

Encounters With Life And Death

Personal reflections on a journey through
manipulations and attachments

NEIL BUTCHER

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This book is dedicated to Eli, the fragile angel not meant for this earth, whose brief time with me changed my life forever.

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Introduction

My name is Neil Butcher. I am a middle-aged, English-speaking, white South African man, the father of two sons of whom I am very proud, and the director of a small educational consultancy based in South Africa and working in developing countries all over the world. While my life has been rich and full in the 53 years I have lived to date, it is not necessarily a life of especially remarkable achievements that warrant sharing. I have not had to overcome major adversities to achieve my successes in life, having been born into and lived a life of relative privilege. That said, my life has helped me to learn lessons that I believe are fundamental to all human journeys and that I hope might be of value for those wishing to deepen their own self-awareness.

I have wanted to write a book for a long time, grandiosely seeing it as an opportunity to begin a more purposeful writing career. After a few false starts and several delays, when I finally sat down to start writing it, I had some vague notions of things I wanted to say, but no clear structure or goal. I decided instead to let it unfold over time.

What I ended up writing is deeply personal. The act of writing became a disciplined way to reflect on various experiences in my life to date, how they have radically shifted my perspectives on what life is about, and what that will mean for the second half of my life. Occasionally, this felt threatening,

especially as the modern world tends to marginalize and ridicule some of my conclusions. Mostly, though, it was exceptionally rewarding for me.

People reading early drafts of this work suggested that I share some of the sources of ideas contained in this short book, many of which I accumulated through books, podcasts, online courses, and conversations over several years. While this might be a worthwhile undertaking in giving interested readers opportunities to explore ideas in more detail, I simply cannot remember my original source for most of them and cannot do any justice to the breadth and range of sources I have engaged with over many years. Furthermore, the ideas that have resonated best have done so because I came across them in different forms in multiple sources, so would struggle to attribute them to just one. I am also not convinced that what made sense for me would necessarily do likewise for others, so I have refrained from sharing sources, recognizing that the process of exploring ideas will be unique to everyone; all that really matters is the commitment to start and then keep exploring and learning.

Similarly, some ideas appeared ‘fully formed’ in my mind (usually in the middle of the night), as I engaged with them subconsciously and they finally came to have a meaning that became unique to me. For this reason, I have mostly avoided citing references because I would not know how to begin and want to avoid communicating the simplistic notion that these lessons are learned intellectually or academically. While intellectual engagement with ideas is essential to me, gaining meaningful insight is a lived process that takes time and requires different pathways for everyone. Self-help books that pretend they can replace this lived experience by offering simplistic lessons or formulae for life are of very limited utility, though they often contain interesting ideas.

I hope you will find value in what I share in these pages. My goal is not to tell anyone what I think they should do, even in places where my tone might

come across as assertive. Instead, it is to capture some of my experiences and reflections on my own personal journey and what I have learned from it so far. The ways in which I have learned these lessons is deeply personal and unique, so I do not presume that anyone else should seek to emulate my journey in any way. I do hope, though, that sharing the lessons I have learned might help you, the reader, to reflect on how your life experiences might be helping you to learn similar lessons and prompt you to share those, and other, experiences with people close to you. I also hope that sharing with openness and transparency, but without a prescriptive agenda, might contribute in some small way to building a more compassionate world.

Even if I have not succeeded in achieving any of this, I know the ideas and experiences presented in this short book will shape my future experiences and engagements with other people for the rest of my life, so I am deeply grateful to have had the wherewithal to be able to invest time and energy in this exercise of writing.

Chapter One: Soul

Everything begins and ends with God.

Three years ago, before the global chaos unleashed by the COVID-19 pandemic began and worldwide travel lockdowns gave me the gift of staying at home for two years, I would never have imagined this introductory sentence formulating in my mind, let alone making its way onto the written page through my hand. I have the rest of my human lifetime ahead to internalize it and explore its implications, but now recognize it to be the single and simple universal truth without which any other efforts to make sense of and deepen the journey of being human can never bring fulfilment or peace.

There are two primary reasons why it took me so long to come to this realization.

First, in its attempt to explain God, Christianity (the religion under whose traditions I was raised) has, like so many other religions, tried to ‘humanize’ the concept of God to make it understandable to people. The version of God presented to me since I can remember was that of an all-knowing person (a father figure) in heaven, who makes thoughts and decisions affecting the flow of my life and who reacts to my actions in rational, predictable ways. While this humanizing project makes God easier to describe and seem more understandable, it diminishes and rationalizes the concept by

seeking to make God knowable to us as a separate self. In doing this, it robs the concept of precisely the magic and mystery that makes it so powerful, something that requires us to abandon the constraints of our rational minds and have faith in a universal life force we can never truly know.

Second, all religions have two dimensions. There is the simple universal truth of God that all religions I have encountered seek to explore through stories, myths, and symbols of a dazzling array, combined with the quest to come closer to God through the human journey. This is the God I have discovered. But then there are the manipulations that many religious people and their institutions have layered onto these religions to gain leverage and control over other people. Such efforts are usually easily distinguishable because their adherents typically assert the primacy of their dogma over others, while seeking to use fear and the notion of scarcity to exert power and control over their congregations.

In breaking through these mental constraints, my pathway to a meaningful understanding of God began when I finally came to perceive the human as a soul and engaged with the idea that my soul had come to earth to experience the journey of being human, concepts that were as foreign to me initially as the concept of God itself.

The Human as Soul

In a time of introspection, as I was trying to work out why a new relationship was following an unhealthy pattern similar to that of my failed marriage, I was reintroduced to a simple but powerful structural concept that helped me to understand better why I was repeating behaviours I thought I had over-

come. This well-known concept breaks our interior landscape into distinct personalities, though with variations in explanation and semantics:

1. The Inner Child, the essence of who we are when we are born.
2. The Wounded Self, that version of ourselves who starts to mature when we begin to encounter the material world of adults as young children, learning (and being taught) to fear the many dangers it seems to contain. In response, the Wounded Self learns defensive behaviours (including suppression, avoidance, and attachment) that protect us from these perceived and real dangers but also disconnect us from our Inner Child. A goal of this book is to unpack some of the defensive behaviours I learned during my life and explore how I am trying to unlearn them.
3. The Loving Adult, the more mature version of ourselves who can begin a dialogue with the Wounded Self to enable it to let go of these behaviours and enable us to connect again with our Inner Child.

These concepts are presented in various forms, most of which are sanitized in presentation to make them acceptable to modern, secular psychology. Even in those forms, they provide a powerful framework to analyse why we engage in destructive forms of suppression and to help us to reconnect with, and learn to love, ourselves. I have read and heard about them often before, but the unique inflections in the version I was reading at the time, combined with my specific personal circumstances, finally enabled me to grasp their full meaning. The key message was:

Inside me, there is a unique, fully formed 'essence', a being worthy of love simply because it exists, independent and regardless of anything I ever do or achieve.

This is a very difficult concept for the typical adult to grasp, either because we have been conditioned throughout life to believe that we are not worthy of love (usually by other adults who also struggle to love themselves) or be-

cause we have been taught over and over again that our sense of self-worth should be defined and measured by our actions and achievements rather than simply by our existence.

Often, especially in modern psychological writing, this 'essence' of us is described as the Inner Child, a useful but potentially limiting way of understanding the concept. While the idea of our 'essence' being child-like resonates with me in many respects, it also implies that this 'essence' is still in a process of maturing rather than already being fully formed and ready to be discovered as we mature through our human journey.

Thus, I added a fourth layer to the framework, the idea that I am a Soul who has embarked on a human journey and first encounters the world through the eyes of a human child. I consider this my first 'leap of faith' as I embraced a concept that has no rational or scientific proof but that enriches the above interior landscape in profound ways. While I recognize that many people have come to this awareness over much time and possibly with significant intellectual wrestling, in my case it simply appeared fully formed in my mind at the right moment and I immediately accepted it because it helped so much else to make sense that had previously been perplexing. Our Soul transcends our human experience but is also why we choose that experience, an invitation for us to find a connection with the essence of our humanity, that which makes us uniquely and unconditionally worthy of love regardless of what we do or achieve. As Souls, we choose to undertake this human journey because (hopefully) re-learning connection with ourselves and, through that, the state of unconditional love in a physical realm helps us to deepen our connection with God.

As part of our humanity, our Inner Child has a strong love connection with our Soul when we are young but is also susceptible to fear in the material world, the fear that nurtures our Wounded Self and the defensive behaviours in which it engages. These defensive behaviours aim to protect

us from the perceived dangers of the material world, but they also suppress our connection with our Souls, a connection without which there can be no meaningful, unconditional self-love. Without real self-love, we are unable to fulfil our fullest human potential, which is to live a life of unconditional love and, through that, for our Souls to explore deeper connection with God within and beyond the material world.

I have no ability, or inclination, to prove that my ‘essence’ is indeed a Soul who has chosen to come to earth to experience the journey of being human, but this insight enables me to live and feel the concept of self-love in ways that are simply not possible when I stay in the world of rational, ‘provable’ thought. As I will explain in Chapter Three, I am increasingly aware of the acute limitations of my rational, conscious mind, so using concepts that are exclusively defined in rational, scientific terms makes it much harder to fully explore and live the practice of self-love because it leaves me susceptible to all the limiting lessons I have been taught about myself since childhood. Understanding my essence as a Soul frees me of the need to explain or justify the importance of self-love; it becomes instead a voyage of discovery to learn more about my true self.

My lessons from engaging with these ideas were as follows:

1. At the heart of my humanity is my Soul, a unique, beautiful, and mystical being worthy of love simply because it exists. My Soul has taken on a human form for its life on earth, but also transcends the physical vehicle that is my body. It was formed from, and is part of, God.
2. During my human life, I have acquired, learned, and been taught many behaviours that have suppressed my ability to connect with my Soul and love myself unconditionally. This is a normal part of the human experience.

3. The primary goal of life, without which other secondary goals lose their meaning and relevance, is to re-establish and nurture this love for and connection with my Soul. Until I can start doing that sustainably, my ability to love others is inevitably compromised. When I do start, this enables me also to deepen my connection with God.
4. If my essence is a Soul on a human journey, this must also be true for every person on earth. Like me, every person will have inherited, acquired, learned, and been taught behaviours that have suppressed their ability to connect with and love their Soul. This is true regardless of how much people's behaviours may seem to suggest otherwise; indeed, the more people's behaviours might imply they have no Soul or are 'evil', the clearer the evidence that their Wounded Self is dictating their choices.
5. Thus, when confronted with the full spectrum of behaviours from all humans, however we may encounter them and wherever they may live, the only meaningful response is compassion, as this helps us to see our own struggle to re-connect with our Souls reflected in their behaviours. But responding with compassion is not possible until we commit to learning to love ourselves unconditionally.

The Soul's Relationship to God

I have long been fascinated by the idea that human bodies are physical manifestations of energy. This notion abounds in religious, scientific, and self-help literature alike, though with different permutations, focuses, and intentions. Given what we know about human cells, the idea of our bodies being physical manifestations of energy no longer seems especially contro-

versial. When my father died in his bed, my mother told me that she literally felt his energy leaving his body as his human life ended.

Intuitively, we are aware that our energy fields extend beyond our bodies and influence others. This should not be a particularly controversial concept for anyone who has observed the effect that a person in a bad mood can have on others simply by walking into a room. Thus, it seems most likely to me that our energy is in constant interaction with energy fields around us, coming from other humans, from other living beings, from the technologies surrounding us, from the earth itself, and from the universe beyond. We should be much more careful about protecting our energy than we typically are!

Until recently, I gave little thought to the idea that the energy fields within us might be anything other than a physical phenomenon. However, as I internalized the idea of the human Soul, I also came to recognize the Soul as my energy and to see that energy as being in constant interplay with all the energies with which it coexists. Symbolically, then, my father's energy leaving his body was the moment when his Soul was released from its physical human container back into the energy of the wider cosmos or universe. We often tend to think of the universe as something beyond earth (outer space) but we are inextricably in and part of the universe, which is all around us. The energy within his physical body did not die with that body; it just transformed into a new state as it transcended the material realm.

Our modern lives are replete with distractions that disconnect us from the universe around us and from our Souls. As I will explore in subsequent chapters, most exist intentionally, created either by ourselves (attachments) or other wounded humans (manipulations), often over multiple generations, to control us for some or other material gain and to sustain the attachments that keep us disconnected from our Souls. The more we can identify and dismantle those manipulations and attachments, the easier it becomes to

observe and appreciate the miracle that is life, even if only fleetingly at first. This is why, for example, we find being in nature so soothing and speak of it feeding our Souls. The more we truly observe life, the clearer it becomes that the energy coursing through us, through all living organisms, through the earth, and through the wider cosmos is unequivocally an energy that is for life. This is not accidental or random; it is purposeful in creating life. We can choose not to believe that or try to disprove it, but then we will just be wasting our energy resisting the inexorable flow of life.

In our wounded state, humans often end up trying to destroy or resist this life force, despite the futility of this endeavour. Life always finds a way to flourish and, in flourishing, is in constant flux. Life does not stand still; it is constantly changing. As wounded humans, we often fear this change and try to make our life experiences static and fixed, finding comfort in what we have experienced before. But resisting change is just resisting life, both futile and counterproductive.

People have acquired multiple cognitive frameworks to explain or label this universal life force, be they scientific, religious, or esoteric. Many of us feel uncomfortable with the idea of God because our religious philosophies have taught us to fear God, something that usually happens when the person or people teaching us about God is trying to control or manipulate us. Some seek scientific explanations for life and their knowledge base is slowly growing in ways that shed limited light on a few individual aspects of what creates and sustains life. Despite this, scientific knowledge is still very superficial and rudimentary in its understanding of how life really works (despite many people's arrogant claims to the contrary). Others choose terms such as the universe or the cosmos to label this universal life force. I have tested many of these and find them either limiting or just semantically clumsy; this is unsurprising given the limitations of language in capturing our experience of this realm.

For me, it is simplest to label the universal life force as God, following traditions that are many thousand years old. This is why I assert that ‘Everything begins and ends with God’ – and by extension, therefore, everything is infused with God. Because my Soul is inextricably part of this universal life force and will return to it in the form of energy when I die, that means my Soul is also part of God. The same is true of every other human being’s Soul, regardless of whatever wounds they have and the actions these may be leading them to take. Thus, seeking connection with my Soul is part of deepening my connection with God.

God and Religions

Nothing I describe above is a new insight, though my journey towards this understanding was as unique as the Soul that I am. The concept of God has been explored for millennia and is documented in religious texts in a myriad of fascinating ways.

