have their wealth if not for the people who work for them, the people who buy from them, and the interconnectedness that pours from God. It is nothing other than the pursuit of a larger purse that drives this concentration of wealth among the few. Surely, there is nothing innately wrong with making a living and gaining a respectable share for one's work. Capitalism has existed as a form of economy in human society since we first bartered and traded with one another. It is a part of who we

are and it is not an inherently bad thing. We turn away from God, however, when we become slaves to greed.

We cannot forget that the purpose of wealth is charity. When we put in our share and contribute, we are elevated together. The notion of trickle-down economics will never work. It is a smokescreen for the continued, unrestrained accumulation of greed. Wealth must flow, not “trickle”. It’s time to give back. I have often heard it said, “eat the rich”. Please, don’t. They’re gross.

We have sought to create a fairer and more equitable world for ourselves and our progeny. Progress has been slow and painful. But, we are frail, weak, and dreadfully imperfect. We have torn each other to pieces for things that on God’s plane are no different from ourselves.

Greed, like all the great sins, goes against our better nature because it feeds into the state of being that is addiction. The root of addiction is a removal from God. It is purely egotistical and narcissistic. Me, me, me. That is why the ultra-wealthy are as gross as they veritably appear. They have become distorted by their own self-deprecating actions. It is a matter of cultural perception they are not sent to rehab centers.

It is critical we learn to change our perception on the state of wealth. I believe we must trust in God and share amongst ourselves, materially and immaterially. We will become happier, more content, and further at peace. Far away from greed.

8. Lust

It is not for the woman to cover up her body. It is for the man to cover up his lust.

The same applies to any person with a sexual inclination. To place the responsibility for one's lust on another individual is to allow oneself to be a slave to one's baser instincts. Nothing more than an animal.

Surely, overcoming the natural propensity of lust is not easy, but to do so is to free oneself from obsession and fantasy. Lust is one of the seven deadly sins and, like greed, deserves its own chapter. In my eyes, lust is becoming more pervasive and normalized to a greater extent. To be locked in lust is to be chained to madness. Like the other great sins, it leads only to addiction. Like all addiction, it is a bottomless pit that cannot be filled. It always requires more, until the inescapable conclusion of any addiction: death.

Look at the example of Robert Johnson. One of the progenitors of modern blues and rock 'n' roll. Robert Johnson is idolized around the world and is considered the first of the infamous "27 Club". After the death of his wife and child, Johnson turned to the blues and traveled as an itinerant musician. He only recorded two sessions in his short career, but they influenced countless people. Tragically, he found his end to lust. Johnson was a known womanizer in his travels. In a small town, he lay with the wife of

another man. The enraged husband poisoned Johnson's whiskey. Johnson died a slow and agonizing death. A terrible end to a man filled with such talent.

Lust is incredibly dangerous. It drives behavior a rational human being would surely abstain from. It is a madness of the mind. Lust can be so detrimental to the person and to the community that its warning has survived thousands of years.

Even the Buddha does not teach the abstention from sex. Rather, how dangerous it is to leave the desires of the body and mind unchained. Sexuality is sacred and can be extraordinarily healthy.

Lust is in every one of us. As is hunger, greed, and vanity. Over the course of one's life, one may fall prey to it deeply. Thankfully, the tools of our forefathers can illuminate what lies beneath.

In the Gospels, Jesus said, "Moses said unto you, do not commit adultery. But, I say unto you, if you covet her in your mind, then you have committed adultery." When I read this for the first time, it was like Jesus himself cut into my heart. Truth can do that.

Lust is the egotistical pursuit of fantasy. The distinction is fantasy and not sex itself. Sex is necessary and the greatest sex comes from the deep, emotional connection with one's partner. This is impossible to accomplish with lust. Lust is pure ego. There is no desire for connection or intimacy in lust. There is only the individual experience.

We experience what our eyes capture and what our nerves transmit to our brain. When we engage purely on the physical level, we experience in a vacuum. When lust is strong enough, we are removed, detached, and when it is over we are left with emptiness. Conversely, when we are emotionally present, we open ourselves and can join in communion with another person. This is not possible with lust.

