

The Whole Donut, Not Just the Donut Hole

by Ian Dodd

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The state of Bahia is in that part of Brazil that bulges out into the Atlantic Ocean pointing toward the elbow of Africa from which it separated eons ago. It is where Portuguese explorers first set foot in South America in 1500. The capital city of Salvador is where African slaves were brought in by the shipload and sold to work clearing the fields and planting cacao and coffee. The four of us, my then-girlfriend (and now wife), my college roommate and his wife, and I, had been in Salvador for a couple of months and now had to make the 1400 mile drive to the southern state of São Paulo. Our Volkswagen Bug was

packed to the proverbial gills with all our luggage and we were all jammed in around it. Honestly, the roomiest spot was the driver's seat and after we got out of the city I traded with Dan for that coveted space. It was a hot, sticky summer night so we drove with the windows rolled down. The air was thick with the aromas of the plantations, diesel fumes from the trucks traveling with us on the highway and the surrounding forests. Once everybody else had finally found any semblance of comfort, they drifted off to sleep, leaving me alone to pilot the Bug through the tropical night. As the moon rose over the Atlantic to my left, I felt around and found the headphones to our Sony Walkman cassette player.

In 1983 a hot new Texas blues guitarist named Stevie Ray Vaughan had just come on the rock and roll scene with his first album called “Texas Flood” and one song, “Pride & Joy”, had landed him on the charts. With the Walkman in my lap, and one hand on the wheel, I pushed the ‘play’ button [Cue opening :30 of “P&J”]. For the next hour the world faded away. There was nobody else out there on that Brazilian highway but Stevie Ray and me. I was lost in the landscape, completely embraced by the music. Together we traveled through the night carried by the sweet wail of his Stratocaster guitar. The sublimity of that moment was exquisite, no less than spiritual.

Whenever I'm asked what I do for a living, I don't respond that I am an "a-carpenter", that is, someone who doesn't do carpentry. When I'm asked about my political viewpoint, I don't respond that I'm an "a-conservative". If we're talking about relationships, I don't tell people that I'm "a-single". It makes no sense to define myself by what I'm not. That's why, when it comes to my belief about the grand why and how questions of the Universe, the phrase "atheist" leaves me wanting. While it is true that I don't believe in any sort of God, deity or supernatural being, I find the term "atheist" lacking in any descriptive sort of way.

What do you learn about me if I call myself an “atheist” other than something I don’t believe in? Does it give you any insight into who I am, what I believe in, what I respond to? Does it give you any idea how the music of Stevie Ray Vaughan can transport me in an instant to northern Brazil and a moonlit highway?

For years I have wrestled with finding an adequate label that sums up, in a single word or a simple phrase, the rich and complex worldview that frames my life. Since Diagoras of Melos in the 5th century BC objected to being labeled an atheist, those of us with a similar outlook have struggled to find an appropriate description. Atheist. Agnostic. Freethinker. Skeptic. Humanist. Rationalist. Some people have even advocated for the term “Bright”, an effort that hasn’t gained too much traction because of

the implied arrogance, as in “I’m bright, therefore you’re dim.”

Trying to define me as an “atheist” [**Holding up a donut**] is like trying to define a donut by its hole; while it may describe a noticeable feature, it leaves out all the best parts.

“Agnostic”, too, comes up short. Literally, “agnostic” means “one who does not know”. But does that really say anything? [**Holding up a churro**] I mean, is this a donut or is it not? While it’s similar, it doesn’t make the same commitment to “donut-ism” that this one, with a hole, does. As one writer put it, agnosticism “entails nothing more than admitted indecisiveness or embraced fence-sitting.”

“Freethinker”. [Holding up a bag of flour] “Humanist”.

[Holding up cooking oil] “Rationalist”. [Holding up sugar]

These are all important ingredients, but taken by

themselves they each fail to make the whole finished

product.

Not long after I moved to Los Angeles a friend invited me to visit MOCA, the Museum of Contemporary Art downtown. It seemed like an appropriately heady, intellectual thing to do on a Sunday afternoon, something that would identify me as a person of culture and taste. As I wandered through the galleries, trying with all my might to find meaning in the pieces, I was wholly unprepared for what was about to happen next. I wandered into a gallery and was immediately curious about a painting there, a piece called "Blue" by Mark Rothko. I sat down on the bench in front of the abstract painting and within moments I felt like I was falling into it. As my eye traveled around it I kept falling deeper and deeper. The whole painting enveloped me like a boa constrictor and with each breath out it would squeeze me just a little harder until I could

hardly inhale. I just couldn't, or didn't want, to break my gaze. It was like a lucid dream, where you know you're dreaming. Part of my brain was telling me this was crazy, it was just a bunch of shades and tones of blue and white paint on a canvas, but the rest of my brain, in fact my whole being, just ignored the intellectual voice and reveled in the sensations that flowed through me. I don't know how long I sat there. Maybe 5 minutes. Maybe 10 or 20. I was finally stirred back to this world by the sound of a familiar voice saying, "There you are. I turned around and you were gone. You been here the whole time?" I had and, yet, I hadn't. All that time I had gone somewhere else and in a sense the world I came back to was forever changed.