All religions – ancient and modern – use myths, stories, and symbols to explore a simple universal truth: there is a universal life force that is God, and my Soul is an interconnected part of that universal life force. Some invoke a single God and others many Gods in their stories, all to help to make God more understandable to our human selves. By way of analogy, all cultures and their languages use words, metaphors, and stories to explore the universal emotion of love. None of them is right or wrong; indeed, there can be no such binary state when it comes to this most complex of human emotions. A true scholar of love would presumably embrace the full richness and diversity that can be found when exploring the myriad ways that different human cultures describe and explore love. Every subtle nuance and detail that this process reveals will only deepen and enrich our under-

standing and appreciation of an emotion that defies any reduction to single or simple definitions.

The same is surely true of religions. Taken together, the myths, stories, and symbols of the world's religions represent a quest thousands of years old to bring understanding and insight to our human experience of God. The more we embrace the rich diversity of descriptions and insights across religions in our exploration of God, the more we deepen and enrich our understanding and appreciation of a concept that is fundamentally unknowable in any rational sense. The more we surrender to this journey, the closer we come to God and the stronger become our connection with our Souls.

As I learned in my upbringing, we should remain vigilant as we seek guidance from religious teachers and their teachings. A simple test of the intent of any religious teacher can enable us to assess whether their objective is truly to help us explore the mystery of God or to use their concept of God to gain control or wield influence over other people. Any religious teacher who seeks to persuade you that their religious framework is the only correct one and that all the others are false is really trying to manipulate or control you and your thoughts. Their efforts to manipulate others might not necessarily even be conscious as they are deeply embedded in how our human societies function. Thus, many religious teachers may be well intentioned but not yet aware how their actions are a form of manipulation that emanates from wounded human behaviours and the institutions that such behaviours have constructed over many generations.

Sadly, this has led many people away from connection with God and, consequently, with their own Souls. In our wounded state, we often feel a need to manipulate other people to feed our own wounds. Many people manifest this in a desire to exert control over others, gaining power or enriching themselves materially in the process while disconnecting themselves from their essential humanity. This has created religious institutions that have

been amongst the most manipulative and exploitative in human history. In turn, their narratives of manipulation have turned many people away from the simple universal truth of God that underpins all religions.

This happened to me early in my life. I grew up surrounded by Christianity, a powerful religious doctrine that focused initially on the quest for the human Soul to be free; Jesus Christ was, in all senses, a true social revolutionary. Unfortunately, these powerful and socially subversive ideas were re-written, sanitized, and co-opted by, amongst others, the Roman and British Empires as part of their political strategy to gain power, building servitude and compliance over the societies they sought to control and exploit. They did this by harnessing fear, an emotion that feeds our Wounded Self and heightens our susceptibility to manipulation by others; fear of eternal damnation, fear of God's judgement, and fear of those 'appointed' as his emissaries on earth. This legacy lives on globally today.

Likewise, the semantic construction of God as a male and a father illustrates this goal of control, seeking to normalize and entrench the idea of males as superior, thereby justifying the controlling forces of patriarchy over millennia. My examples of using religion to gain control have a Christian origin, but all religions from the most ancient to the most modern are replete with human efforts to twist the narrative of God towards political, social, and economic ends. Typically, these attempts harness the powerful and illuminating myths, stories, and symbols of the religion within which they operate, so it is not helpful to reject outright the religions just because they have been co-opted. Rather, we need constant vigilance to determine intent as we learn from our religious teachers: is the engagement leading us into love (the base emotion of God) or into fear? If it triggers fear, we owe it to ourselves to disengage and find a different pathway to connection with God.

God and Our Emotions

Our emotions are infinitely complex, which is part of the appeal of the human journey that our Souls have chosen, providing endless learning opportunities to explore connection with God. For the purposes of my evolving spiritual framework, though, I found appealing the notion that all human emotions are rooted either in the base emotions of love and fear. There is an elegant simplicity to the idea that our emotional responses to events and experiences are grounded either in love or in fear.

This does not mean that individual emotions belong exclusively to either love or fear. For example, the transient emotion of happiness may reflect a joyful moment in which we are filled with the base emotion of love, but it might just as easily be a by-product of some or other addictive behaviour in which our Wounded Self is engaging that disconnects us from our Soul and therefore from the base emotion of love. Likewise, anger may emanate from a place of fear (for example, a fear of rejection that leads us to use anger as a strategy to manipulate others into subservience), but it may just as easily emerge as a perfectly reasonable initial reaction to someone else's attempts to manipulate us, alerting us to an external threat (a response grounded in self-love, at least initially). Pausing to reflect on the source of our initial emotional reactions and then using that reflection to guide our subsequent actions is critical to self-awareness.

Seen this way, our emotional experiences need not be perceived as binary, with the corresponding requirement this induces to control the 'bad' ones and nurture the 'good' ones. All our emotions are inextricably part of our humanity, helping us to learn from our experiences, should we choose to do so. Experiences that generate fear-based emotions give us the opportunity to explore the origins of that fear and learn more about our Wounded Self,

an essential part of any meaningful healing journey. As I will explore in subsequent chapters, I have found this, often difficult, process of reflection and learning essential as I seek to live more consistently in a state of love. Given that God is the universal life force, this state of love enables us to find God in our lives and to be one with God. Love, however, is not the opposite of fear; on the contrary, our willingness to engage with and face our fear, the emotions it precipitates, and the actions towards which it leads us is an essential aspect of our Soul's journey into deeper connection with God.

God, the Soul, and Freedom

The final concept that was important for me to incorporate into this life framework was the notion of freedom. If my Soul seeks a human journey to deepen its connection to God, that journey must include freedom of choice for the experience to be meaningful; without this freedom, we are simply being manipulated. Thus, our natural state is one of freedom, without which the Soul cannot give full expression to its unique beauty within and connection to the universal life force that is God. This, of course, carries the risk that our freedom of choice will lead us into manipulations and attachments and thus away from connection with God.

A further challenge is that freedom is not an individual concept, but rather a collective and historical one. If freedom (or agency) is given to all humans over multiple generations, then the choices they make throughout their lives affect not only them but also all the beings around them, both in their lifetimes and in future generations. Where those choices are made by the Wounded Self, grounded in fear, and based on defensiveness against perceived external threats, they generally lead into the world of manipulation

and attachments, a world that can deepen and accumulate complexity over time.

Manipulation involves us seeking to change other people's behaviour, whether consciously or unconsciously, for one reason or another and is typically motivated by emotions grounded in fear. When we seek to manipulate others or when they seek to manipulate us, this always comes at the expense of our freedom and moves us away from the natural state of our Souls. The manipulator and the manipulated both live in a state of co-dependence that binds them to each other and erodes their respective freedoms. Attachments come in the form of an unhealthy dependence on, for example, physical possessions, recurrent addictive behaviours, or co-dependent relationships that bring the illusion of short-term comfort but keep us in a state of fear. For this reason, attachments also always erode our sense of freedom.

Individual freedom is complicated by the reality that humans are social beings and navigate societies encumbered by manipulations and attachments of many kinds, populated by people whose actions and behaviours seek to place limits on the freedom of others in countless ways. These manipulations and attachments have been repeated and transferred through multiple generations, taught through parenting and schooling, propagated by religious institutions, governments, and commercial companies, and passed on in our epigenetics¹. Likewise, they have coalesced into social structures and institutions that have codified the manipulations and attachments, often making them harder to detect and always harder to evade.

Some people may feel that the pathway to personal freedom involves removing oneself from society and thus from these influences, but I believe that the process of experiencing these social manipulations and attachments is

1 Epigenetics is the study of how your behaviours and environment can cause changes that affect the way your genes work. Unlike genetic changes, epigenetic changes are reversible and do not change your DNA sequence, but they can change how your body reads a DNA sequence.
<https://www.cdc.gov/genomics/disease/epigenetics.htm>

an essential aspect of the Soul's journey to freedom. This is because simply avoiding unpleasant experiences or situations does not lead to real freedom. This comes rather from the experience of living through the challenges of being human, learning from the challenges, and learning to free oneself over time. If our Souls have chosen to experience the human journey, it does not help to avoid it. The act of freeing oneself from manipulations and attachments while remaining connected in love with all the other beings who are also part of the universal life force is an ongoing act of deepening connection with God.

A Framework for Living a Life of Love

As I reflect on my life so far, I hope that it is, albeit slowly and through many challenges, moving me towards living in love. By this, I do not mean a life of being 'in love' with another person in the narrow romantic sense. As I see it, living in love first requires true connection with my own Soul (self-love). Then, it requires surrender to the unknowable reality that there is a universal life force (that I call God) that is unequivocally for life and love, of which all our Souls are inextricably a part. This means that all our fear-based emotions are a construction born out of our material human experience and perceptions. Combining these insights enables us to show up in the world to share our Love with all of creation. We no longer need to receive love in the conventional sense to fulfil our needs because it is always around us all the time, flowing within and through us and through God. Only when we no longer feel the need to receive love to tend our wounds are we truly ready to give it.

This framework cannot be internalized through intellectual thought alone, though reflecting on it intellectually periodically helps develop and internalize some insights. Rather, it is lived, experienced, and felt, in daily actions and decisions, in our successes and failures, and in the lessons we learn as we continue our earthly journey as humans. It is not the starting point for our behaviour but a culmination of what we learn as we grow connection with our Souls. I have described it in this first chapter, though, because nothing else I have done makes real sense anymore without this framework.

As a human, I am very much a work in progress, still massively susceptible to manipulations and attachments that make living a life of love hard to sustain. I am grateful that my experiences to date have helped me to perceive the universal truth I have tried to articulate in this chapter – and it was the combination of these experiences, many of which have been painful and challenging, that provided this insight. In the following chapters, I will try to unpack how this happened for me, and continues to happen daily, in the hope that it might be useful to others (while recognizing that everyone's journey is unique). For the sake of a structure, I have organized this reflection into chapters on body, mind, relationships, and death, but they all intertwine with each other and with several other themes I could have chosen.

Chapter Two: Body

More obviously than anything else, our bodies represent the choice of our Souls to experience the material realm through a human journey. I grew up with a poor body image and a disrespectful, dismissive approach to the physical manifestation that my Soul is inhabiting during its earthly journey. This poor body image started, I think, growing up in apartheid South Africa, a strongly patriarchal society where a high premium was placed on being ‘manly’, often measured in terms of physical size and strength and sporting prowess (with an emphasis on competitive team sports such as rugby, cricket, and soccer).

In terms of body type, I am an ectomorph (someone with a ‘lean, only slightly muscular body’) and I was born late in the school year cycle (15 days before the annual cut-off date), so was always the youngest in my school class. This combination meant that I always felt skinny and weak compared to my peers. Growing up in all-boys’ schools and with two older brothers, I felt acutely aware of my bodily limitations and unable to compete physically with my peers. Although these capabilities improved over time, I never really shook the notion until deep into adulthood that, as this skinny child, I somehow never became a ‘real man’. This happened even though I played

first XV rugby in my final school year and went on to register significant athletic endurance achievements into middle age.

My endurance sporting endeavours in adulthood were rooted in an unquenchable desire to prove myself physically, both to myself and to others. As a result, I seldom celebrated any of my achievements, instead immediately focusing on the next physical goal. With hindsight, I recognize that this is an example of a suppressive behaviour, less obviously harmful but not wildly different from drinking alcohol excessively, taking drugs, or working excessively long hours.

In my early years, I compensated for a slight physical stature by developing my capacity to think quickly and talk my way out of threatening situations. These skills enabled me to gain an upper hand over others in situations where I felt threatened, while also enabling me to use cutting humour and quick wit as a weapon. I am still working now to undo that legacy both in myself and for my children (to whom I taught those 'skills' in their youth), as it has tended to lead me to anger too quickly and to undermine other people through the things I say (something I still most typically only do when I feel threatened in some way).

As an ectomorph, I had a fast metabolism that prevented me from gaining weight as a young adult. This enabled me to get into a bad habit of regularly drinking large quantities of beer (binge drinking) without putting on weight. I thus saw no need to take physical exercise and abandoned all forms of exercise while studying at university. This persisted until a picture on a renewed driver's licence in my early 30s provided me with clear evidence of weight gain in my face.

My fast metabolism can also be linked to high levels of acidity, which precipitated early onset of gout attacks, as well as making me predisposed to type 2 diabetes and problems with processing cholesterol effectively. Because

I remained thin while eating badly and drinking too much beer, it took me longer than it should have to work out the importance of eating well and taking regular exercise.

The Journey to Physical Health

My journey to physical health constituted the first tentative, unknowing steps to connection with my Soul. I think this illustrates that Soul connection starts not with rational thought or intellectual debate but in the ongoing daily choices we make (many of which are subconscious) about how we will treat ourselves and what we will prioritize. The journey does not have a goal or destination; every day we make countless small decisions and choose between different options, some of which bring us into closer connection with our Souls and some that suppress that connection. The opportunity to learn about love and what it really means through this process is an intrinsic part of why our Souls chose the human experience with all its complexities and apparent contradictions. Physical health and wellbeing is an important starting point, as it confronts us with choices about whether or not we will choose to love ourselves.

Getting into Physical Fitness

The first memory I have of deciding to prioritize my physical health was when my ex-wife and I arranged for our friends to buy us bicycles as a wedding gift because we already had what we needed to live comfortably. Unusually, I had never learned to ride a bicycle as a child, having been

scared off cycling when my oldest brother returned home one day covered in grazes after having fallen off his bicycle. Thus, I needed to overcome my fears to learn to ride a bicycle in my mid 20s; even now, despite having completed a full Ironman and countless bicycle races in different parts of the world, I am still not able to stand out of my pedals properly while cycling, as I feel unbalanced and unstable. Managing and overcoming my fears to pursue physical exercise goals became a recurrent theme in this journey.

I soon began cycling around the neighbourhood, motivated by that photograph on my driving licence. I tend to be 'all-in' or 'all out' when I start new pursuits, so I quickly began taking it more seriously and entered my first road cycling race, upgrading to a racing bike in the process. As a result, cycling became my first exercise love and remains my happiest form of exercise, as I can lose myself completely in the rhythm and momentum that comes with cruising along the roads talking to friends or listening to music on my headphones, oblivious to whatever physical risks might accompany the outings.

Simultaneously, travel was becoming a growing part of my professional life, first within South Africa, then across Africa, and ultimately globally. By this stage, I had started to feel the benefits that regular exercise provides, both in terms of weight management and brain function ('healthy body, healthy mind' is a cliché with ongoing relevance). Consequently, I started running during my travels, as cycling was not an option on the road. The more I travelled, the more important physical exercise became to help me to mitigate the negative effects of prolonged periods in aeroplanes, exposed to high levels of radiation and criss-crossing different time zones.

I discovered that the simplest way to sustain the habit of regular exercise was to enter an endurance event that would scare me enough into doing exercise when I did not feel otherwise motivated. I set this precedent by entering my first triathlon (a half Ironman event) after having completed

several cycling races because I was a weak swimmer with no experience of open water swimming. The thought of swimming in the sea and doing such a long race scared me much more than the logistical challenge of training for three disciplines simultaneously, propelling me out of the door to keep training.