Lust is locked in the duality of the world. The pursuit of lust can only bring pain. Lust is an illusion, a fantasy, hiding the truth of what lies beneath. We desire to have the object, to eat it, to drink it in, and make it ours. But this is impossible. As this attachment is a fantasy created within ourselves, lust can only bring pain.

In Buddhism, attachment is one of the great sources of suffering. If we selfishly attach to people, places, or things, we cannot take them as they are, rejoice in their being, or walk away from them without pain. Through attachment, we may try to escape from our problems. Exterior forces cannot fix interior problems, however.

We may believe ourselves to be wise and intelligent creatures, but we are still animals. We can become as rabid and unhinged as a moose in a rut. Compared to God, we are blind hatchlings crawling upon the floor. We grasp into the darkness to grab hold of something that will quell our fears. We constantly look for something outside ourselves when the only answers lie within.

God feeds us through ourselves. We can get close to the source and find the calmest waters. Buddhas do not reach enlightenment by following something outside

themselves. It comes from the internal connection to God, to the light that pours through.

Doing so is not easy. Though it brings fulfillment, many of us choose to continue blindly, stuffing ourselves with whatever bits and pieces we can find. Lust is one of these pieces. We feel the high and the rush, and we think this is the answer to our problems. All too often, we are left in withdrawal, with a bitter sense of dissatisfaction and hopelessness. Instead of remaining calm and sitting in our silence, we think all we need is just a little more, one more high to make things right. Maybe that last experience just wasn't good enough, we may tell ourselves. We go back out into the blinding dark, hoping for some miracle to save us.

But that miracle will never come. Everything in this world is transient. Whether it be a person, a relationship, an object, or an experience, the end will always be nigh. In creating attachment, as lust can drive us to do, we bring pain into our lives. We may grieve the loss of a loved one, but grief can turn to love as we remember that this is the natural course of life.

Many may never progress past the stage of a blind newborn. We may simply slither about and slowly poison ourselves with whatever we get our hands on. We can live circular lives, never taking steps towards growth and reaching the next stages of our evolution.

The only positive that can come from a life of lust is the realization that one has gone in the wrong direction. The person I am today was born from this experience. From the age of six until 27, I was a sex addict. Truly, lust was something that had a firm grip on my life and directed almost every one of my actions. Born from a place of limited self-worth, social isolation, and introduction to sex far too early, I became gripped by the pursuit of the physical and the high that came from my lust.

How I lived my life led to incredible and persistent pain. I was never happy, my friendships were superficial, and I could never truly be myself. Almost all my actions were directed towards finding a sexual partner and using her for my desires. I lied, manipulated, and cheated any I could sink my teeth into. I was a vampire.

Throughout this period, I believed myself to be a good person. I told myself I was a liberal, feminist-minded individual who prided myself on the social movements I participated in. But, in the end, I was no better than the people I claimed to despise and fight against. If many had known the kind of person I was, I would have been spurned by them.

In my life, I have hurt many good people. It took hurting one of greatest to realize the insanity with which I lived my life. When I was 24, I met the woman that changed my path. I am thankful to God she came into my life. She saved me, but at her own detriment.

Her love for me blinded her and kept her around long after she should have left. I lied and manipulated her more than any other. It is dangerous to be around someone lost in addiction. I found real love for the first time and I did not want to give that up. Not when I thought I could have my cake and eat it too. It pains me to this day how much hurt I caused her, from the lust I had filled myself with for almost two decades. Like those before her, I was unable to stop cheating on her. Not even when it was in my best interest, not even when it cost me everything.

Lust and its pursuit are drugs. Too much of anything will lead to addiction, and addiction is complete and utter madness. We lose our humanity and return to an animal state of being. We can stoop down to a level that provokes a reaction from God. Damned are those who betray love and cause unnecessary pain. I, myself, stood upon the precipice from which there was no return. I heeded God's warning that night and I will never forget it.

Through the love of that woman, I was able to start on the path to wholeness. Through her pain, she taught me how to be. She and God raised me back into the light. The person I am today is a direct result of her efforts. It brings me enormous displeasure and shame to know that my lies, cheating, and abuse almost broke her.

