

Y8 – Your Choices & Changes

Dear: Provided you take reasonable care for your health and safety, your opportunities are astounding: you could be an archeologist, architect, or assassin (!), a ballerina, botanist, or burglar... whatever! Yet, to realize any such potential, almost certainly you'll need to work hard and persevere – and probably you'll need a fair amount of good luck. And yes, I realize that contrary to common misconceptions, such an array of choices isn't necessarily invigorating: the reality is that associated decisions can be painful.

Decisions can be painful, because we can envision potential consequences. In fact, it can be painful even if we attempt to avoid making decisions and even if we neither foresee the consequences nor acknowledge that consequences follow from our decisions. Thus, if you decide to continue in the religion of your childhood indoctrination, then literally thousands if not millions of consequences will follow. On the other hand, if you decide to abandon your childhood indoctrination, literally thousands if not millions of consequences will follow. And guess who has no option other than to choose – and therefore, to cause all those consequences!

At times, you may want to adopt the attitude that my daughter would express to me when she was young: “Whadda I know about that; I’m just a kid?” Probably all of us, sometime or another, wish that someone else would take the responsibility for at least some of our decisions. In the limit, it’s as Eric Hoffer wrote in his book *The True Believer*:

People whose lives are barren and insecure seem to show a greater willingness to obey than people who are self-sufficient and self-confident. To the frustrated, freedom from responsibility is more attractive than freedom from restraint. They are eager to barter their independence for relief of the burdens of willing, deciding, and being responsible for inevitable failure. They willingly abdicate the directing of their lives to those who want to plan, command, and shoulder all responsibility.

Based on my experience with you, however, I’m sure you’ll want to make your own decisions. In fact, Dear, once you’re on your own, no such option is available: even if you decide to give someone the authority to make your decisions for you (so that you can then claim that you’re no longer “on your own”), such a decision was your responsibility – and so are all its consequences. Welcome to adulthood, kid!

Alternatively, faced with a decision, you might decide not to think about it. For example, faced with the decision of whether to continue with or to abandon your religious indoctrination, you may decide just to dismiss the quandary from your mind. You decide not to think about it; you decide that you'll decide "when you're older." Sorry, Dear, but not only won't that work, it's probably the worst possible decision.

It won't work, Dear, because already your decision not to decide is a decision – with its own set of unavoidable consequences. Further, your decision not to think about your decision is probably the worst possible decision, because you thereby abandon what most makes you human: sheep on their way to be slaughtered don't think of consequences of their decision to do what the shepherd wants (at least "the humanity in us" hopes that they don't foresee the painful consequences of their decision to obey!), but what makes you human, Dear, is your ability to foresee the consequences.

You have to make a fundamental choice: whether to think as others want you to think or to think for yourself; whether to be a follower or a thinker. And you must choose, Dear, because the two options are incompatible. Thereby, again the immorality of all organized religions is apparent: to promote people to obey rather than to think, to guide people to "have faith" rather than to evaluate ideas against relevant data, and "to believe what might be" rather than "to become what they could be". Thereby, religious people become automatons, "programmed" by their controllers. In general, choosing to avoid a decision is the dumbest possible decision – suitable only for animals on their way to be slaughtered.

Thus, Dear, you must make a decision about your belief in God. You think you can avoid such a decision? Nice try, kid – but it can't be done. "Sure it can," responded the skeptical grandchild, "I ain't gonna think about it!" "Riiiiiiight," drawled the grandfather, "you think that, thereby, you haven't made a choice, but in fact you have – and furthermore, your decision is exactly what your mother and the clerics desire: on the matter of God, your choice is not to think." "Fine," the grandchild concluded, "I'll think about it – and decide – when I'm older." "Riiiiiiight," replied the grandfather, "and yet, when you were four, you told me that you were 'already older' – so tell me, little one, when do you figure you'll be old enough to start thinking?"

And I would agree if you argued: part of the difficulty of making decisions is one's aversion to causing other people pain. In particular, when you reject hypotheses that neither summarize data nor provide predictions that can be tested experimentally, then simultaneously, you can be rejecting ideas held by someone else, which can be stressful. For example, if someone emotionally close to you "believes" that "All invisible flying elephants are pink" or "You possess an immortal soul" or "Jesus was the son of God" or "If you don't believe that God exists, then when you die, you'll go to hell", and if you reject such ideas and thereby reject the "beliefs" of someone close to you, then that someone may feel real pain.

But, Dear, although I would agree that a good general principle, dealing with difficult decisions, is to try to follow the Hippocratic motto, "First, do no harm", sometimes it can't be avoided – if you abide by the higher moral principle of using your brain as best you can. For example, if you choose to reject belief in God and if present trends continue, then your decision may hurt your mother and your other grandparents. On the other hand, if you choose to believe in God, then I know of another set of your grandparents who will be rather disappointed to see you thereby damage yourself.