As it turned out, this triathlon served a double purpose. First, it initiated what has become a lifetime love affair with regular, varied physical exercise and cross-training. Second, it provided what I now think of as the first of at least three near-death experiences I have had in my life. I suspect there have been more that I ignore, particularly when cars have come perilously close to me while on my bicycle, the most notable of which was when a car's rear-view mirror snapped off after hitting my elbow from behind.

Of the three, this was the one that, objectively, one might say did not involve a 'real' encounter with death because Ironman events are very well marshalled, and I was likely never at serious risk of drowning (although two people did drown in the same event the following year). Nevertheless, the fear of dying felt very real at the time, as I ran into sea water of 19 degrees Celsius with three-metre swells, accompanied by 1,000 other middle-aged men swinging their arms and legs in the ocean around me and the persistent feeling that I was never going to make it back to shore once I had swum a kilometre out to sea. There were periods – short in chronological time but stretched interminably long in my memory – where I was convinced that I would drown. Interestingly, when I did finally haul myself out of the sea, having been encouraged by two life savers in a kayak who came to rescue me after I started cramping, the fear of completing the remaining two legs of the race had evaporated; they were just long bouts of physical endurance and pain, paling by comparison to what I had just experienced.

As much as anything else I had done before or since, that hour in the sea rebooted my notion of fear and what experiences should elicit this emotion.

For example, the behaviour of clients I worked for mostly stopped causing me anxiety or fear in ways that they had done previously. Having feared for my life, I could now recognize that nothing they were doing came remotely close to being life threatening, even though my nervous system had been responding as if it was. I am forever grateful for that gift, as it helped me to learn, through lived experience, that most fear is just a story we create in our minds, and often one that is fed by people who have discovered that keeping people fearful is the easiest way to manipulate and control them.

Physical Fitness Becomes Suppression

Participating in my first triathlon served the useful purpose of making exercise a daily habit and showing me the benefit of doing diverse kinds of exercise: in my case, running, cycling, swimming, paddling, strength work in a gym, Pilates, and, most recently, yoga. However, it also had a darker side, as extended bouts of exercise also became an easy retreat, a way of avoiding and suppressing my own emotional wounds. Unlike most other forms of suppression (for example, alcohol or drug addiction), training for endurance events is seen as socially acceptable and even aspirational (a bit like excessive working), which make the patterns harder to detect.

This did not occur to me when I first began increasing my exercise load. Later, though, I came to realize that exercise, done for the wrong reasons and to excess, can be a form of suppression in which we engage to numb emotional pain and avoid confronting our inner wounds. I was only able to see this truth when COVID-19 lockdowns put an end to all races, forcing me to stop setting these goals for a while and giving me space to reflect on what had been motivating me.

I entered my first full Ironman (3.8 km swim, 180 km bike ride, and 42 km run) while my marriage was in terminal decline. For some time, I had been using hard work, excessive travel, and exercise as strategies to avoid being at home with Shelley, my ex-wife, as our relational space had become deeply uncomfortable for both of us and I lacked both the awareness and courage to confront that reality. However, Shelley finally told me she wanted to get divorced just as my training programme for the full Ironman was gaining momentum (while I was working in the Caribbean), so exercise quickly became the easiest way to escape the pain of the divorce process.

In the beginning, I thought this was healthy, and, in some ways, it was a helpful coping mechanism. It is difficult to stay angry about anything when you are doing a 160 km training ride, and I still find exercise a useful and healthy way to process and release my emotions. Unfortunately, though, when one is training so many hours every week, it quickly becomes impossible to distinguish between healthy exercise and avoidance/suppression.

In my case, I used exercise to avoid engaging in depth with how my marriage and prior intimate relationships had wounded me and what role I had played in their failure – and then went on to use it to avoid connecting with myself and learning about intimacy. Although I have no regrets about the many amazing sporting events for which I prepared and in which I have since participated (Ironman South Africa, the Comrades Marathon, bicycle races in Europe, multisport races in New Zealand, trail runs in beautiful, unspoilt locations, and adrenaline-filled paddling races, amongst others), I also used exercise as a form of suppression and avoidance. I should have made this connection every time I got injured (my specialty being twisting one of my ankles and tearing its ligaments) as my most serious injuries were almost always the result of overtraining and fatigue. Rather than reflecting on why I might be injuring myself, I instead rushed the recovery process

and pushed through physical pain to get back to exercise – and avoidance/suppression – as fast as I could.

These experiences have taught me that, like most things in life, there is little of any substance that can be neatly categorized. Physical exercise and staying physically fit are unquestionably important life habits, without which many other things become significantly more difficult (or sometimes not possible). The choices one makes about regular exercise are important ways of honouring one's body, dedicating time to oneself, and practising self-love, all of which are essential aspects of the journey towards connection with God. However, they can just as easily be choices to suppress one's emotional experiences, avoid engaging with wounds to heal them, and distance oneself from the full, interior experience of being human. Thus, it is not just the actions and choices that matter; it is also what motivates them and where they lead us.

Exercise-Induced Encounters with Death

As I mentioned above, my physical pursuits provided the context for me to come face to face with death. These encounters have proven to be deeply formative, first because they helped me to separate real fear from the fabricated fear that our modern societies seek to generate in us, and, second, because they led me to wonder whether fearing death itself is necessary or helpful. My first experience came in that half Ironman, which, though maybe not actually life threatening, felt real enough to transform my outlook on life radically.

The second was very much more real. As a new challenge, I learned river paddling to prepare for a multisport race in New Zealand called Coast to

Coast. Starting paddling in one's 40s proved a tricky proposition because my middle-aged brain was much more risk averse than the typical teenage one. After several river trips and countless hair-raising moments, I found myself preparing for a three-day paddling race called the Dusi Canoe Marathon, another event that, like Ironman, I had initially assumed was beyond my capabilities. As part of our training for Dusi, my paddling partner, Guy, and I accompanied a river expedition down the Jukskei River, which is usually not possible to paddle due to pollution but had become traversable after several days of heavy rain. Paddling over a broken bridge (manmade obstructions are always the scariest obstacles on rivers), we were forced to slow down by a tentative paddler going over the bridge ahead of us. Paddling slower than the current is always a bad idea and the result was that our canoe was already tipping over as we went over the bridge. The water had formed what is known as a 'washing machine', a circular tube of water that pulls the paddler back into it when they try to swim out; Guy fell out on the other side of it, while I fell straight into the middle.

The best way to escape these is to swim down towards the river floor but I had nonchalantly put my life jacket on very loosely so every time I tried to swim down it pulled up over my head and dragged me back into the washing machine. Every time this happened I managed to get my head up sufficiently to get a quick breath of air but could also feel that the energy this required meant I could not sustain it for long. Time stretches interminably in these moments, so the couple of minutes I spent trapped in that washing machine felt like a lifetime, enough for me to observe my waterproof mobile phone case floating above on the top of the washing machine and to be impressed with how well it worked. Ultimately, I resigned myself to the fact that I was not going to get out and that this would likely be the end of my life. I recall feeling a surprising sense of calm about this insight, which I think has contributed to me re-conceptualizing my perspective on death

later in life. That sense of calm may also have stopped me fighting the water, which ultimately led to the washing machine spitting me out.

I was naturally very shaken by this experience as we paddled further down the river. There was no choice but to continue paddling as that was the only way to get back to our cars. As fate would have it, just a few minutes later, our river guide alerted us that we were approaching a weir with a three-metre drop. She advised us all to paddle to the side and walk around the weir as it was quite treacherous, an instruction with which most of the group complied. Guy turned to look at me and asked what I wanted to do. Of course, I told him I wanted to walk around the weir, but, as we got closer, it became clear that, if we did, I would never shake my fear of the experience and our Dusi Canoe Marathon would be a nightmare. Thus, as we got into the line of the weir, I told him to paddle and over we went. The exhilaration that came from successfully dropping over that wall into the river and emerging upright was extraordinary. It also set us up for a successful Dusi Canoe Marathon, an experience that ranks as one of the most memorable and enjoyable racing events of my life.

Deep lessons have continued emerging slowly from these encounters with death, but, at the time, they gave the gift of understanding most fear for what it really is, a base emotion that has been both socially and individually constructed to prevent us from fulfilling our true potential and finding real connection with our Souls and with God. We spend so much time fearing what might happen in a fictitious future of our own construction, encouraged to feel scared of the world by our parents, our siblings, our friends, our schools, our employers, our governments, the media, and a host of other role players. Most of what we experience as fear is wasted energy spent worrying about things that either never happen or are much less severe in reality than we worried they would be. Sometimes, though, we also become so fixated on the things we fear that we attract them into our lives.

Though I would never advise anyone to seek out death, experiencing real fear when confronted with actual life-threatening danger is the quickest way to see socially fabricated fear for what it is: an elaborate set of manipulative strategies that suppresses our connection with our Souls and with God, keeping us under the control of social forces that seek to take advantage of us in some way. Releasing yourself from this fear is a critical step towards God, even when you are not aware that this is the direction in which you are headed.

The last, and most recent, encounter with death precipitated by my exercise habits, occurred in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, which I was visiting for the first time. I had already been on what had proven to be a dark and difficult work trip to Albania before getting to Riyadh, so had been spending my first day or two there trying to rebalance my energy. One of my favourite activities is to explore new cities in the early morning, running around them to see sights and observe communities as they come to life at sunrise. I have stored thousands of memories of remarkable locations where I have been able to do this: crossing the Golden Gate bridge in San Francisco, running along the Seine in Paris, seeing some of the 1,000 temples of Bhubaneswar; visiting Lodhi Garden in Delhi; exploring Stone Town in Zanzibar; heading up and down volcanic hills in St Vincent; crossing the Red Square in Moscow; and running onto the famous plains of Eldoret, to name just a few. The list seems truly endless!

Consequently, I planned an early morning run in Riyadh, though there was little of obvious interest to see within running distance of my hotel. I mentioned my plans to my colleagues, two of whom expressed interest in joining the morning outing. As it turned out, one of them slept in late, so I went out just with Eli, a delightful woman originally from Venezuela who was then living in Jakarta with her husband and young daughter. We had run a kilometre or two, chatting happily when, out of nowhere, a car travelling

at well over 100 km/h bore down on us from behind as we crossed a road. I saw the hideous lights of the car over my right shoulder and then turned to see that Eli was not where she had been a second before. Her body had been carried 100 m down the road before the car had managed to come to a halt, presumably killing her instantaneously on impact.

There are no words to describe the effect that direct exposure to an event of this kind has. Disbelief, guilt, shock, fear, bewilderment, confusion all flooded through in equal measure in ongoing waves as I tried to process what had happened right next to me and saw the lifelessness of her body when I got to her and gingerly lifted her arm to look for any signs of life. Disbelief that this young life had ended so abruptly, leaving a husband and young daughter to make their way in life without her. Confusion about how the car hit her and not me when she was right next to me. Guilt as I wondered what I should have done differently to prevent this from happening. Shock that it had happened at all. Bewilderment at the banality of the process by which her physical body was zipped up into a plastic bag and loaded onto a mortuary vehicle.

Having happened only months before I write this, the event is too new for me to feel that I understand its true meaning yet, but I know that, in deep and imperceptible ways, I am irrevocably transformed by it.

Food and Physical Wellbeing

With the habit of regular, healthy exercise as my first example of an action that one can take to express love for oneself and create the conditions for deeper connection with one's Soul, the second that follows in parallel is surely the choice to eat healthily. My fast metabolism made it easy for me,

at least initially, to ignore bad eating habits, most notably an unhealthy love of processed sugar and a compulsion to drink too many beers. Fortunately, my growing interest in endurance exercise propelled me into a world where people were endlessly obsessed with optimizing performance, for which healthy diet is one critical requirement. The more I read and listened, the more I began to learn lessons of good eating. This has taken time and is a continuing journey, as I have vacillated between healthy eating (though sometimes overly restrictive) and overindulging as and when my exercise programme 'allowed' me to eat pretty much whatever I wanted without any visible signs of damage.

The journey so far has provided a few pointers that I consider to be of value:

1. Processed sugar and alcohol are toxic for the human body, in any quantities. They interfere with the body's natural processes of self-management and disrupt sleep, much more than I had realized when I was younger. While modest consumption of either when the circumstances warrant it might be justified as part of broader life experiences, neither confers any direct health benefits, no matter what any so-called scientific literature might claim.
2. The less processed food is, the healthier it will be. Increasingly, I realize that this applies not just to the outward appearances of being processed, but also to how the food is grown and created; the more organic and the less genetically modified, the better.
3. People have different dietary needs and tolerances, so prescribing to them what and how to eat based on personal experience is generally a bad idea, and partially explains why recommended diets and self-help books have little sustainably positive impact. The only meaningful way to know what is good for you is to follow points 1 and 2 above and then see what food makes you feel better and what makes you feel worse.

4. Quantity and diversity matter. Although eating healthier, unprocessed food is better, weight gain and loss will always be correlated with the sheer amount of food one eats. Likewise, diversity in what I eat, both in the short and long term, helps me to stay healthier.
5. Intermittent fasting, usually for a period of around 16 to 18 hours, is my most effective way to lose weight and let my body recover from over-indulgence. Likewise, the more time I leave between when I eat and when I sleep at night, the better my sleep will tend to be. As I get older, I also realize that the human body requires less food the older it gets.
6. Undue obsession about adherence to any eating practice is less healthy than breaking the habit occasionally. Enjoying ice cream with my sons or drinking a beer around the braai (the South African version of the barbeque) are a healthy part of a balanced life for me. Likewise, obsessing about the 'purity' of one's food sources can place major, unhealthy constraints on one's life when taken to extremes. Getting food-related habits 'mostly right' is thus likelier to be healthier overall than trying to get them 'totally right'.
7. Healthy eating is a prerequisite for all other aspects of my ability to function effectively – and thus for any serious journey to deepen connection with my Soul and with God. While this may sound controversial in the modern world given the extent to which unhealthy lifestyle practices have been normalized by the marketing machinery of consumptive industries (which have co-opted health-related rhetoric to promote their own agendas), I strongly believe that none of my recent insights and spiritual shifts could have taken place if I had not first committed myself to daily habits of healthy eating. Many religions include clear guidance on this, so I think the controversy only arises from the fact that we live in an era of deep-seated social manipulation that seeks to normalize unhealthy consumptive practices.

The Food Industry and Social Manipulation

There are many challenges to pursuing a life of deeper connection with God in the world today (though I have no opinion on whether it is harder or easier than previous eras). Central to this challenge is the evolution over decades of modern, consumptive capitalism, which conceptualizes people primarily as consumers of products and services and thus places a premium on strategies that increase individual consumption. This has now become so deep-seated and so intertwined with other forms of social manipulation (most especially the manipulations of governments over people as they seek to exert social control) that it is difficult to see how it will unwind successfully without severe, but ultimately healthy, social upheaval. The problem is that the tenets of this global social nightmare within which we all live (to paraphrase concepts in *The Four Agreements*²) have developed slowly and over multiple generations so that they have seeped into our social consciousness masquerading as universal truths. And they begin with a simple fact, which is that humans do indeed need to consume, first to survive and then to thrive.