So what does a Sunday sojourn to the art museum have to do with my belief system? A while back I came across an article by Pitzer College sociology professor Phil Zuckerman called, simply, “Aweism”. That’s “Awe”, as in a feeling of wonder, -ism. Aweism. In the words of Professor Zuckerman, “Aweism is the belief that existence is ultimately a beautiful mystery, that being alive is a wellspring of wonder, and that the deepest questions of life, death, time, and space are so powerful as to inspire deep feelings of joy, poignancy, and sublime awe. To be an “aweist” is to be an atheist and/or an agnostic and/or a secular humanist – and then some. An aweist is someone who admits that existing is wonderfully mysterious and that life is a profound experience.”

When I read that, it was one of those seminal moments when I said “Aha! Now I know what I am. I am an aweist!”

Awe can be found in all kinds of places. I feel awe in the music of Stevie Ray Vaughan and the paintings of Mark Rothko. I find awe in the mathematical perfection of a nautilus shell or the spiral traced by a hawk wheeling on an updraft. Maybe for you, awe is inspired by the language of Shakespeare or the delight of a child at inspecting a ladybug on her finger or at moments in prayer or meditation when all separateness dissolves away.

As an invited guest here, you don't know me, but I am a science junkie. I love science. Give me the *New York Times* Tuesday edition or NPR's "Science Friday" on my iPod, and I'm a happy camper. I have been known to stand in line beginning at 7 o'clock in the morning to attend an 8 o'clock lecture by Stephen Hawking. . . 8 o'clock at night. I am absolutely in awe of the what physicists predict they might discover with the Large Hadron Collider, the tracing of the reptilian roots of birds by evolutionary biologists and paleoanthropologists' mapping of humanity's footprints spreading out across the globe. Each one is like fitting another piece into this amazing jigsaw puzzle that is existence and seeing a little more of the whole picture begin to emerge.

But to me, there is nothing more incredible than to look out at the night sky and contemplate the fact that the light I'm seeing has been screaming across vast swaths of space for hundreds, thousands, even millions of years.

[Projected image of M31] When I'm taking in the sheer beauty of the spiral arms of the Andromeda Galaxy through a telescope, I'm remembering that when that light began its journey our distant ancestors were barely scratching out an existence on the savannas of Africa.

And not just time, but space encompasses scales from the infinitesimally small to the incomprehensibly large.

[Projected image of Hubble Wide Field] We heard in the Opening Words this morning the thoughts of Ursula Goodenough from her book "The Sacred Depths of Nature":

“I lie on my back under the stars and the unseen galaxies and I let their enormity wash over me. I assimilate the vastness of the distances, the impermanence, the fact of it all. I go all the way out and then I go all the way down. . . . I take in the abstractions about forces and symmetries and they caress me like Gregorian chants, the meaning of the words not mattering because the words are so haunting.”

Probably the most famous image taken by the Hubble Space Telescope is this one [[Projected image of “PoC”](#)], a region called the “Pillars of Creation”. Right there in that one image is an illustration of Goodenough’s “going all the way out and then all the way down.” Right there are processes happening on an atomic level that have created a structure 24 trillion, that’s trillion with a T, 24 trillion miles tall.

In that cloud of gas and dust, atoms of hydrogen are falling together under the force of gravity until they become so compressed and so hot that they ignite as stars fusing the hydrogen into helium and eventually into carbon and oxygen, the very substances required for life. Those elements, along with heavier ones like iron and copper, will be blown out and scattered across the cosmos when a star grows unstable and explodes. We now know that the very atoms in your body and mine have come from those stellar explosions. Carl Sagan was being quite literal when he said, “We are made of star stuff.”