From all of which, Dear, one thing that you might want to learn is the lyrics of a song by Ricky Nelson (someone long before your time!), that included something close to: "You can't please everyone, so you've got to please yourself." Put differently, Dear, look at it this way: it's not your decision about God that will hurt others; it's their own ideas that will hurt them. Meanwhile, you're not responsible for other people's ideas (save, in some respects, for your children's) – only for your own.

When your grandmother and I made similar decisions to reject "the god idea", over our parents' objections (for me it was with my mother, and for your grandmother it was with her father), we (separately) chose a "belligerent approach" – although we tried not to be too belligerent! I remember when I was about 40 that my mother was still "bugging me" that I should attend church, to which I recall responding (I hope not stimulating too much pain for her): "Mom, I attend my church at least 10 hours per day, 7 days every week." [I was referring to how hard I was working on science]. Not understanding what I meant, she responded: "Oh my goodness; maybe that's too much." And maybe it was! I heard one of your uncles (your mother's brother) was even more belligerent in his attitude, blurting out to his mother: "How can you be so stupid?"

In some cases, however, other options are available that you might want to consider (besides the above-illustrated “belligerent” approach). One option is to try to keep your decision private – although be careful, because thereby, you may violate the strong recommendation to share your ideas with others! But if you choose to keep your decision about religion private (not out of fear of being exposed as a fool, but in hopes of causing others less harm), then if asked, you can tell your mother (and, as appropriate, her parents, other relatives, friends, and so on) just that you’ve made your decision. If you’re then asked to describe your decision, you can respond something similar to: “I’ve decided that my decision should be private.” If your mother and her parents press you for details, you might want to remind them that Jesus advised that a person’s religion should be kept private.¹

Such an option is available, however, only if your decision is of a certain type. If, instead, you decide to be a “practicing” whatever (Mormon, Catholic, Buddhist, Taoist...), and if that “practice” (you’ll get it right, some day!) includes making “a show” of your religion, then obviously your decision will be apparent to all. Alternatively, if your decision is to abandon your indoctrination, then what you might want to consider saying, especially to your mother, something similar to the following: “Mom: I’ve decided to become a humanist, guided by the love that you taught me and showed me. If you want me to attend Church with you, I will. But I’ll attend not to show my love for the clerics’ Jesus, but to demonstrate my love for you. If it gives you pleasure that I attend with you, then that will make me happy.”

That is, Dear, I’d caution you against saying to your mother that she’s immoral or stupid or similar. Such would be unkind (and pointlessly so), since such statements would almost certainly stimulate undesirable emotions in your mother. Instead, if ever you are so inclined, say what you really mean, i.e., something similar to: “Mother, from my perspective, it’s not clear that you’ve taken into account all appropriate data, and perhaps you’ve given too much credence to untested and in some cases untestable speculations.”

¹ You can see this, for example, in *Matthew 6*, and in the corresponding statements copied into the Book of Mormon: “Be careful not to make a show of your religion... if you do, no reward awaits you in your Father’s house in heaven.”

Another reason that people avoid decisions is fear of associated changes, and undoubtedly, such fear is sometimes appropriate. For example, if a Muslim in Mozambique considers abandoning Islam (where ‘Islam’ means ‘surrender’ – and that means ‘surrender’ to the clerics, not to Allah, because recently I talked to Allah, and she insisted that she never wanted people to surrender their sovereignty to anyone!), then certainly a impediment to a such a change is the threat of being murdered for being an “unbeliever”. But for societies such as ours, with a little more light shining through clerical darkness, reasons for continuing some affiliations and abandoning others are usually less dramatic. Thus, if you choose to abandon Mormonism (which, from stories on the internet, e.g., at <http://www.exmormon.org/> and <http://ex-mormons.com/>, apparently can be quite traumatic), then probably the most significant repercussion that you’ll experience is the loss of most if not all of your Mormon “friends”.

On the other hand, Dear, you’d be well advised to get used to change, since everything does change: the weather changes, climate changes, the Earth changes, stars change, even the universe changes. Further, people change and their ideas change. History is a record of change. Actually, a compelling case could be made for the claim that the fundamental observation of reality is that “energy changes”, and maybe the fundamental generalization is that “everything changes”. As Heraclitus said, ~2500 years ago: “All is flux; nothing stays still; nothing endures but change.” Granted that the “time scales” for changes can be dramatically different (from picoseconds and less for energy transformations by electrons, to billions of years for major transformations of stars), but I can’t think of anything external to people’s minds that doesn’t change.