I am grateful that I have been in recovery for almost six years and sober for most of that time. Sadly, at the cost of regaining my sanity, I lost my best friend. It was only when the final straw had broken that I realized I was powerless and an addict. The lust with which I had filled myself had become too much. I was unable to stop. I had lost

control. I am grateful that she kept me straight and reminded me of the responsibility I had to myself and to the truth of what happened.

Ironically, it was when I realized I was powerless that I started to get some power back. No longer was I grasping blindly in the dark. I knew the source of my ills and I found the first string I could follow back to the light. From my very first Sex Addicts Anonymous meeting, I knew I was in the right place. It took a few months to get my first sponsor and to get the ball rolling, but once I did, I never looked back. Today, I am on Step 11 of 12 and am a proud grand-sponsor. All I can do is take things one day at a time. Progress, not perfection.

Lust destroyed my life in ways that I hope never destroys another's. I hope my experience serves as an example and warning. Lust is a deadly sin for a reason. It takes us away from our purpose and leads us into darkness. I am grateful I have realigned with my purpose. I wish I had done so any time before 27, but perhaps that is part of my path, too.

9. America

The national poet of Scotland, Walter Scott, wrote in 1805, “Breathes there the man, with soul so dead - Who never to himself hath said - This is my own, my native land!”

I love my country. I have traveled to 23 countries and I can say with great assurance there is none like the United States of America. Not only exemplified by our immense natural beauty, we are a conglomeration of exquisite peoples. Drawn from around the world, we are the microcosm of the earth. Our diversity is our greatest strength. It has endowed us with a pool of talent that is unmatched. This diversity enabled us to become the leaders of the free world.

Within our country lies a wondrous experiment. Freethinkers came together and created a system of laws and a constitution unlike any seen before it. Our Founding Fathers gave us a stout, yet simple structure through which we have been able to create greater equality and prosperity.

This is not to say we don't have faults. Like the very people that make up our nation, we are naturally flawed. We were endowed with the great sin of slavery and fought each other over it.

In the end, the North won over the South because we were on the side of spiritual justice. One may point to the fact that the North was further industrialized and had a

greater population, but these are themselves logical outgrowths that come from praxis. The South, drowning in the sin of inhumanity, was doomed to failure.

To create the atmosphere necessary for slavery, one must control and dominate. Two actions which by their very nature transgress against God. There is no love in slavery. It is evident, therefore, that the South created its own demise by refusing to love themselves and their neighbors. Giving up on Reconstruction, the North condemned itself to perpetuate the same sins.

Today, we still grapple with many of the same forces our Founding Fathers did. We are locked in a battle between a system of laws and one of control. The trauma we inflicted upon ourselves has never been allowed to heal.

The North is not free from sin either. Rather than overt physical control, ours evolved into an economic control. In places like Tammany Hall in New York City, private interests ruled government. Monopolies held a stranglehold over people's ability to become successful. Fueled by greed, working-class Americans of all ages were exploited to fuel the hoarding of wealth. Like the slave owners of the South, these "leaders of industry" were ruthless. To achieve their ends they were willing to extort, manipulate, and quash all.

Imagine a United States without the Roosevelts. First, Teddy and the progressive era that ushered in the 40-hour work week, the Clayton Antitrust Act, and the direct election of Senators. The era of "muckraking" journalists who uncovered corruption and

Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. The Meat Inspection & Clean Food and Drug Acts, and the end of child labor.

Then with Frederik Delano, who led us out of the Great Depression and WWII. His 100 days became the benchmark, creating the foundation for the modern Federal system. FDR was the only president grand enough to serve more than two terms. These men helped make the United States what it is today. Thanks to them, we were able to blossom as a country and set the stage for the American Century. It was those “progressive” ideals, melded with the can-do, indomitable spirit of America, that made the behemoth we know today.