And the most mind-boggling part of it all is that our minds can comprehend that! Think about it for a minute: 13.7 billion years ago a cataclysmic moment of creation took place. Since then gas and dust have coalesced into

stars and stars into galaxies. 5 billion years ago in one of those countless galaxies another countless star ignited, illuminating and warming the clumps of silicon, carbon, iron and oxygen that were gathering around it in the form of planets. A billion and a half years later some of those molecules became animated with life and began to grow and develop until a few million years ago our forebears ventured out of the Rift Valley. 30,000 years ago our ancestors began to tell stories to try and make sense of it all. They began to observe the night sky and find patterns in its randomness. Eventually they began to measure it and map and then, 400 years ago, with the invention of the telescope, to study it in detail. It was less than a hundred years ago that a Belgian priest, physicist and mathematician, Georges LeMaître, proposed the idea of

that initial cataclysmic creation and just a few years later that part of his story was confirmed by Edwin Hubble right here at Mt. Wilson above Pasadena when he discovered the Universe was expanding just as Monsignor LeMaître had predicted. Today we are getting ready to recreate conditions similar to the first few billionths of a second after that creative cataclysm and to probe the nature of the 95% of the Universe that is invisible to us. The very fact that we as a species (or at least a few among us) can conceive of all that and have confidence in our understanding of it is truly awe-inspiring.

Many people object to what they consider to be the reductionist view of science. To them, science explains away all the mystery of existence. With our ever-growing understanding of the Universe, there seems, to those people, to be less room for the divine, no space for the sacred. In the early 1800s the French mathematician Pierre-Simon Laplace had produced a multi-volume treatise on celestial mechanics. When presented to the court of Napoleon, he was asked by the emperor why there was no mention of the Creator in his work. Laplace responded, "I had no need of that hypothesis." For many people, science removes the need for any such hypothesis and, thus, seems very cold and sterile, lacking the magical spark. But quite the opposite is true. As we solve the little 'm' mysteries of science, the big 'M' Mystery

of existence grows ever richer and more wonderful. Every new discovery adds another delicate layer of sweet sublimity to the majesty of it all. For me, the very idea that we are part of all of that and, at the same time, can comprehend it is the most thrilling idea of all. It has been said that we are the Universe observing itself and I find that to be a deeply satisfying sentiment.

The Universe is greater than any god we have ever conceived of. As Carl Sagan said, "In some respects, science has far surpassed religion in delivering awe. How is it that hardly any major religion has looked at science and concluded, 'This is better than we thought! The Universe is much bigger than our prophets said, grander, more subtle, more elegant. God must be even greater than we dreamed'? Instead they say, 'No, no, no! My god

is a little god, and I want him to stay that way.’ ” Any person who is impervious to the awe available in the night sky or a nautilus shell, a sonnet by Shakespeare or a searing rift by Stevie Ray Vaughan, is, in the words of Albert Einstein, “as good as dead.” In his essay, “The World as I See It”, Einstein said this:

“The fairest thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science. He who knows it not and can no longer wonder, no longer feel amazement, is as good as dead, a snuffed-out candle.” He went on to say, “It was the experience of mystery--even if mixed with fear--that engendered religion. A knowledge of the existence of something we cannot penetrate, of the manifestations of the profoundest reason and the most

radiant beauty, which are only accessible to our reason in their most elementary forms--it is this knowledge and this emotion that constitute the truly religious attitude; in this sense, and in this alone, I am a deeply religious man.”

Einstein never read Phil Zuckerman. But if he had, I think he would have described himself as an “aweist”.

I find spiritual moments in music and modern art. I get giddy at contemplating the cosmos and the idea that I even can contemplate them. And there’s something else I can contemplate. I don’t have any training in anthropology, though it would be awkward to describe myself as an “a-anthropologist”. But from what I understand, one of the characteristics that may be unique to our species is the ability to contemplate our own death and the future without us. My guess is this may be a lot of

the genesis of religion. I'll admit that I fear death, no different from the person of faith. But when I think about death I console myself with the strangely paradoxical words of Richard Dawkins: "We are going to die, and that makes us the lucky ones." [Pause] "Most people are never going to die because they are never going to be born. The potential people who could have been here in my place but who will in fact never see the light of day outnumber the sand grains of the Sahara. Certainly those unborn ghosts include greater poets than Keats, scientists greater than Newton. We know this because the set of possible people allowed by our DNA so massively exceeds the set of actual people. In the teeth of these stupefying odds it is you and I, in our ordinariness, that are here." And that statement leaves me filled with awe.

Yes, I am an atheist. I am a humanist. A rationalist.
But my worldview is made up of more than just these ingredients. At first glance all you may see is what I am not. But I am so much more than that. I am the whole donut, not just the donut hole. I am an “aweist”.