Yet, obviously many ideas don’t change: Shakespeare’s question, “To be or not to be...” hasn’t changed, and “Ouch!” probably means exactly the same today as it did when the first person exclaimed it! Further, there’s no doubt that a major appeal of science is the potential discovery of “unchanging laws” (or better, “principles”): Newton’s principles of mechanics (if interpreted relativistically) may be one example; the second principle of thermodynamics seems to be another (and even the first principle of thermodynamics, if interpreted relativistically, may be another); Einstein’s $E = mc^2$ seems to be another, and so on.

And I admit that it can be somewhat stimulating (and sometimes maybe saddening) to realize that most of what each of us considers as “the real me”

* Go to other chapters *via*

doesn't change: our bodies certainly change, but probably most of us think that much of what we think doesn't change. Nonetheless, many of our ideas do change – and some, quite dramatically. In fact, as we gain more experience with reality, major changes occur not only in what we think but even in how we think. Such changes (in our thoughts and in how we think) occur as a part of making the transition from being a child to becoming an adult, which leads me to want to tie up some more “loose ends”, namely, those dealing with changes.

Let me start where I left something dangling. In **T2** (dealing with “Truth and Understanding”), I stated:

In the **Y**-chapters, which focus on You, I'll return to the challenge of change; in particular, the challenge that you'll need to face to accept change, overcoming feelings that can range from timidity to terror. Here, I'll just summarize with the recommendations: whereas change is inevitable, work with it, welcome it, go with the flow. In contrast, religious people fear change; therefore, they cling to the only thing that's changeless: fictitious stories and word games.

Thereby, I already tied up the loose end – but neglected to include anything in the package! So, let me try to remedy my omissions, starting with some comments about changes in the way we think, i.e., in our “cognitive development”.

Now, Dear, maybe my daughter is partially correct: maybe I'm a bit weird. But I'd label you “even weirder” if you think that, this late in the book, I'm gonna go into details about “cognitive development”! It's a huge field of study (complete with its own specialists, professional societies, and journals). If the subject interests you, you might want to get your Ph.D. in the field (e.g., in “Cognitive Psychology”). My plans, instead, are just to quote a few of the (huge number of!) internet sites devoted to the subject.

The first quotation, below,² is from a page of the PBS's series “A Science Odyssey – People and Discoveries” devoted to Jean Piaget, who was essentially the founder of the field of study of “cognitive development” – well, at least the founder other than all the mothers who ever lived!

² From <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aso/databank/entries/dh23pi.html>, and to which I've added a couple of notes in square brackets.

Jean Piaget (1896–1980) always considered himself a natural scientist, not a psychologist. As a boy he quickly gave up play and pretend to take refuge in “work” – exploring internal combustion engines, studying fossils, shells, and birds. “I have always detested any departure from reality, an attitude which I relate to my mother’s poor mental health,” he recalled.

Strangely enough, after his successful undergraduate and graduate studies concentrating on mollusks, he began to work with children and did so for the rest of his life. His godfather had introduced him to philosophy and he found it so compelling that he decided, “to consecrate my life to the biological explanation of knowledge.”

After his education in Switzerland, he worked in France for Théodore Simon, Alfred Binet’s collaborator, where he helped standardize tests for gauging the reasoning abilities of five- to eight-year-old Parisians. He was fascinated with finding that at a certain age, children could solve a particular reasoning problem, but, more than that, at an earlier age, they nearly always gave the same wrong answer. He set to find out more.

Over the next 60 years, in numerous prestigious academic posts, he continued to talk with children, play with them, ask them questions, and try to understand their thinking. Gradually he pieced together a “blueprint” for normal cognitive development in children, and presented findings that were amazing for their simplicity, insight, and endurance to the test of time.

For example, he found if he showed a baby a toy, but then covered the toy with his hat, the baby would forget about the toy – if the baby were younger than nine months old. At about nine months of age, most babies understood that though it was hidden, the toy still existed. [And thus, Dear, Piaget found when children first accepted some “conservation laws” – and the bases for logic, i.e., that things exist and are distinct, viz., $A \equiv A$ and $A \neq \sim A$.]

Piaget found four major developmental stages (with many subdivisions). For the first year and a half or two years of life, infants are only aware of sensorimotor experience, and do not connect it to things outside of themselves. They do not know how things will react, and so are always experimenting – shaking things, putting them in their mouths, throwing – to learn by trial and error. [That is, they start applying the scientific method!] The stage from 18–24 months to 7 years Piaget called *preoperational*, where children can think about things in symbolic terms. They can pretend, verbalize, and understand past and future. Still, cause-and-effect, time, comparison, and other complex ideas are out of reach. From 7 to 12 years, children gain new competence in thinking and are aware of events outside of their lives. But tackling a problem with several variables in a systematic way is unusual at this age. From 12 years old and up, people are able to think about abstract relationships (as in algebra), understand methodology, formulate hypotheses, and think about possibilities and abstractions like justice.