Truly, it must be seen that the most conservative values are those of charity, community, and faith. Why then is it that certain policies, that create standards that are aligned with our ancients' teachings, be called “progressive”? They are not progressive. They are some of the most conservative. When we look at the laws of Moses, the teachings of the Buddha, the teachings of Jesus, of Muhammad, and many others, we see we are only seeking to meet the minimum. It is an interesting juxtaposition that the “conservative” movement is pushing values that are antithetical to traditional conservative values.

Greed cannot be trusted. It is without question a dangerous and bottomless pit. Why else would it be one of the great sins warned against? Since the 1980s, can we really say that our society is better off? CEO pay compared to the worker is outrageous, far exceeding anything in the past. Income has stagnated for many people in this

country. Our nation debt has sky-rocketed under modern Republican administrations. Homelessness has exploded while social programs have been cut.

Just as in the 1880s, monopolies have begun to reappear and hoard wealth. It will be up to the leadership of this country, with the support of its people, to bring overconfident corporations back into straights. The government is but a reflection of its people and the current reflection is not good. It is a shame. We all hold a potent stake in our government. It is up to us to work together to find the best way forward.

The fault is not solely on corporations, however. They are but a manifestation of the deeper problems we face. We have become sick from the disconnect to our past, our values, and who we are. There is rot and we must clean it out. Like a hospital patient lying interminably in bed, we are developing bed sores that will lead to death if we do not make a change.

We are oversaturated with media and consume-at-all-times. Sadly, many of us were born into it and we do not know much else. It has become our world. It is how we perceive ourselves and reality. We watch movies and TV shows that try so hard to depict reality, but they are nothing but the fantastical creations of a few imaginations. They are entertainment, not representations of real life. Take a month-long break from media. What you may find may surprise you.

Media has divided us and with good reason. There is control in having two sides hate each other. Democrats hate Republicans and Republicans hate Democrats. Such a

state of being for a country is profoundly dangerous. We are all Americans. As our greatest president said, “a house divided against itself cannot stand”. It is critical that we work together as our Founders did. Yes, we may have different ideas and values, but we can recognize the commonality we all possess. We do not have to agree on everything, but by having conversations and building relationships with our neighbors again, we can start to build compassion again.

I am guilty of, in the past, finding Republicans repugnant. I thought of my fellow countrymen as enemies to progress and to our nation. But I was a part of the problem, too. After living in the South, I was shocked by the fact that we could see the same problems facing our communities. Where the solution lied, however, and with whom was where we began to split. That split is often set off by triggers and not rationally dealt with. We have been charged up against each other, but we can work through it.

In reckoning with my own sins and shortcomings, I realized that no one person has the answer. Everyone is endowed with a piece of truth. It is why we work best when we work together. Doing so brings the truth out of all of us.

It is time to roll up our sleeves and get back to work. We owe it not only to ourselves, but to those we want to leave this world to. Let's put down our phones and strap on our boots. Think of our ancestors, who lived hard and worked far more than most of us know today. How they would be proud of us and want us to continue.

We owe it to the world to resume our mantle as the leader and first example. The kind, compassionate older brother who sets the tone for the rest to follow. We must end corruption, shine the light of truth over evil, and help those who are less fortunate than we are. It is our highest character and natural inclination. As a country, we represent the world. We may have many flaws, but we also have every quality to be the best.

Working together is what makes us human and endows us our greatest strength. Unlike our cousins, it is not gluttony, or else we would have never left the Gorillas behind. It is not pleasure, or else we would have remained with the Bonobos. It is not violence like the Chimpanzees, who hunt smaller monkeys and wage war with extraordinary brutality. It is our compassion and our empathy that enable us to rise as human beings. It is our love that allowed us to follow God and leave the animal kingdom.

In the North and South, our troubles are deeply linked. Greed, lust, pride, envy, wrath, gluttony, and sloth need to be overcome. In doing so, we can solidify our place as the leaders of the free world. We can set the example and guide humanity into the brightest future.

10. Meditation

One day in a recovery meeting, I heard something I really liked. “Prayer is talking to God, but meditation is listening to God.”

Meditation is something simple. But that does not mean that meditating is always simple. It takes patience and practice to gain the gifts of the exercise. If meditation can be thought of as a state of deepening awareness, then meditation can be achieved whenever one seeks awareness. One does not have to be seated in a lotus position for sound practice.