The food industry provides an excellent case study, though the principles are the same for the pharmaceutical industry, the technological industry, the travel industry, the energy industry, and indeed every major industry. Its development is rooted in our basic need to eat to survive. This starts as an individual imperative, of course, but quickly becomes a collective challenge as human communities work together to ensure stable, reliable food supply. As communities gradually organized into nation states, a key imperative of any government seeking to maintain control has been to ensure at least a basic degree of stability in the food supply. Food has also long been a global

² *The Four Agreements: A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom* is a self-help book by Don Miguel Ruiz. The book outlines a code of conduct based on Toltec teachings. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Four_Agreements

social issue as the world became more integrated and we (mostly) came to recognize our common social responsibility to prevent our fellow human beings from starving. Separately, we have also always recognized that eating is not only a matter of survival; good food, especially when shared with good company, can be an intrinsic joy of the human experience.

While the agricultural and food industries have unquestionably played a major role in making food readily and conveniently accessible to most of the world's population, we have paid a major price for this, a price that has been documented in detail in several books. As a few examples: large-scale, commercial monoculture farming has steadily eroded the nutritional value of most of our major food supplies (although it has simultaneously contributed to improving food security in some ways); excessive food processing further reduces nutritional value of what ends up on our plate; thanks to the abundant supply of cheap, processed food, obesity has outstripped starvation as a global health crisis (and become a disease of poverty as the cost of eating healthily has increased relentlessly); addictive, processed foods laced with processed sugar and unhealthy chemicals have become commonplace and helped to confuse our bodies' internal processes of hunger management so that we consume more than we need; our desire (for those who can afford it) to eat what we want when we want to has driven the creation of global supply chains that demand growing amounts of energy and resources to sustain; and unhealthy symbiotic relationships between private companies, academic researchers, and government agencies have facilitated massive conflicts of interest and misrepresentations of evidence that have sought to give a façade of scientific credibility to this toxic situation.

As with most aspects of life, this is a complex social situation of interdependencies and ethics that does not lend itself to the kinds of simplistic pronouncements of 'right' or 'wrong' that are typical when debates about modern-day capitalism take place. This situation arose over decades, at least

partially motivated by good intentions. Regardless, though, the reality is that powerful commercial companies, supported by governments, have a strong vested interest in maintaining the status quo and go to great lengths to manipulate people into believing that this situation also benefits them. It has, over time, become significantly more expensive and less convenient to eat healthily than to eat unhealthily, and significantly harder to moderate food intake in the face of a barrage of carefully constructed, pervasive manipulations designed to increase consumption levels.

I have no idea how these kinds of problems will be solved while still meeting our basic human needs and aspirations. Of greater interest to me in the context of a personal spiritual journey is to reflect on how this complex, socially constructed situation, which has unfolded over multiple generations and is deeply embedded in the institutions and systems with which I engage daily, manifests both manipulations and attachments. We might like to believe that we are autonomous individuals in control of our choices, but my experience has been that any such delusion makes development of healthy habits significantly harder to sustain in the long run.

In exploring my relationship with food, I have tried to understand how these powerful social forces seek to manipulate me into a co-dependent relationship of supply and consumption. In overly simplistic and generalized terms, commercial enterprises in the food industry primarily seek to ensure that I consume their products, and the more I consume the better for their business model. These business models have emerged from a place of deep wounding and fear in which resources and money are seen as a scarce resource, so their architects, owners, and managers typically seek to accumulate as much money and profit as they feel they can get away with. As they do not have to deal with the long-term consequences of this model of consumption, there are no serious short-term impediments to expansion of this approach, so strategies that increase consumption rates will ultimately always prevail over

those that approach food consumers from a place of compassion that seeks to help them to become healthier. Likewise, governments, which supposedly regulate this type of environment, have little incentive to disrupt such business models as they are a core source of their own revenue and thus their power. Some governments do make partial efforts at regulation, but the history of the food industry has more typically been one in which governments have enabled and supported these enterprises and their business model to grow and thrive at the expense of human health.

Manipulation is embedded into most aspects of my interaction with the food industry – how it is advertised, how ‘research’ findings of all kinds are presented, how shops are laid out, and how marketing messages make their way to me online and while I navigate the world. Understanding it as manipulation and detecting how the manipulation is seeking to influence my behaviour equips me better to avoid developing unhealthy attachments to what the food industry is trying to sell me. It does not solve the problem by itself, but it has helped me to grow in self-awareness.

From Food to Pharmaceuticals to Everything

The commercial quest to manipulate people into longstanding co-dependent relationships of consumption does not stop with the agricultural and food industries. Another example of an industry with its own intertwined relationship with the food industry is the pharmaceutical industry, which plays a major role, amongst many others, in helping consumers to mitigate the short-term effects of over-consumption of unhealthy food. For me personally, this is illustrated in my genetic susceptibility to a host of related medical issues: hypertension, problems processing cholesterol, type 2 diabetes, and gout, amongst them. I say genetically susceptible largely because I have had

experience of all of them and my father did likewise – and ultimately died from their cumulative effect.

There are two ways of managing these medical issues. The first is to live a healthy life; take exercise, reduce stress levels, and avoid those foods that will increase the likelihood of one or more of the above medical conditions. The second is to allow the medical conditions to arise and then take drugs to try to control them. For all the above conditions, the drug regimes are most typically long-term. In other words, most medical doctors will gladly prescribe these drugs in perpetuity as treatment for a chronic condition, rather than as an acute intervention while the patient gets their lifestyle habits sorted out. In all instances where I have grappled with one of the above medical conditions, medicalization of the condition has been the approach proposed for me by a medical expert, rather than lifestyle change.

This happens in significant part because many people seeking medical advice are looking for quick fixes, rather than being willing to confront how their own habits have brought them to the point where they require medical assistance. Thus, the situation is again a complex one of multiple co-dependencies, not one where there is necessarily an obvious single villain. Nevertheless, it is also easy to see how this model works well to support a business model based on sustaining and expanding product consumption, as it facilitates ongoing eating of unhealthy foods and then enables additional dependence on the drugs required to mitigate the health effects of the unhealthy eating.

I have, on occasion, become caught up in this cycle as I have tried to mitigate the effects of one or another bad lifestyle practice. Fortunately, my passion for exercise generally helped me to break out of the cycle, at least as far as food and pharmaceutical drugs are concerned and I am now able to manage these conditions through my behaviours and not by taking drugs. Sadly, the same was not true for my father, who died of cancer at 76, having

left his attempt to change his lifestyle and wean himself off several chronic drug regimes too late.

These patterns exist everywhere and are cumulative: consumption of products and services starts by meeting a real human need; as business models mature, the enterprises that profit from them invest in strategies to maximize consumption and seek to manipulate people's behaviours towards this end; individual consumers develop unhealthy attachments to the products and services they consume and become increasingly easy to manipulate. Each time this happens successfully, it becomes easier to replicate in new areas and increasingly socially acceptable to lower the ages at which it begins. Finally, as powerful social actors who derive financial benefit from these arrangements grow in stature, wealth, and power, they become increasingly able to manipulate the regulatory and research systems supposed to protect against exploitation of these patterns, thus further entrenching their dominance.

I can recognize these manipulations and attachments at work in so many areas of my life. Of course, it affects my relationship with food as I try to find a balance between healthy eating and the time available in my week to eat and shop. It has also, though exploded the world of 'healthy living' itself, which is now beset with snake oil salesmen who peddle a dazzling array of products – supplements, technological gadgets, books, and consulting services, amongst them – usually falsely promising health, longevity, and myriad other protections against the evils of unhealthy lifestyles.

The patterns are also rife in the world of technology and media consumption, social media, television, movies, streaming, music, and reading, where the competition is for our attention – and the result is that we become quickly and easily bombarded by media products and services that can fill our every waking minute. The origins of most of these can be found in something of utility, but their cumulative effect has been overwhelming, massively over-

stimulating, and dehumanizing. This leads us neatly onto the next theme:
Mind.

Chapter Three: Mind

The Unhappy Ascendancy of the Conscious, Rational Mind

I grew up in a world that has placed the conscious, rational mind at the pinnacle of human capability. Though I have not done enough historical research to make confident claims, my sense is that, in many ways, this dates back to what is now known as the Age of Enlightenment, an intellectual and philosophical movement that:

Included a range of ideas centered on the value of human happiness, the pursuit of knowledge obtained by means of reason and the evidence of the senses, and ideals such as natural law, liberty, progress, toleration, fraternity, constitutional government, and separation of church and state...The Enlightenment was marked by an increasing awareness of the relationship between the mind and the everyday media of the world, and by an emphasis on the scientific method and reductionism.³

3 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Age_of_Enlightenment

This Age has had deep and profound influences on human societies globally. The intellectual ideas that emerged had a dominant influence on how I came to define and conceptualize my mind until around ten years ago. Key amongst these were the following:

1. a belief that I control my actions through my conscious, rational mind and that decisions are best made by thinking through them consciously and rationally;
2. the notion that what I perceive through my conscious, rational mind defines me as an individual, while this individual self and what it experiences through the five senses of my body is separate from other beings and from the wider universe (a notion that many ancient religious traditions have long described as the ‘illusion’, for which they were attacked and marginalized as the concepts of rationality and individualism gained ascendancy); and
3. a belief bordering on religious zeal that these two concepts represent the pinnacle of human capability and are thus more worthy of nurturing than any other aspects of our overall being and should also be trusted above all others in guiding our decisions and choices as individuals.

My career journey took me into the world of education, the values of which illustrate more starkly perhaps than any other the truth of the final statement. Although schools and, to a much lesser extent, post-secondary educational institutions pay some lip service to nurturing other aspects of our humanity, by far the greatest proportion of time, energy, and resources is dedicated to schooling the conscious, rational mind throughout our formal educational careers – and progressively more so as we move from early childhood education towards higher education. Sadly, even within my lifetime, modern education systems have become increasingly and reductively focused on schooling the conscious, rational mind (often doing even that with narrow-

ing and often weak outcomes) to the exclusion of our other capabilities. The effects of this have been deeply damaging to our global conceptualization of what it means to be human.

This unfortunate reification of our conscious, rational minds persists, both in education systems and in human societies more broadly, even though growing bodies of scientific evidence have already demonstrated that it is, at best, misguided, but more likely profoundly deluded – and these scientific processes are just scratching the surface of an evidence-based understanding of how our bodies and minds really function as an integrated organism. This is not helped by many people's tendency to confuse a spurious concept labelled as 'the science' with a real understanding of the scientific method. In my experience, when people reference 'the science' it is usually because they are dogmatically asserting a statement as incontestable and are seeking to shut down debate. Conversely, scientists following the scientific method rigorously tend to approach scientific knowledge with a high degree of humility and constantly aim to expand the boundaries of our knowledge, at least in part by continually questioning the validity of what we think we currently know or what is 'proven'. This quest is fundamental to formulating and testing hypotheses through real scientific research.

This confusion about science in public debate propels a confirmation bias that encourages people to favour information that strengthens their initial beliefs rather than using new information to test and question these beliefs rigorously and continuously. Thus, even though new insights about how we really function biologically as a species are emerging at an accelerating rate in the scientific world, misconceptions persist and remain deeply embedded in our belief systems and our social structures.

I have only recently come to recognize how the human body is really an integrated learning organism exquisitely designed to support the voyage of discovery of life on earth of our Souls. The rational, conscious mind is a

critical aspect of this design, but it is part of a much bigger human intelligence and only functions effectively when its integration with the rest of our human body is considered. A full explanation of this is beyond the scope or purpose of this book, but even just three observations illustrate the complexity of that design and the futility of our exclusive focus on the conscious, rational mind.

First, the conscious mind undertakes 40 conscious bursts of activity per second, while the non-conscious mind processes a million operations per second. Clearly, what is happening at the subconscious level matters tremendously and should be deserving of far greater attention and nurturing than it receives. Second, spinal nerves connect the brain with the nerves in most parts of the body, while the enteric nervous system comprises two thin layers of more than 100 million nerve cells lining the gastrointestinal tract and integrated with the gut microbiome. This has been labelled as the 'second brain' and suggests that the idea of 'trusting your gut' is more than just metaphorical. More importantly, just at the level of the gut microbiome (but also throughout our entire bodies), we coexist with trillions of microbes, all of which have a direct and significant impact on how we function. Third, knowledge is emerging rapidly on epigenetics, the study of how human behaviours and environment can cause changes that affect the way our genes work. These are inherited at birth from our ancestors and change throughout our lives, influenced by our behaviours and our environment. These cellular 'memories' are stored throughout our entire bodies and we are only just beginning to understand how they function.

Just these limited insights indicate that effective functioning of our minds and our full human capabilities, conscious and subconscious, is a capability distributed throughout our whole body in an integrated way. Yet, the approaches we take to learning and the priorities codified in school curricula reflect none of this reality and do not seek to nurture this full capability.

Similarly, many people simply do not see any connection between how their brain works and how they treat the rest of their body.

My exploration of ancient religious traditions and wisdom is embryonic, but, from what I have read, all of them include clear guidance on nurturing this exquisite, integrated, multi-layered, and infinitely complex learning organism that is our human body/mind, often combined with highly sophisticated quests and strategies to develop its capacity. Yet, the world in which I grew up had systematically sidelined these ancient spiritual practices and instead focused predominantly on developing my conscious, rational mind without reference to how it is integrated and interdependent with all these other layers of our capability and how disabling it is to be disconnected from them. While not a conspiracy in the traditional sense, this narrow, dismissive focus on the conscious, rational mind has the effect of trapping us in an elaborate, multi-layered, pervasive, socially constructed world of manipulations and attachments that keeps us disconnected from our true humanity and our Souls. There is a clear benefit to this for forces of social manipulation; the closer our connection to our Soul, the less inclined we are towards unhealthy attachments and the harder we are to manipulate. As we have already seen, there are many social structures that derive benefit from our attachments and thus have a vested interest in maintaining this disconnection to make our manipulation that much easier.

The Schooling of My Mind

My experience of education systems began with pre-primary school, which I remember as a place of play and engagement with other girls and boys (though only if they were white and middle class, as I grew up in apartheid South Africa). From there, though, even the gender-based diversity quickly

disappeared as I moved into a private, single-sex primary school and continued into a similar secondary school where I became a weekly boarder, staying at the school during the week and returning home for weekends.

This was the education of the privileged elite in South Africa, and I received access to schooling opportunities that were denied to all but a small percentage of the country's (and indeed the world's) population. This set me up for post-secondary academic studies and subsequent material success in life, so my critique of this educational experience is imbued with grateful recognition that I was tremendously fortunate, at least materially, to have received the opportunities I did. They laid a strong cognitive platform and opened significant doorways for me.