Awareness has been expounded upon in a previous chapter, but I will repeat its most important tenets. To be without being means to experience the world beyond the ever-working, ever-analyzing mind. From the time our brains first started making sense of the world, we were taught to associate things with language, learn culture, and objectify, framing our perception to existence. To cultivate awareness, one must break from this view. Awareness is beyond the senses. The gifts of contentment and peace are what lie within it.

Let us return to the previous meditation exercise. Meditation is easiest when one is seated, with one’s back straight, and the crown of the head slightly raised, with the chin pointing slightly downward. Think of trying to dust the ceiling with the crown of your head while rooting your tailbone into the earth. Doing so will fully open your airways.

Meditation is a calming of the mind and an unwinding of the mechanism that makes up the ego. Throughout our lives we constructed identities. We learned and took things from others, believing them to be our own.

We may believe that these inputs make up who we truly are. We begin to identify with them, incorporate them into our personality, and believe we could never live without them. Are these true qualities, or are these ascriptions that quantify who we are in relation to cultural norms? Are we funneled into these classifications by what is available, by what society desires us to be?

This world is in a constant state of change. There is nothing permanent. Why then, must we be written in stone? Are we not able to incite sudden change within ourselves? We can change. The distance between what is true to the self and what is superficial is vast.

This is where the gifts of awareness and meditation can help the individual. In seeking through one's consciousness, one can begin to untangle what has accumulated. It takes a lot of work and a lot of patience, but I can say that my only regret is not doing more, sooner.

It is difficult, but the work is beyond rewarding. Through the practice of meditation and cultivating awareness, one can be opened. Contentment can be cultivated and love fostered. True happiness, one that is content and at peace, is possible

to all those who earnestly desire it. It is a matter of turning the volume down, dimming the lights, and connecting with the surrounding silence. God, the universe, nirvana, is always there.

As you sit, eyes open or closed, do not try to control the mind, body, or spirit. If things come up, let them rise, but remain mindful of the change. Return to the simple question, “where am I now?” Bring yourself back to the content center. As you begin, sift through the sands as they pour forth, but do not try to hold onto them - they will only slip through your fingers. Let them pass.

Eventually, like the ending of the hourglass, the sands will finish running. Find that space and grow within it. Become aware of what is there. Discover it for yourself.

These gifts are possible and available. It may take work to reap them, but I was amazed before I was halfway through. Neither is there one path to get there. In the ancient spiritual practice of yoga, there was never one path. The destination of all practitioners was Raja Yoga. All paths lead to Raja Yoga, be it Hatha, Kundalini, or Vinyasa - all practitioners will find the same mountain.

One must experience it to learn. The path will reveal itself. Do not be afraid and follow your path.

11. Redemption

The sins of the father are not passed to the son, so long as the son does not continue in the ways of his father. If the son, however, continues the sins of his father, then he shall face the same judgment. But should he give them up, then he can be free from judgment.

I am not a religious person, but I am a spiritual one. Not only is the experience of spirituality important, I believe we must read our collective sacred texts.

The above passage is paraphrased from the Old Testament. It illumined for me an important concept of redemption: that it is always possible for someone who earnestly gives up their sin. It is always possible to come back.

As a recovering addict, I thought redemption was beyond my means. I sold my soul early in life and it took a long time before the consequences finally caught up to me. Though I have never murdered or raped, I have betrayed the love of those close to me. I hold a lot of shame for my actions. I've worked hard to make amends for what I have done and live righteously. Lord knows a lot of work is still ahead, but I am grateful to be back.

Redemption is not a quick or easy pass. It is not paying indulgences. It takes constant, dedicated work and it has many tests. Without it, we fall right back down.

Redemption entails being redeemed, either clearing a debt or being saved. This does not happen without blood in the pudding.

It's a lot of hard work. But it is possible for those who earnestly desire it. One does not have to be religious, or spiritual for that matter. What matters is the knowledge that what one is doing is wrong, understanding why it is wrong, and possess the unassailable desire to never return to whatever it is, ever again.