The model of my schooling and its curriculum was a by-product of the British Empire, even though the empire no longer existed. In the structure and form of the schooling I received as an English-speaking white male in what had been a British colony, I was ultimately still being 'prepared' for the old imperial enterprise, capable of thinking on my feet, able to solve problems, and groomed to be a leader – but expected not to question the bigger system of which I was part or the rules, conventions, and values by which it operated. The school operated, as such schools largely still do today, through a strict hierarchy, from the headmaster at the top through the teachers and the senior boys (who played an integral role in enforcing disciplinary codes) to the junior boys at the bottom. Challenging this hierarchy was punished, as was transgression of any of its rules.

Likewise, the formal curriculum codified what was considered worth learning and what was not, with these decisions being entirely outside of the control of the boys. Teachers had also limited control over these decisions within a narrow range (but much greater latitude than teachers today, whose role in the classroom is even more tightly prescribed than it was 40 years ago). Ultimately, we were told what was worth learning and were taught

that failure to learn this successfully would jeopardize our futures and was thus to be feared. This formal curriculum focused exclusively on intellectual endeavours, the activities of the rational mind; it occupied the bulk of our school days, whether in classes or doing homework.

As part of an elite, private schooling system, I had the benefit of participation in organized sport, which at least provided regular physical exercise. However, the emphasis in almost all exercise was on competitive sports, whether individually or in teams. Team sports had the advantage of teaching us to work together, especially sports like rugby where, no matter how talented an individual might be, he can never win a game without the support of his team. More importantly, though, these sporting endeavours taught us that life is a competition that will reward the winners and ignore the losers. Successful sportsmen received excessive adulation and access to the best facilities and coaches. Those who were less talented, and even those who just happened to develop physically later than others, were quickly sidelined. I am not sure how these kinds of experiences provide any useful life lessons, despite ongoing claims and beliefs to the contrary. This reductionistic view of physical exercise and its distorted value systems contributed significantly to me abandoning physical pursuits as soon as I left school. Certainly, nothing about the experience helped me to understand the critical importance of physical exercise and a healthy body to a well-functioning human mind.

As part of our elite schooling, we also had access to limited, extra-curricular activities, though mostly we tried to avoid these as much as possible because, even though they were mandatory, they were accorded little status in the system; we learned quickly only to put effort into those activities that the system rewarded. Real success was measured in academic and sporting performance, so it seemed easiest elsewhere to do only the bare minimum required to avoid unnecessary punishment.

I have engaged in significant introspection in recent years about experiences that I found traumatizing in my youth and how they caused wounds I carried into adulthood. Barring some unpleasant experiences with teachers and bullies in the school and the initial fear that accompanied my departure to boarding school, I do not consider my schooling to have been obviously traumatic in the substantive ways that it has been for many people. I mostly thrived in this schooling environment. I am blessed with a brain that found academic work relatively easy so did not have to work particularly hard to achieve good grades and I had enough sporting talent to be able to hold my own on the rugby and cricket fields, though I never excelled.

I recognize that I was fortunate in this regard compared to many people whose skills and talents were not acknowledged or valued by the schooling system and its narrow definitions of what constitutes success. Coming from a middle-class background, I was also fortunate to have had access to generally competent teachers and world class facilities. This is not the school experience of most of the world's population, though.

Being very young for my class and having come to enjoy my time at boarding school after some early struggles, I elected to stay on at my secondary school after I matriculated, for what was called a post-matric year, in which I studied first-year university courses via correspondence while continuing to enjoy the relative security and predictability of boarding school life. I made the decision primarily because I was not yet sure what I wanted to study at university, and it turned out to be life changing. Amongst the various commercially oriented subjects I chose for study, I also elected to study first-year English. Before the end of that year, I realized that I would be deeply unhappy if I pursued a typical career in business, even though my entire world enabled material, commercial success for privileged young, white, English-speaking men like me. This illustrates just how easily individual decisions taken in a moment can unknowingly change the course of

a person's life, despite all the effort we typically expend on trying to make that course as predictable as possible.

Consequently, on completing my post-matric year, I decided to pursue a humanities degree, majoring in English. I had no idea what career pathway this would lead me down but knew I was much happier studying this than, say, commerce or law. To my surprise and gratitude, my parents did not try to dissuade me from this academic career, instead supporting my decisions and funding my studies. As I matured into my university career, I even came to enjoy the intellectual rigour associated with my university studies and pursued a Master of Arts in Drama and Film, although I was also motivated to do this by the more prosaic determination to avoid being conscripted into national military service (still a requirement for white males under the apartheid system but fortunately dismantled by the time my university studies were completed).

As with my schooling, I have mostly fond memories of my years of higher education as a formative and happily social time in my life, another by-product of an upbringing of privilege. The biggest material problem I encountered was my penchant for drinking too heavily while out socializing, which I enjoyed but was both unhealthy and, as I now realize, a form of suppression of my true personality that enabled me to cope with social situations. This drinking habit was never significant enough to interfere with my studies, so I passed my undergraduate and postgraduate degrees with relative ease.

I am now walking alongside my two sons as they navigate their own educational careers, and little has changed regarding the emphasis. The main difference for them is that, for complex reasons, we moved them from my old, all-boys, secondary boarding school into a co-educational secondary school where they live at home and where the emphasis on academic achievement is even greater (and the status of sporting achievements correspondingly reduced). Otherwise, though the path has been very similar, including the

focus on academic achievements in subjects and content that are depressingly similar to what I studied. They are on track to continue studies at universities after their schooling, both also being blessed with finding academic work relatively easy compared to most of their peers.

The emphasis on academic achievements is even stronger today than when I was young, so the focus of schools has become more heavily skewed towards successfully completing final Grade 12 examinations and securing entry into university, accompanied by ongoing efforts to scare children about the long-lasting negative consequences of ‘failure’ in those examinations. In my schooling, there were at least some spaces in the teaching day for our teachers to go beyond the curriculum and the emphasis on testing and examinations was tolerable; now, the formal prescribed curriculum has become almost sacrosanct in its dominance, while testing and examinations have reached levels that are, in my professional opinion, counter-productive and border on abusive (of both teachers and students), especially when those tests are standardized.

In the context of my life journey, this schooling experience was relevant for multiple reasons. First, it taught me that the conscious, rational mind is really the only important human capability worth developing to secure success in life; even the successful sportsmen at our school knew that sporting prowess was highly unlikely to secure their material future. No attempt was ever made to connect a well-functioning conscious mind to good lifestyle practices such as physical exercise, healthy eating, and sleeping well, let alone to inculcate those practices. Topics such as these found no place in the formal curriculum. Second, it was drummed into us that working hard on these intellectual pursuits and being industrious were virtuous characteristics. While this might not appear problematic, it came with the attendant notion that one’s value and worth should be judged primarily, if not exclusively, by one’s achievements, with the criteria for measuring

success in these achievements set by society not by the individual. This is at odds with the conception of the human being as a Soul, worthy of love and compassion simply by virtue of our existence in the world – and not requiring any external validation of that worth. This social programming becomes so deeply embedded that most people go through their whole lives without ever questioning it; ultimately, it disconnects us from our own humanity and from other people.

Third, it taught me to be competitive and to understand the world as a place of winners and losers, where you do not want to be on the losing side. This is interwoven with perceptions of the world as a place of scarcity and limited opportunity. If there is scarcity, you must compete to secure what you can of the scarce resources and opportunities available. The mindset of scarcity is debilitating on so many levels, leading people into lives focused on endless resource acquisition and fear that the choices they make might lead them into scarcity. That fear often either becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy or propels people into obscene levels of resource consumption/accumulation that reflect a fear of scarcity rather than a deep understanding of what living in abundance really means and what unhealthy behaviours it enables you to release.

Fourth, it taught us that failure is a negative experience, to be avoided to the greatest extent possible, and that its consequences should be feared. This links to the previous lesson, as we learned, falsely, that failure is most likely to lead to closure of opportunities and access to resources. This is so sad given that failure is such a powerful learning experience (I think, for example, of the amazing lessons I learned through my failed marriage). Fifth, we were taught that we were not in control of defining what success meant and how we could achieve it. On every step of the journey, success was defined for us by external forces and rules were prescribed regarding how to attain that success. Not only did those narrow our perceptions of what might be

considered 'success', with very heavy emphasis on academic success as a gateway to career and financial success (and everything else as secondary), it also sought to teach us that the gateway to success is to follow the rules of social institutions and the dictates of the people who control them.

Our education has encouraged us to think of the conscious mind as a powerful analytical tool, where rational thought leads us to make sensible decisions. That might sometimes be true, but the conscious mind has also been key to our physical survival because it is predisposed to focus quickly and exclusively on external circumstances that demand immediate attention, most particularly those that might be threatening to our survival. The more we learned these lessons through our schooling, the more prone we have become to living in a state of ongoing fear and anxiety, with these emotional states activated not just by actual threats (even sometimes relatively minor ones) but also by learned thought processes that have made us worry unduly about future events that either never happen or are much worse in our minds than they are in reality. Once we have been activated in this way, we then erroneously believe that the solution is to use the same conscious, rational mind to think and reason our way out of this fear and anxiety.

I had the blessing of a privileged upbringing, exposure to a relatively benign version of the damaging schooling model I describe above, and supportive parents who, unlike most, facilitated key choices I made to shift my given life trajectory instead of trying to persuade me to conform (as in their support of my choice of university studies). Likewise, I have, more recently, had the resources and time both to explore the limitations of these life lessons and to take steps to actively 'unlearn' them. Sadly, this is not the reality for most humans. Having traversed education systems globally at close quarters through my work, I can say with confidence that the formal education experience is deeply dehumanizing and disempowering for most people who go through it, even if they do not consciously recognize it as such. For those

who do not have the benefit of a loving home environment to help them navigate through it, the consequences will likely be devastating and thus much harder to overcome later in life.

I am disinclined to believe in conspiracies as I have had too much exposure to human systems and seen up close how inept people are at running anything on a large scale for any length of time (which all conspiracies require). However, this system of schooling has, in my opinion, been remarkably successful in helping to trap people in a world of fear and anxiety, with enough of a veneer of respectability to prevent any meaningful resistance to it and to preclude the development of more humane systems of learning that might focus on nurturing and developing the integrated, exquisite learning organisms that we humans are.

The easiest way to manipulate people and feed their unhealthy attachments is to keep them in a state of fear and anxiety! Thus, nation states and their governments, armies and police forces, employers, large corporations, and institutionalized religion all benefit from our current education models and should be expected to work actively to sustain them, whether they do this consciously or not. However, just because these powerful social structures work hard to maintain the status quo, that does not make it good for humanity.

If we really are Souls on a human journey, our commitment should be to learning systems that nurture and develop the integrated learning organism that is our human body/mind, which is purpose-built to enable us to experience and deepen connection to God. Instead, we have evolved education systems that distort and disable this capability, suppressing and disrupting our connection to our Souls and to God, while rewarding behaviours that most typically lead to unhealthy attachments in later life and make us all the more susceptible to powerful forces of manipulation. It strikes me as

especially deeply symbolic of the pervasiveness of this disconnect that we then go onto describe access to this kind of education as a human right.

Into the World of Work

Equipped with these largely unhelpful lessons from my schooling, I made my way into the world of work. My choice of academic studies had set me on a career trajectory that would be quite different from my peers, who typically followed more traditional pathways into the corporate world. I stumbled into my career, being offered a part-time research job at an educational non-governmental organization (NGO) by my supervisor while studying towards my Master of Arts degree. My main motivation for accepting was to earn beer-drinking money; I certainly would have chuckled disbelievingly at the notion that, more than 30 years later, I would still find myself working in the world of education.

I was fortunate to receive this opportunity, especially given my unusual choice of academic studies (a master's degree in Drama and Film is not an obvious trajectory into any kind of career other than academia). The NGO I joined was newly formed, with, as it turned out, a brief to help the government-in-waiting of the African National Congress to plan for the transition from apartheid to democracy in South Africa by exploring large-scale solutions to the country's educational crisis. Apart from being my first serious opportunity to earn money (though I had done my share of waiting tables and working in a video shop), I found myself in the fortunate position of working in a well-placed organization at a time of significant political and social flux in South Africa. This gave me unusually early access, career-wise, to high-level engagements around a national education system, as well as exposure to expert mentors from around the world, who shaped my initial

views on education significantly and introduced me to a global education network that enriched my subsequent professional life and afforded me extraordinary work and travel opportunities.

I was fortunate to have received this unique, life-defining opportunity (another one of those brief moments of serendipity that completely altered my life pathway) and I made the most of it, despite having a strict policy initially of leaving the office at exactly the designated finishing time every day. I absorbed all the knowledge and lessons I could, both from my mentors and my exposure to interesting educational circles, observing and engaging with the many deliberations and debates taking place as the apartheid government gave way to a democratically elected government. I also learned fast about the business side of the enterprise from the NGO's director, learning how to sell time through various kinds of contracts and to ensure that this always covered all the costs of running an organization profitably.

Learning About Education

Early in my career, I asked my director to suggest a good book that would explain to me what constituted good education. I was surprised by her reply that there was no single book that could answer that question. I had no idea that my question would precipitate a career-long voyage of discovery that continues to this day.

I have been afforded a privileged view from which to examine this question in depth during a career of more than 30 years (and still counting). I have been able to examine issues from the perspective of national governments and their development partners across the world, as well as through in-depth working relationships with universities, technical colleges, and schools. I rec-

ognize now why I received the answer I did to my early question. Education is an inordinately complex development sector, where the vested interests of individual learners, their parents, local communities, national governments, and employers are constantly intersecting and colliding. Together with the health sector, it is the social space where contestation about the primacy of these various vested interests is strongest, which also helps to explain why meaningful reform in education systems is so difficult to achieve.

From what I have seen, problems in education reform were unwittingly exacerbated by the growth of faculties of education at universities. Though I have not researched the history in detail, my understanding is that they began with the establishment of chairs in pedagogy or education in the late 19th century. These initially focused on researching education, while the training of teachers took place elsewhere, but their influence over the training of teachers, the curricula used to train teachers, and the policies that govern education systems grew rapidly throughout the 20th century. One of the risks of being in a university is that value is predominantly defined by how much published peer-reviewed research one produces. Consequently, the imperative to produce such research has grown in faculties of education. While some might argue that this is beneficial, I think its main consequence has been to proliferate unnecessarily complicated theories of education and learning, as well as a deluge of so-called scientific research on education that has mostly created confusion in educational decision-making processes and contributed to the growing dysfunctionality of the education systems that I observe in all my work around the world.

My work provided me extraordinary opportunities to explore the severe limitations of education systems that, like the one in which I grew up, focus so exclusively on training the conscious mind and are driven by decision-making that gives credence (at least publicly) only to meeting nonsensical standards of intellectual rigour and so-called evidence-based decision-making. I

see clearly now that any meaningful solutions to education reform lie not in doubling down on these mistakes, but rather in letting go of our attachment to them and returning to a much simpler, more compassionate understanding of humans and how we need to nurture ourselves to learn effectively. Letting go of this attachment will not be meaningful, though, if we do not simultaneously recognize that the human being is an organism exquisitely designed to enable the learning journey of the Soul who occupies it and who coexists inextricably with all of creation.

I have observed repeatedly how much the manipulations of various social interests drive the construction and operation of education systems: governments that seek to control the behaviour of their citizens to maintain control and power; large corporations that seek access to semi-skilled and skilled labour for their commercial enterprises (small employers lack the wherewithal to have any significant influence in this area, though their interests are typically no different); economic and political lobbies that seek to bend public discourse in favour of their world view; development agencies that seek to propagate and maintain a world order that mostly only benefits its creators, while presenting this as philanthropy; wounded teachers and parents who cling onto the idea that the education they experienced must be what will be good for their children and students; and a host of others.

My language above describes these influences in quite negative terms, though many people will argue persuasively that they are positive. Where would human societies be without social order? How will people survive if they cannot earn money? Is it not worthy to spread Western democracy and its capitalist values through education given that it is the political/economic model proven by research to lead fastest to improvements in key indicators of social progress? Do we not need more of the models of education we have, given that we have proven that material life outcomes, again as measured by specific metrics, improve with higher levels of education?

Of course, persuasion through argument is the discourse of the rational mind so it is unsurprising that those who value its primacy would seek to use argument to persuade others that these really are positive influences for humans. As a person who thrived on debate and evidence throughout my career, I fully understand this sentiment, but this also means I have observed enough to know that persuasion has more to do with the skill of the persuader than any essential truth being presented. If one relies on evidence-based decision-making, there is always enough evidence one can find to justify any decision if one is clever enough – and many, compelling ways to persuade others of its veracity if one is sufficiently eloquent and charismatic.

Increasingly, I think the more interesting issue is to consider why a person seeking to persuade another of the correctness of their position feels compelled to engage in this kind of manipulative behaviour. Increasingly, I believe, essential truths are self-evident and so simple that they require no defence or persuasion. Thus, when people are engaged in the art of persuasion, the first issues to understand are why they seek to persuade, why the ideas being presented require persuasion to be compelling, and what the person doing the persuasion stands to gain from it. There might often be good answers to these questions, but the answers might also often raise alarm bells about what is really happening and why.

Work as a Pathway to Anxiety

At the risk of sounding immodest, I have been successful in my career by most typical measures. I developed a reputation for producing high-quality work quickly (and thus at a reasonable cost), managing projects within budget, and meeting deadlines consistently, while also becoming adept at

finding new work to cover my costs. After a period doing this successfully at my first employer, I decided to become a freelance consultant, having tired of the administrative work that went with being employed (which was relatively minor but still felt stifling to me). I then set up my own small business, slowly recruited staff, (mostly through accident rather than by design), and have run a modestly profitable enterprise for over 20 years. I experimented occasionally with growing it, but then opted instead to keep it small, finding that organizational growth dragged me too much into the work of management and away from doing what I found purposeful. Nevertheless, the profits generated have enabled me to live a comfortable, experientially rich life while doing work that I find engaging and about which I am passionate. More recently, changes to the business structure are enabling me to share that wealth more effectively with the team that works with me. My work also enabled me to see the world, taking me to places that many people have never heard of or imagined that they might visit if they had.

However, this success came at a price, as I became the architect of my own anxiety and stress. In my years of education, stresses were the result of externally imposed events like examinations, while, during the early years of my career, my pressures were likewise caused by the expectations of my manager or our clients. As I gradually worked out how to become the master of my own destiny, I also learned to become my own hardest taskmaster, driven to succeed, to deliver professional results, to create a comfortable life for my family as it grew, to pay my employees reliably every month, and to avoid ever having no work to do or money to earn. And the difference then became that I could no longer escape or separate myself from the source of my stress and anxiety as I had been able to do when examinations ended or when I so diligently left the office as soon as my conditions of service said the workday was over.

This work success led me into the darkest period of my life, a time when my ever-growing success created the version of myself of which I am least proud. Having already learned at school how my mastery of language could be used as a defence mechanism when I felt threatened, I combined it with high expectations, impatience, and anger to drive myself further and 'achieve' more. My professional and business acumen meant that I kept finding new and innovative ways to produce better results and take on more work, often obsessively concerned about what has turned out to be an entirely fictitious risk that the work might 'run out' (a mindset of scarcity, if ever there was one).

My business developed in parallel with technology, so we ran it virtually from the outset, helping me to keep costs down and harnessing new technologies as they became available to increase productivity and cut overheads. Much of this enabled what has ultimately become a liberating business model that allows us to focus almost exclusively on doing productive work rather than pointless administration, but I struggled to draw boundaries between my work and the rest of my life, so that it consumed me for a long period. Technology allowed work to find its way into all aspects of my life and my time. This, in turn, shortened my temper and eroded my patience, while I used anger and impatience as manipulative tools to achieve my work goals, persuading myself that the ends justified the means (although truthfully I was also often simply unaware of how unpleasant and bullying I could often be). In parallel, this cycle fed on itself, generating more stress and anxiety, disrupting my sleep further, and making me then more determined to push myself ever harder, thinking that this could alleviate the anxiety. Of course, it never did, as the stress and anxiety all came from inside me, mostly driven by fictional fears.

I know I am not alone in experiencing this kind of self-created trap; it is the focus of so many fictional stories and self-help books, while having been a

topic of conversation with countless friends and acquaintances. I was relatively fortunate, as I do not think my experience of this was nearly as extreme as others I have heard, read about, or observed. How strange though that our upbringing does almost nothing to teach us about these dangers and what we might do to reduce or avoid them – and that we continue to extol as virtues the behaviours and tendencies that lead people down this pathway!

Meditation Provides a Pathway Out

Although it sometimes feels like a curse, I am blessed with an insatiable curiosity to learn about new things and am continually reflecting on how I can improve or optimize my performance. Though I still need to quieten the busy, slavish voice that continually pushes me to ‘improve’ (and deepen my understanding of where that voice comes from), I gained a nagging awareness that my stress levels had become unsustainable, and I needed to find a solution before it became too damaging.

My travels had begun taking me further from home on a more regular basis, and long trips to distant parts of the world provided good solitude and time to reflect. I do not recall how I stumbled upon the concept of meditation but remember clearly being on one of many business trips to Jakarta around 15 years ago when I read a simple guide to starting meditation and decided it might help me tackle my stress and anxiety. I was attracted by the guide’s simplicity, by the fact that it proposed manageable daily sessions of eight minutes each over six weeks, and by its absence of references to spiritual dimensions of meditation (I remained thoroughly grounded in my materialistic, individualistic, agnostic perspective of the world at this time). I was already in good physical shape by this time, so found it a reasonable notion that I should spend time training my mind and not just my body.

The effect was immediate and has become life changing. Instantaneously, I gained the insight that 'I' am not my conscious thoughts and that my thoughts are an eternal stream of chatter that runs constantly (consciously and subconsciously) and trips me up at least as often as it helps me. Where my near-death experiences released me from my fear of the world beyond me, my early experience with meditation showed me a way to release myself from the anxiety and stress I create within myself. Since that time, I have tried to meditate on most days. As I write this, I have just returned to my meditation practice with a beginner's mind to re-learn about it, but with the new vantage point of myself as a Soul on a human journey. I hope to deepen my meditation practice significantly over the next few years as its benefits to my journey of self-discovery are so clear and observable. I also hope to combine this with a more regular yoga practice (having started yoga around three years ago), as I have come to embrace yoga as much as a meditational, energetic, spiritual practice as a physical one.

How can it have taken 40 years for a well-educated, well-connected, well-read person to have discovered something so powerful and transformative? What distorted mental models must I have inherited, learned, and nurtured to have remained oblivious to and ignorant of it, given how long humans have had access to this wisdom? And why did none of my education or early formative experience introduce me to something so useful and practically beneficial?

Like physical exercise and healthy eating, meditation was not something I did for spiritual gain, but, without it, I do not believe that gaining meaningful spiritual awareness would have been possible.

Nurturing My Mind

Meditation introduced me to the powerful ideas that I am not my thoughts and that my brain is not my mind. Very slowly and supported by experiences that life brought my way, it has provided me a growing awareness of just how much the mental models we carry determine our state of mind and how much time we spend nurturing those mental models, even when they harm us. I still consider myself a novice in exploring this, so I have only scratched the surface of what mental models I have buried in my subconscious mind, but my main quest currently is to surface them, explore them, understand them, and work through them to let go of them so that I can become more closely connected with my true essence and thus with God. Several of these mental models are wrapped up in relationships with other people so I will explore those in the next chapter.

Meditation also enabled me to observe that there is much more to my mind's capabilities than my rational, conscious mind; indeed, my conscious thoughts are often the least 'me' part of me. Like my physical body, the mind's full capabilities need regular nourishment and care to thrive. This starts with how we treat our physical body; a healthy mind really does require a healthy body. There is just no doubt that the capacities of my mind are inextricably intertwined with my physical health. If am not eating sensibly and taking regular (but not excessive) exercise, my mental performance suffers.

Also important for me has been the practice of journalling. I began keeping a journal when I was at secondary school, encouraged by an uncle of mine who told me it was an effective way for an aspiring writer to practise his skills. Sadly, I let the practice lapse shortly after leaving school, caught up instead in the social whirlwind of university, then the world of work, and then the domestic experiences of marriage and parenting. Fortunately,

though, around the same time that I began exploring meditation, I picked it up again as a habit on my business travels and still try to write a long-form journal entry at least weekly, though ideally more frequently. Journalling has been an essential technique to draw out and analyse subconscious thought patterns that influence my behaviour and to reflect quietly on how the events of my life are affecting me. I set a loose rule that every entry should be at least three pages long, because I find it is only in longer-form writing that I get past obvious responses to, and interpretations of, events and behaviours to be able to recognize deeper patterns. I cannot readily think of any other way in which I would do this meaningfully.

Following from this, my mental capabilities work best when I can find my way to stillness, something with which I struggle enormously. All my most meaningful insights have come to me not by actively thinking my way to them but by creating enough mental quiet to be able to hear what my intuition is always trying to tell me. As a person who over-thinks everything and has a chronic addiction to ‘being busy’, this is something I am only just beginning to learn how to do – and explains why meditation is so crucial for me. A simple example of this has been in my work life. Every time I have obsessed about an apparent dearth of new business opportunities and how to create them, I have created unnecessary stress for myself and not found solutions. The answers have always come only when I finally ‘give up’ and stop worrying. Like magic, the opportunities literally start presenting themselves within a few days of that happening.

Unfortunately, though, stillness often feels like a scarce commodity, despite the apparent simplicity of accessing it. Our modern world bombards and distracts our minds in the same way that processed foods pollute our bodies – and this is a worsening problem. While I have used information technology to build and run a materially successful business and the same technologies have granted me unlimited access to information that has helped me gain

many of the insights documented in this short book, those same technologies also represent possibly the most comprehensive and sustained attempt yet to manipulate human minds, fragment attention, and foster unhealthy attachments of myriad kinds.

This has happened everywhere to me: mindless scrolling through social media feeds whose algorithms build on knowledge about addictions from the gambling industry; endless access to news articles that remind me how bad life is both where I live and everywhere else; immediate access to emails and other communication that keeps work ever-present in my mind (even when I delete email apps from my phone, I keep reaching for it to check my mail); technology designs that are intended to fragment and disrupt my attention and my ability to concentrate as they compete for our attention; and countless other examples. We delude ourselves that our relationship with these technologies is predominantly productive and that we are in control of it, but I do not believe this. Finding greater stillness in my life and nourishing my mind will require much more purposeful effort to disentangle myself from many deeply unhealthy relationships that I have with these technologies – and I think this is true for all of us.

I am also having to confront my relationship with media, which I find challenging. I have always prided myself on the size and diversity of my music collection and on how many interesting and different movies I have watched. I consider this lifetime love affair with music and movies to be intertwined with my identity and personality and have historically always felt that they have enriched my life. However, as my understanding of myself and my connection to God develops, it is becoming increasingly difficult to pretend that the media to which I expose myself has a mostly positive influence on how my mind functions. If unhealthy food pollutes my body, why would violent movies or aggressive music not have a similar effect on

my mind? Likewise, where is the line between purposeful engagement with media and its mindless consumption?

I like to believe I have made purposeful choices about what I have watched, but recently it has become clear that, more often, I use media to escape my life and this is just another form of distraction or suppression that ultimately leaves me unfulfilled. At the same time, this habit and the ease with which I can now listen to music or watch something anytime or anywhere also encroaches on and removes spaces where I can find stillness, the kind of stillness that will bring me deeper connection with my Soul. The escape provides temporary relief from the material world but also deepens my suffering.

I see parallels between this and physical exercise. Moderate, purposeful media consumption brings richness to my human experience, but excessive consumption brings suppression and disconnection. Likewise, technology companies and purveyors of media have no interest in helping to moderate my consumption; for them, more consumption is better and its negative consequences for our wellbeing is not their concern. Unequivocally, in this example, the manipulations of others become my attachments – and this all accumulates to my detriment over time.

The World of Dreaming

During the travel lockdowns imposed by governments as COVID-19 spread around the world, a benefit of the extended time I spent at home was that I enrolled in a short online course on lucid dreaming. I have always been interested in my dreams and was fascinated by the idea that you can train yourself to be ‘awake’ within your dreams. I have had some occasional

experience with lucid dreaming, but the more substantive outcome of taking the course was that I began keeping a dream journal (and now have a few notebooks filled with my dreams).

I have read quite a few books and articles about dreaming and engaged with various scientific and psychological explanations for dreaming and why we dream. I have found them all interesting and see validity in most, though I am doubtful about the more reductionistic explanations that seek to diminish the mystery of dreaming and propose that it is scientifically understandable. Having now observed the sheer breadth, depth, and intricacy of my dreaming world over more than three years, I am much more comfortable to leave it in the realm of a mystery that need not be known and simply to embrace the experiences of dreaming for what they are. I love the time I spend in my dream world!

Regardless of what the answers might be, I am convinced that dreaming is an essential aspect of our overall mental landscape and has been diminished in our modern worlds to our detriment. I am also clear that my ability to recall my nighttime adventures happens best when I am healthy, my mind is not overly cluttered, and my stress levels are low. When my conscious mind is too busy, I find it harder to remember what I dreamt at night. Because of this, part of me also believes that the world of dreaming does not stop just because we are awake; maybe the dreaming world continues through the day, but our rational, conscious minds are so strong they override our dream recall. I think this is sad because I think dreams can play a critical role in helping us to experience our connection with God.