What of the murderer and the rapist? If they can fully comprehend the depth of their savagery and inhumanity, turn from it, and make themselves new, are they to be redeemed?

Inevitably, yes. God forgives all beings. But redemption is not something that happens quickly, even with the best intentions. Sometimes it takes decades. The scale on which redemption progresses is not up to us. It depends on the gravity of the deed and what needs to be done to wipe the slate clean. It may take a lifetime of work. Atoning for the actions of one's sins is paramount. Making amends have been some of the most difficult things I have ever had to do. Taking ownership, being vulnerable, and offering humility on a silver platter takes guts. Living those amends every day is the next step.

Reasonable individuals with a clear mind will not transgress against others. Those that do - and we are many - carry with us trauma, afflictions, and mental illnesses. In regaining our sanity through redemption, we regain who we are. We

connect to the world around us and gain the gifts of empathy and compassion. This work is some of the most worthwhile.

Am I to be judged for the actions and choices I have made in life? Certainly. My community, my family, and my friends will judge me, and above all God will judge me. If I had the choice of how I was to be remembered, it would be as someone who made a lot of mistakes in life, but also as someone who took accountability, did not shy away from responsibility, and worked to leave something positive behind. In the end, the only legacy we leave behind is our actions.

It's not easy. Not at first, but the load gets lighter as time goes on. Perhaps it's the shackles of the past being slowly chipped away. Time will tell. As with Jesus, carrying his cross, turning to it and embracing it - we must learn to love our burdens.

If you find yourself in need, be the hero in your own life. You deserve it. The universe will help you if you ask for help, but you must do it for yourself, not because anyone is asking you. Do so with a clear, pointed, and open heart.

12. A New Way

We are becoming, more and more, the dis-United States.

We are locked in a death spiral. Abraham Lincoln warned us “a house divided against itself cannot stand”. We are close to seeing this a reality.

On one side, Democrats hate Republicans, on the other, Republicans hate Democrats. Both sides act violently, both disparage and insult the other, kill each other, and feel vindicated in doing so. We have lost compassion for our fellow countrymen and women. I have seen this be true for both sides of the proverbial aisle. We seem to have forgotten that we are one people, one nation, indivisible.

Families are often troubled. We have differences of opinion. Sometimes we run different races and see different parts of the world. We grow and learn in different ways, but we are still family. I believe we must remember to accept and love each other, and grow together. Two things can be true at the same time.

Families carry trauma. We have a dark history, but our history has shown we can surmount the greatest evils. The tools are in our hands. Trauma blinds and disables, but trauma can be worked through.

There is no illusion that this work will be easy. But it is something that will get easier with time. All wounds heal. It is available to us all, should we earnestly desire it.

There is no reason the cowboy in Texas cannot be brothers with the surfer in California. No reason why the rancher on the plains of Wyoming cannot confide with the broker of New York. There is no reason the housewife of Kansas cannot be close friends with the transwoman of Vermont. Just as no one person has the complete truth, no one person has the complete solution. Divided we fall, but together we continue our ascension.

We became the greatest nation in the history of the world because of our differences. Not only for the diversity of our people, but our diverse and incredible land. We possess everything the earth has to offer - wild coastlands, breathtaking mountains, rich fields, and roaring rivers. Diversity is the greatest gift of life.

We have come a long way since the 1600s; revolution and civil wars, industrialization, immigration, world wars, civil rights, and the American Century. I, for one, am incredibly proud to be an American.

Though we are imperfect, we have continually evolved and placed our highest principles first. "We are a nation of laws, not of men", said Alexander Hamilton. It is thanks to these laws that we became the greatest nation on earth and the envy of the world. We are the nation that others look up to. We have taken on the mantle of a big brother and must protect those most vulnerable.

We are constantly evolving, learning, and adapting. What sets us apart from the rest of the world is that we are - out of many, one. With every year that passes, more people rise through social and economic ranks in ways that would be impossible in other

nations of the world. I challenge anyone to find a nation where an individual can better themselves and those around them, with greater efficiency, than the United States of America. I believe in my country because I see within it its truth and glory.

We have been sliding on a downward trajectory as of late. Since the 2000 election, I have watched our country become more and more divided. That election was when I realized something changed. It was the first time battle lines were drawn in our neighborhoods. Within my cul-de-sac, half of the neighbors stopped talking to each other. Just weeks beforehand, all the children had been playing together in the street. But now, no more.

Since the 90s, I have watched more and more people end up on the streets. I have watched the hollowing out of the American middle and working classes. In 2009, I watched our government spend hundreds of billions of dollars to bail out “too-big-to-fail” companies that wrecked the lives of millions of Americans. Where was Main Street’s bailout? Why was it that the very people who had been used and abused were made to pay their abusers?

I have watched as corporations shifted operations overseas, leaving behind the American worker. Those jobs are never coming back. Like Pandora’s box, once it is opened, it cannot be closed again. Slowly, but surely, I have watched as corporate media, on both sides, have weaponized one side of the news against the other. Each side yells at the other with only part of the story. I have watched with despair both political parties have enriched themselves from this divide.

I have watched our Supreme Court gut protections, voting rights, and allow unlimited campaign contributions from single donors. Have you seen how our system has been badly damaged by these decisions? Politicians are more reliant than ever on these single donors: multi-millionaires and billionaires who can now legally buy politicians.

I am tired of watching. I am tired of seeing the country I love be destroyed by the greed and avarice of the few. I am disgusted by those who profit off the misery of the common man and woman. My fellow Americans, it is time to set a new way forward. That is why I am proposing a solution.

It is time to bring our greatest president back to the forefront of the nation. Republicans have lost the right to call themselves the “Party of Lincoln”. The Republican Party was Lincoln’s party in 1860, but he ran under a different party in 1864. He knew something greater was needed to heal the nation.

I call for the return of the National Union Party. As National Unionists, as in our darkest days, we shall stand for shedding partisanship for a unified United States of America. With the US Constitution as our guiding light, we can heal the divide that threatens to tear us apart. We must set aside our differences and remember that we are all Americans. If our Founding Fathers, in their day and age, were able to work together to create a nation, we can overcome the burdens of the present. We owe it to them, to their hard work, and the sacrifice of millions of Americans that we come together.

We must look past our ego and pride, and remember the teachings our ancients passed down to us. We all possess self-will and God will not save us from ourselves. We will reap what we sow. Though the hand of God moves slowly through the universe, it is unstoppable.

In channeling what has been discussed in these 12 essays, we may yet create a just and honorable society. One in which all people are free to be themselves, have agency over their decisions and their bodies, and are enabled to pursue true freedom and happiness. We may yet see a world where ordinary Americans do not have to worry about losing their housing or their lives just because they missed a paycheck or fell sick.

I don't know if I will see this reality, but I am unabashedly confident that it will be achieved. Be it 100 years or 1,000 years, we will reach closer to God. Our creations will be reflections of this world's truths. Religion may have no place in politics, but spirituality, I believe, is inescapable. When we accept that love, truth, and justice are what God wants for all of us and are entitled to everyone, regardless of skin color or orientation, then our society will be a reflection of peace. Once again, the proof is in the pudding. All beings reflect God. Everyone and everything is here with purpose. There are no mistakes.

We will always have differences. Just look at the infinity of Pi. Within the circle, all possibility exists. The universe is not so different from the circle. The world is vast and we are still young in our evolution. Most like to think they are right and they know

the complete, ultimate truth. I do not believe anyone does. Definitely not this author. We are all moving in the same ultimate direction of truth. We each hold a piece of this truth and we must learn to love and respect each other. Until that time we can join our truths together, no one has the complete answer.

Just as all paths lead to Raja Yoga, all paths will converge. There, I believe we will find contentment. There is no reason to be afraid of one or the other, we are all the same. We may have cultural and linguistic differences, we may look different on the outside, and we may see the world through different shades, but we are the same.

I hope these writings are helpful to you in your pursuit of truth. Please, go and search truth yourself. We are all called, it is simply a matter of tuning your antenna. I will continue my path and work. I hope to see you out there.