This, in turn, connects with our sleep and the importance of sleep to our wellbeing. This is now well understood in theory, but lifestyle habits encroach ever more on our ability to sleep properly. The tropes are, by now, familiar: when I eat healthily (and some time before I intend to sleep), take exercise, am less busy with work, do not bombard my mind with digital

media, and can rest in a quiet, cool, dark environment, I will sleep much better – and in turn have much richer engagement with my vibrant, cascading dream worlds.

Chapter Four: Relationships

The World of Relationships

Relationships with other people are central to the human experience, simultaneously an essential aspect of the rich joy of that experience, foundational to how we orient ourselves in the world, and yet also social constructs through which we codify and perpetuate many falsehoods and so much trauma. I left my reflections on relationships until the end partly because relationships are complex and personal and partly because I recognize the ease with which other people in relationships become an excuse for our own behaviour. Discussion of personal relationships also risks encroaching on the privacy of those with whom I have had relationships in my life: family, friends, work colleagues, clients, service providers, and casual acquaintances. In respect for that privacy, I will keep my thoughts on this as general as possible.

Parent and Sibling Relationships

The nuclear family I grew up in comprised my parents and two older brothers. I have already observed that being the youngest of three brothers contributed to a perception of myself as physically weaker than other males. More helpfully for me, though, it meant that my errant behaviour was subject to much less disciplinary consequence than it had done for my brothers; the youngest children do indeed tend to get away with behaviours that parents do not allow for elder siblings. In my case, this relative freedom may have made it easier for me to pursue an alternative life pathway than it had for my brothers (respectively, a doctor and an accountant by profession).

This was, of course, a very male family, a trend that continued when my wife and I had two children, both boys. I occasionally wonder how my life might have differed if I might have had a sister or a daughter. Certainly, the dearth of feminine influence in my life (exacerbated by going through single-sex schools and living in a highly patriarchal country) has meant that, in recent years, I have had to spend a lot of time exploring, and unlearning, many aspects of toxic masculinity and misperceptions about femininity that have pervaded my world view. I have found this process enriching and enabling, and hope that it has helped me to become more connected with my Soul and to show up in the world as a better version of myself.

Key has been to embrace the feminine within myself, understanding now that the masculine and feminine reside in both women and men. Through this process, I have been sad to observe how much modern society, possibly in an effort to support gender equity, elevates and encourages behaviours in women that exhibit the same toxic masculinity that I have been trying to unlearn and, in doing so, undermines and suppresses the true power of the feminine (at least as far as my limited understanding of it extends).

I am well out of my comfort zone in making such observations but my embryonic sense is that much of men's physical and emotional violence towards women is because, having been actively encouraged to suppress their own femininity and to see it as the 'other', they find true femininity so scary and disempowering that they prefer to destroy it than to respect, honour, and defend it. In time, I hope humans, and especially men, will come to recognize again that the real power of humanity lies in embracing the sacred feminine and that masculine energy really exists in our material world to support and defend the flourishing of the sacred feminine. Instead, living in fear of it (as I grew up learning to do), most men and many women still seem intent on destroying true feminine energy, pretending that it is inferior but really being terrified of its full potential. This is such a sad aspect of the world in which we live, as letting go of toxic masculinity and embracing the sacred feminine is the only way to let go of the illusions of fear and scarcity that dominate current world views. This feminine energy is the energy of abundance and of love but cannot thrive without masculine energy honouring and defending it.

Overall, my upbringing was relatively privileged, having had parents who did not physically abuse me, cared for me, supported my life choices, could ensure my material wellbeing without spoiling me, and enabled my independence into adulthood. This means I was not subjected to various kinds of severe childhood trauma that so many people experience. However, this does not mean that my upbringing was free of trauma; childhood trauma and wounding are an intrinsic part of the human journey for us all and, should we choose to, we are all given opportunities to work through those experiences as we reconnect with our Souls. Thus, as I have reviewed my relationships with both my mother and father in recent times, I have focused on exploring how patterns of behaviour are transmitted over multiple generations, becoming stored in us as behaviours and memories (and most

likely in our epigenetics as well) that we pass onto our children, often without even being aware of it.

A striking example of this was when circumstances forced me to engage with why I decided to send my sons to an all-boys' boarding school, which had also been my experience, my father's, and that of my grandfathers. From this long lineage, I had inherited assumptions about this being what was best for boys and simply applied them to my sons without any consideration of their negative aspects. I had not initially thought the experience especially damaging (though I was aware it had been for others), but it drove my construction of perspectives about myself as a male, how males should behave, and my role in the world. These have been, and continue to be, hard to unlearn, so it mildly horrified me to see similar perspectives emerging in my sons as they went into boarding. This mindless transfer of choices and behaviours from one generation to the next is at the heart of many unhealthy behaviours and much social suffering. Conversely, though, when we take the time to see the choices and behaviours for what they are, this is when we can break free from them and prevent their transmission.

Fortunately, I got the opportunity to do just that when it became clear that the boarding school world was simply not working for my eldest son, and instead causing him significant distress and unhappiness. Ultimately, I was forced by this experience to recognize the truth of how unthinkingly I had repeated the choices of my family lineage and passed on all the baggage and wounding that came with that lineage. Though the experience was deeply painful at the time, my son's bravery in renouncing this (which happened viscerally, not intellectually, and came at some personal cost to him) ultimately enabled me to recognize significant weaknesses in my parenting style and radically changed my approach to parenting.

The all-male boarding school experience is one of many mental models that I inherited from my upbringing as a white, English-speaking male growing

up in South Africa. Its grounding in the vestiges of British imperialism prompted me to consider further how inter-generational traumas might have been transferred to me. There are two related aspects to this for me, one connected to British imperialism and one to the apartheid regime. It is hopefully obvious how these two regimes and the broader history of white privilege created violence and trauma, both physical and psychological, for the billions of people of colour on whom they were inflicted. I have no lived experience of that trauma but have seen repeatedly in my work around the world the devastating effect that this continues to have on so many societies as the trauma it caused (and continues to cause) is passed on from one generation to the next.

Less obvious, and riskier to speak about for fear of diminishing the trauma of those on whom imperialism and apartheid were inflicted, is the ongoing trauma that passes on from one generation to the next amongst those of us whose ancestors were guilty of having inflicted these crimes on humanity. One key manifestation of this comes in the form of denial, especially for the subsequent generations that were not directly involved in the crimes themselves but are its material beneficiaries and have also inherited our own inter-generational trauma related to it through our epigenetics and our upbringings. At the heart of this ongoing trauma is our collective denial about the severity of the crimes committed and about the lasting distortions this has created that perpetuate social disadvantage. Those who will not recognize the horror and consequences of such crimes as an essential truth of their current reality will surely be tortured by it and the subconscious guilt that it generates.

I hypothesize that this denial is a key reason why so many white South Africans (and indeed white people around the world) cling so strongly to the idea that Black governments can never be successful (an unspoken racism that is rife in the development community). This myth helps to smooth over

the cognitive dissonance that accompanies such denial, because imposition of tyrannical regimes can then be seen as having been a necessary evil for people incapable of governing themselves. In South Africa, the strength of this belief amongst white people and its ensuing actions to undermine government have played a critical (but by no means exclusive) role in manifesting exactly this failure over time, though we continue to deny this. I have not done any research to determine the validity of this hypothesis, but I knew that, as a white South African, my journey of healing could not commence until I was prepared to confront the truth of what my ancestors did and how it continues to benefit me materially – and then forgive myself and my collective ancestry for what we have done.

Some people might consider it self-indulgent to think that I can forgive myself for this history, that forgiveness needs to be sought from those who have been harmed by these actions – and there is truth in the observation that meaningful apology is important. However, I do not think that I can offer meaningful apology to others without going through an internal process of self-forgiveness (which in turn requires internalized recognition of the effects of those actions). Only this enables me to take sufficiently good care of myself to be able to present myself into the world with love and seek to be of service to others, which is the purest form of apology I can offer. Offering apology for past actions to others without having first engaged in self-forgiveness is just a form of manipulation aimed at making me feel better about myself and gaining me social acceptance, as we have seen from the many hollow apologies offered publicly around the world for historical crimes. My analysis above is likely flawed in many respects but I hope it illustrates that we can only heal wounds of this nature if we are willing to confront fully the inter-generational traumas we inherit and grow up with, especially the less obvious ones, as well as reflecting on how they have wounded us.

Introspection of this kind has helped me to understand myself better and to reflect on the many mental and social constructs I have inherited from my family upbringing, the distorted lenses through which I view my life, and the false assumptions and attachments that, often subconsciously, affect my choices. A few other examples include: the belief that my value as a human being is determined by my achievements and a related belief that there is inherent value in ‘working hard’; difficulty showing emotions and vulnerability publicly, perceiving these as signs of weakness (a dual function of growing up male and having a British heritage); and a view that the needs of others are more important than my own needs. Exploring these kinds of mental constructs and how they govern my behaviour has been both empowering and liberating.

The modern world tends to have a reductionistic view of parent and sibling relationships, reducing them to caricatures and encouraging people to cling onto them even when they have been deeply damaging. This is both unhelpful and unhealthy. However, they are seminal relationships in the formation of our identities and beliefs, so worthy of deep review and reflection if we are truly interested in deepening connection with our Souls. This can be healing and might also lead to healthier relationships with our parents and siblings over time.

Romantic Relationships

I have had several romantic relationships in my life. I feel deeply blessed in my current relationship, which has been seminal in shaping many of the insights I have been sharing in this short book. This is very much because of Venessa herself, the special and unique woman with whom I share this relationship, but it is also because many dimensions of the human experience

can only be experienced through close relationships (though not exclusively romantic ones, of course). After my divorce, I learned much from, and enjoyed, being on my own for a period and needed this time to come to know myself properly, having never lived alone before then. But being on my own also had limits. In my relationship with Venessa, I have both a lifetime companion and my spiritual guide, whose insights shape my world view in often surprising ways. In return, I hope I make her material world, for so long made threatening by the male presence, feel a little safer and more stable than it has until now.

Through this relationship and its early challenges, I gained a seminal insight that so much of what our world identifies, embraces, and values as loving behaviours are actually manipulative actions that we take to fulfil unmet needs in ourselves, needs that can in truth only ever be met by us learning to love ourselves. So often, early in our relationship, I did things that I thought were loving and found myself surprised when Venessa found them alienating. This happened several times before I worked out that the reason was that, even when I thought I was being selfless, the actions Venessa found alienating were this way because, often only subconsciously, I expected something in return. This was often very subtle, but Venessa is highly attuned to manipulative behaviour and always immediately felt it instinctively, withdrawing from me and leaving me (often literally) to reflect on and finally understand why it had been so.

Through this process, I came to learn practically what is wrong about how romantic love is conceptualized, presented, and valorized in society, in our upbringings, and in the fictional narratives of most love stories. In truth, until we have learned to love ourselves and take responsibility for meeting our own needs, we will never truly be able to show real, unconditional love in any relationship. Misunderstanding this is at the heart of so much dysfunctionality in romantic relationships, locking people into cycles of co-depend-

dent behaviour in which they, usually inadvertently and subconsciously, seek to meet their unfulfilled needs and tend their emotional wounds through their partners rather than recognizing that those needs can only ever be met within ourselves. Thus, we talk of our partners as our 'better halves' or the ones who 'complete us', not recognizing both how co-dependent such characterizations are and how they diminish the wholeness that already is within us.

Looking further back, my ex-wife, Shelley, and I got married after having lived together for a few years, as well as having dated for some years before that. Moving in together was largely a practical decision, taken because my parents decided to scale down their lives into a smaller house that did not accommodate us (by that stage, Shelley was spending most of her time at our house). It was always a tumultuous relationship, populated by two strong-willed people struggling to grapple with their own issues and lacking many of the emotional tools needed to build effective relationships. Moving out of our parents' houses into co-habitation gave us no serious time to learn about ourselves first. I do not speak on Shelley's behalf, but, for me, the truth was that I was afraid of living alone – and maybe did not feel like I could cope effectively (it turns out I was wrong about that). I was also deeply conditioned into believing that the natural state of human existence was for a man and a woman to share a life together in marriage, and therefore that anything other than that very traditional arrangement represented a social and personal failure.

There are many reasons why my marriage ended, to which both Shelley and I most likely contributed in equal measure. Fundamental, though, at least from my perspective, was that I occupied a deeply co-dependent relational space in which most of my actions (even the ones I considered most loving and generous) were manipulative ones through which I unknowingly sought to fulfil my own need to feel loved and appreciated. This need went deeply

back into my childhood, which made it hard for me to see it for what it was. Consequently, I often felt frustrated and betrayed that my wife was not able to meet my emotional needs, placing an unfair and impossible burden of responsibility on her for issues that could never have been hers to resolve.

It can be very hard to detect such behaviours as manipulative because the social discourse around romantic love idealizes mutually co-dependent acts of lovers sacrificing their own needs for the needs of their partners, in the hope that this will persuade their partner to do likewise. In such circumstances, even where one's partner might feel consciously grateful for the 'love' being shown (typically because they are similarly looking for their needs to be met through their partner or have bought into the myth that such actions are evidence of real love), our Souls know that this is manipulation and not love, so this kind of co-dependence is always unfulfilling. Sadly, it is rife in relationships of all kinds.

Because I had grown up in a world where marriage is considered a lifetime vow, it never occurred to me that the healthiest solution might be for us to separate. Instead, I doubled down on two behaviours of the Wounded Self. First was suppression and avoidance, which took the form of extensive travel, long work hours, and endurance exercise in my case. Second, was yet more co-dependent manipulation, trying to persuade Shelley to work with me to 'fix' our marriage. Fortunately for us both, she was less attached to the belief that marriage had to be a lifetime commitment, so, after many years of living together, she finally initiated the hard process of divorce. She was in another romantic relationship by then, which undoubtedly made the decision less scary for her. I initially resisted, trying even harder to 'fix' our problems and get her to do the same. She remained resolute though and, in doing so, gave me, in divorce, what turned out to be another of my greatest gifts in life: the space and time to learn what I needed to do to connect with and heal myself, which I continue to do every day.

When we separated, I lived by myself for the first time in my life, having earlier moved out of my parent's home straight into an apartment with Shelley. I quickly found living on my own liberating and empowering, coming to recognize how our co-dependent relationship had stifled my own personal growth and led me to avoid real engagement with myself and my wounding. I began an intense new relationship some months after divorce, which started in a whirlwind but quickly began manifesting similar patterns of co-dependence despite my new partner having a completely different personality from my ex-wife. This repetition of relational patterns finally enabled me to work out that the challenges in my romantic relationships lay within myself (and had also done so in relationships that preceded my marriage). This clearly indicated that working on them would take much longer than I had assumed.

As it turned out, it required three years of internal work before I was ready for another romantic relationship, a period for which I am deeply grateful. I rebuilt friendships, took time in my life to pursue passions, and developed stronger relationships with my sons by functioning as a single father with whom they lived half the time. During this period, the work I did readied me to meet Venessa. I had dated a few other women in the weeks before I met her but knew immediately on meeting her that I wanted to be in a long-term relationship with her. She embodies everything that is precious about femininity to me and makes me aspire to be the best possible version of myself that I can be every day.

Critically, as it turns out, she is also a woman who is literally incapable of staying in any kind of co-dependent relational space. This inability is not intellectual nor is it asserted or demanded. It simply manifests as soon as I begin engaging in any kind of co-dependent behaviour (which I often erroneously perceive to be an expression of love), as Venessa simply evaporates from my life when I do that, leaving me to work out, once I have stopped

feeling aggrieved, how my actions have made her feel manipulated rather than loved. This was initially difficult but has ultimately been tremendously rewarding and transformative in my life; without it, none of my subsequent journey would have been possible.

All my romantic relationships have served a critical purpose of teaching me that I am the only one who can be responsible for meeting my needs. Attempts to make others responsible for meeting my needs are actions of my Wounded Self, can never meet my needs meaningfully, and undermine the quality of all relationships. I have then also learned that true expressions of unconditional love in romantic relationships – indeed, in any relationships – are not possible until one has accepted and internalized this responsibility. For the rest, I am still learning as best I can.

Relationships with Children

I currently have two teenage sons and am truly proud to be watching them gradually become independent young men. As one can see from social media feeds, many people believe that their status as parents entitles them to share intimate and private details about their children publicly. I think this is disrespectful and often symptomatic of a deeper problem that many adults do not conceptualize children either as equals or as fully formed human beings. We need no clearer understanding of this than to observe the almost complete lack of agency that children have during their schooling careers. Both my sons are close to the end of their schooling career, and the best I can hope for is that they will successfully meet the gatekeeping requirements imposed on them by society through schools with a minimum of damage and wounding. Most children are not so lucky and carry wounds inflicted by schooling deep into adulthood, often not even recognizing these as wounds

and thus perpetuating the cycle of abuse that these institutions inflict. I generalize here, of course, for dramatic effect, but I am very confident from my professional experience that my observations about the negative effects of schooling are broadly correct – and am happy to engage anyone who feels otherwise.

To respect the privacy of my children, I will not go into details of the many varied, rich, sometimes painful, but always rewarding experiences that have come from being a parent. Instead, I will simply make two general insights that I have gained from parenting:

1. In the first instance, children are sent to parents to help the parents let go of beliefs and attachments that no longer serve them, rather than for parents to help the children. I have tried to explore many of the false beliefs and unhealthy attachments that I have accumulated in different ways. The experience of parenting has been a key driver in surfacing and releasing these. I have no idea how effectively I have done this, but I think this is fundamental to good parenting, because if we do not embrace the opportunity for learning that our children provide, we are destined to pass our false beliefs and attachments onto them, which is antithetical to being a good parent and an adult role model. It also prevents us from finding deeper connection with our own Souls through our parenting experiences.
2. The more attached we become to our children and to the outcome of their lives, the less likely we are to let go of our own unhealthy attachments and the more likely we are to prevent our children from fulfilling their true potential. As Kahlil Gibran wrote:

Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself. They come through you but not from you, And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.

Whenever I have become most engaged in trying to engineer a particular outcome for my children, I have been at my worst as a parent. Conversely, when I have recognized the truth of Gibran's words and allowed my children to define their own pathway, that is when they have thrived. Very usefully, this lesson can be transferred into all aspects of our lives, illustrating as it does how damaging attachment to specific outcomes can become, both for ourselves and those close to us.

If I had one wish, it would be that I had worked out much earlier that our children will, in the long run, only do what we do and not what we say. In earlier years of parenting, I subscribed to the notion that I should be actively involved in telling my children what to do and what was good for them, rather than demonstrating it through my own behaviours. So, for example, when we tell our children that they should live healthy lifestyles, but then drink excessively in social situations (as I used to do), we should not be surprised when the main habit they learn from us is excessive alcohol consumption. Likewise, when we tell them to treat other people with respect but are then rude, abrupt, and quick to anger with people in the service industry (as I routinely was), we must expect them to remember our behaviours not our words.

In my case, the main area where I struggled with this was in how I treated women. While I paid lip service to the importance of treating women with respect (and often thought I was doing a good job of it), the simple truth is that what my sons saw of how I treated their mother was very poor role modelling. At the time, I may have believed that all the different kinds of manipulative behaviours in which I engaged were how a responsible husband and father should behave, but they simply showed no serious respect for women and are a by-product of many centuries of patriarchy that defines very specific social roles for them. I had no real notion of how to listen or even how to show up in relational spaces with gentleness or respect. I

am still trying to learn how to do this now, but I do think I have at least understood better what I should aspire towards and have tried to model this more effectively (as well as drawing attention in my sons to how so much of what I did in my past was poor role modelling).

I hope my own self-awareness has helped to make me a more compassionate, caring, and supportive father than I was initially. My sons' journey is a long one ahead, so I recognize that my impact will ultimately be limited overall, though I hope it has mostly been constructive, open, and transparent. All I know for sure is that, without some of the specific challenges that we have had to work through together, critical aspects of my life journey simply could not have happened and there are several unhelpful mental frameworks and behaviours that I would still not have let go of yet.

Relationships with Friends

I have been blessed with a few healthy, close relationships with friends throughout my life, as well as with many more friendships over time. Friendships came and went for many different reasons, the hardest of which was when my closest friend from school and into university died of cancer in his early 20s. In other cases, relationships ended as our respective life circumstances changed, for example, when I moved from primary school to secondary school and lost contact with all my friends, and again with my move to university when something similar happened. My network of friends was very large when I was at university and at my most social, and I have many memories of enjoyable times spent in the company of people I liked and appreciated. With hindsight, many were not healthy relationships given the kinds of behaviours they brought out of me and reinforced, but I learned from all of them and cannot think of any that I seriously regret.

I learned early on through these experiences that friendships, even the longest-lasting, are always transitory in nature, to be treasured while they last and not to be clung onto or mourned when they end. Friendships come into our lives to bring us joy through companionship, but also to teach us lessons should we be willing to learn. In addition to Venessa, I now have a very small circle of friends. My closest friendship is one that has endured for nearly 20 years, forged through a mutual love for doing exercise and successful because it is grounded in mutual respect, flexibility, lack of expectation, and a willingness by both of us to hold space for each other without judgement. One relationship like this exceeds the value of any number of relationships based on lesser foundations. It also demonstrates to me that nourishment comes from many varied, kinds of relationships not just from the singular romantic relationships on which nuclear families are supposed to be founded. No matter what happens in this friendship in future, I will always feel blessed to have experienced this kind of close and abiding friendship.

Employment Relationships

I have experienced the relationship of employment in all its guises: part-time employee, full-time employee, independent contractor, employer, and client. These have all come with their challenges, often significant and intense, but ultimately have always been rewarding. I enjoyed a happy and supportive working environment when I first became a full-time employee, being afforded extraordinary opportunities for personal growth and development – and I made the most of these. Despite this, I felt encumbered and constrained by being employed and by the rules and restrictions that come with that status (and, I hasten to add, I experienced a benign version of employment). Consequently, I set out on my own, first as a freelance consultant

and soon thereafter as an employer. This brought many new stresses but has ultimately afforded me a sense of freedom and agency that I cannot imagine trading to return to employment, no matter how enticing the material rewards of the latter might appear.

Being an employer of other people, though, introduces a dilemma because relationships of employment quickly risk sliding into co-dependence. Assuming I can run a successful business, I will earn more money from having employees than not having them, while they depend on the employment relationship for their livelihood. I tried always to discharge the responsibility of being an employer with integrity, paying people well, minimizing the administrative burden of belonging to an organization, instituting strategies to share some of the profits of our work, and trying to be more attentive to my employees' needs than to the demands of our clients.

Often though, especially in our early years, I took out much of the stress of running the organization successfully on my employees, being quick to anger, having very high expectations, and talking to people in ways that I now recognize as unacceptable. As I went through some of my other life journeys, I gradually learned to moderate and improve these behaviours, with the result that I enjoyed very long working relationships with a small team of colleagues.

This longevity, though, also fostered the unhealthy co-dependence I describe above, so my focus more recently has been to find ways to break it without ending the relationships (though, in one case, the shifts led to the end of just such a relationship). I have done this by transferring ownership of the organization to two of my former employees, to demonstrate symbolically that I no longer consider myself the owner or their employer. I have then extended our profit-share scheme to enable more equitable distribution of all the profits, rather than just a percentage share. This step was harder than changing the ownership structure, as I had become attached to the financial

benefits accruing from our profits but it was a good exercise in learning that the universe is indeed characterized by abundance if you trust it to provide. Lastly and most importantly, I have actively tried to break down the notion that I am the centre of the organization or responsible for its survival.

This is still a work in progress but is yielding extraordinary results. I always had an aversion to micro-managing people, which was fortunate given that we run a virtual office, so it was relatively easy for people to become even more responsible for the work they do and for securing new work to keep the organization sustainable. Harder, though, has been to break the tendency of everyone (including me) to defer to my needs as the most important. However, as this happens, it is empowering people and making me gradually less important to the wellbeing of the organization. Observing these shifts and the positive effects they have in people's lives as they slowly gain a fuller sense of agency is very rewarding.

Chapter Five: Death

Death is with us from the moment we are born, in our own mortality, the mortality of the people and pets that are precious to us, and in the stories we are told about its meaning. My first substantive encounters with it were the stories. As a person with a Christian upbringing, these started with stories of eternal life after death, heaven for the righteous and hell for the sinners. Quite literally, this story was designed to instill the fear of God in us. However, my upbringing was also quite secular in many respects, so that story was soon supplemented by the more materialistic, separated story of self in which death is the end of our existence. Although this narrative is less dramatic than one that introduces the possibility of eternal damnation, it nevertheless retains the general sense that death is something to be feared.

Though I have not thought much about my death throughout my life, this inherited notion that death is an experience to be feared, and thus anything that risks death should be avoided, has been with me most of my life. Death is indeed a shocking experience. I was mortified by the death of my closest friend when I was a young man; I found my own near-death

experiences deeply traumatic; and I was truly horrified by the experience of someone dying alongside me while we were running. I was less shocked by my father's death, as it had been coming for a while and that experience was thus imbued with a sense of gratitude that his death brought an end to a relatively short period of suffering through illness. I find it very sad that so many dying people are subjected to unnecessary suffering because our social fear of death propels us to find ways to keep people alive regardless of how painful that might be for them.

My father's death precipitated a long process of introspection and transformation. It directly influenced choices that led to me meeting Venessa and it also initiated ongoing reflection regarding the purpose of my own life. I recall my father saying not long before he died that the only life purpose he understood was being of service to others. However, I had also observed how he frequently sacrificed his own wellbeing to help others, a behavioural trait that may well have contributed to him dying at the relatively young age of 76, beset by diseases caused by years of stress and corresponding poor lifestyle choices (especially regarding eating and exercise).

That period of introspection, building on practices I had accumulated through my life, enabled me to gain the insight that I mapped out in Chapter One, that everything begins and ends with God and that, as Souls on a human journey, we are part of God. This insight, in turn, enabled a complete reconceptualization of my understanding of death. If we are Souls on a human journey and the purpose of that journey is to find our way back to connection with God through deep connection with our Souls, then death is not something to be feared. Rather, it represents the culmination of that journey, when our energetic Soul is released from its physical receptacle – our human body – back into the universe.

Perceived this way, death becomes aspirational, not in the sense that it is something we should actively seek but rather in the sense that we should

aspire to prepare ourselves through our lives to enable that energetic release to be an experience of unconditional love and peace, so that the energy released into the universe integrates with God in as close to a state of unconditional love as possible. This has led me to state that my goal for the second half of my life is to embark on a 40-year programme of preparation of death.

Of course, as I have learned repeatedly, we can never know when death will come to our physical bodies, but that does not prevent us from preparing for it wisely. As importantly, the simple steps we can take to prepare for a peaceful, loving energetic release of our Souls on death will simultaneously make our human lives more fulfilling. In summary, these include:

1. Taking good care of my body, through healthy eating, nurturing physical exercise, and good sleep.
2. Cultivating the full capability of my mind, which, in addition to taking care of my body, for me includes deepening meditation practices, regular journalling, good sleep habits, and awareness about the many distractions and information clutter that I allow into my life.
3. Understanding and releasing the many, ongoing ways in which my Wounded Self seeks to manipulate other people's behaviour either as a defence mechanism or to feed some wounding in myself. This also helps me to perceive how other people might, for similar reasons, seek to manipulate me into behaviours that do not resonate with my Soul (though they could resonate with my Wounded Self). This might include family members, lovers, close friends, work colleagues, governments, religious institutions, and commercial corporations, amongst others. At all levels, this helps to shift me out of co-dependent relationships, either reconfiguring them by drawing healthy boundaries or withdrawing from them.
4. Releasing the many attachments that I have accumulated during my life so far, including attachments to material possessions, mindless con-

sumption, bad habits, and co-dependent relationships, amongst others. Letting go of these attachments does not necessarily mean giving everything up, but often entails reconfiguring the nature of my relationship with the attachment. For example, physical exercise can be a healthy practice but can also become an unhealthy attachment linked to avoidance or suppression.

5. Using the above actions as consistently as possible to take responsibility for my own needs so that I do not try to make this anyone else's responsibility. This is a work in progress, and I still have much to learn. The challenges of life often make it hard to stick to healthy lifestyle practices, even when I know they benefit me. Likewise, every time I think I have a handle on how my life experiences have generated attachments, I keep finding additional attachments to release. Releasing attachments is sometimes painful, especially when they have existed for many years and been largely subconscious. Even when it is difficult, though, the result is always liberating and leaves me feeling more closely connected to my Soul.

Taking these actions as consistently as possible improves my ability to present myself in the world able to show unconditional love to others. When I can do this, then I am truly able to be of service to others. Like my father did, and all religious texts I have read teach, I do believe that being of service is the only fulfilling way to live. Unlike my father (I think), I also believe that I cannot be of meaningful service to anyone else unless I first commit to taking care of myself, as this is a prerequisite for true service. If my acts of service are burdened by my own wounds and attachments, they will end up being acts of manipulation that feed needs of my Wounded Self rather than being acts grounded in unconditional love.

None of this is easy, and I still have much to learn about myself and the journey I am on. Every day brings new insights, new challenges, and new

breakthroughs. I am convinced, though, that committing myself to preparation for peaceful death and the release of my Soul back to God in a state of unconditional love is profoundly important and enriches my life immeasurably. To those who view it as macabre, I can only observe that it makes me feel more alive than I have ever felt before. And for those who view it as unprovable, religious, or spiritual mumbo-jumbo, I hope that their world view brings them their own opportunities to find purpose and peace in their lives.

For, whether we remember it or not, we are all beings created out of unconditional love and finding our way back to unconditional love is surely a journey worth taking.

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