Piaget is widely recognized as the greatest developmental psychologist of the century. His ideas have been refined and added to, but they remain the foundation of child psychology.

If I were asked to try to summarize Piaget's contributions, then while admitting that I lacked detailed knowledge, I would say that he found that the mental development of children changes as they learn more by the scientific method.

At the web page apparently created by W. Huitt, the following additional information is given about Piaget's theory:³

Piaget identified four stages in cognitive development:

Sensorimotor stage (Infancy). In this period (which has 6 stages), intelligence is demonstrated through motor activity without the use of symbols. Knowledge of the world is limited (but developing) because its based on physical interactions / experiences. Children acquire object permanence at about 7 months of age (memory). Physical development (mobility) allows the child to begin developing new intellectual abilities. Some symbolic (language) abilities are developed at the end of this stage.

Pre-operational stage (Toddler and Early Childhood). In this period (which has two substages), intelligence is demonstrated through the use of symbols, language use matures, and memory and imagination are developed, but thinking is done in a nonlogical, nonreversible manner. Egocentric thinking predominates.

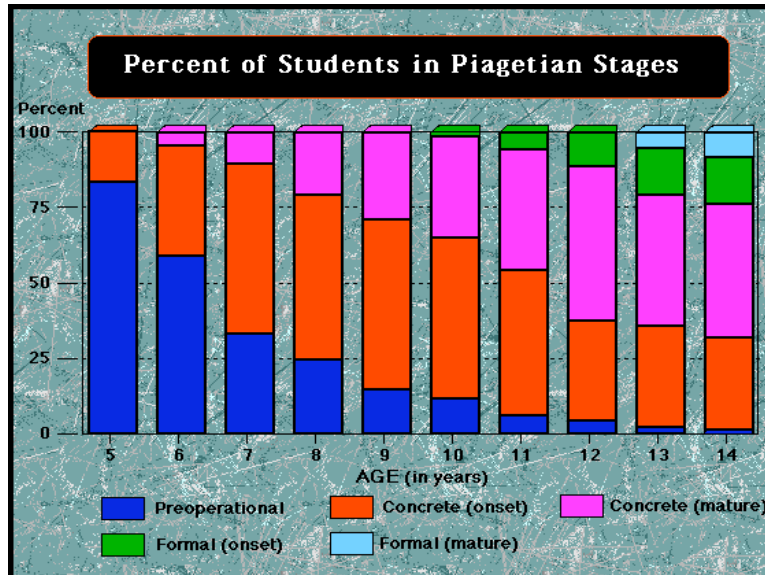
Concrete operational stage (Elementary and early adolescence). In this stage (characterized by 7 types of conservation: number, length, liquid, mass, weight, area, volume), intelligence is demonstrated through logical and systematic manipulation of symbols related to concrete objects. Operational thinking develops (mental actions that are reversible). Egocentric thought diminishes.

Formal operational stage (Adolescence and adulthood). In this stage, intelligence is demonstrated through the logical use of symbols related to abstract concepts. Early in the period there is a return to egocentric thought. Only 35% of high school graduates in industrialized countries obtain formal operations; many people do not think formally during adulthood.

³ This web page provides the following: "Citation: Huitt, W., & Hummel, J. (2003). Piaget's theory of cognitive development. *Educational Psychology Interactive*. Valdosta, GA: Valdosta State University. Retrieved [date] from <http://chiron.valdosta.edu/whuitt/col/cogsys/piaget.html>" (to which I suppose I'm expected to add the date of retrieval, namely 1 January 2006).

From all of which I expect that you're thinking something similar to: "Hmmm... yah... I guess it's kinda obvious that the way we think does change." What might not be quite so obvious, however, is that Piaget's model seems to omit something that I expect is important.

To see what I mean, first consider the following chart (from the same webpage), which summarizes the above quotation.



This chart suggests how the thinking abilities of children change as they age (with some 14 year olds, for example, still thinking in a manner similar to 5 year olds), but the chart doesn't show something else: thinking abilities can differ depending on the subject matter! In particular, the thinking abilities of the vast majority of American adults can be quite well developed for most aspects of their lives (at their jobs, in interpersonal relations, at home, etc.), but when it comes to the subject of religion, these same people think in a manner similar to children! It's a form of schizophrenia, which literally means "split mind".

For example, for most Americans, if you asked them when they're ill why they are, they might mention that they picked up some bug, that they inherited a genetic defect, or whatever; they probably wouldn't say that an evil spirit possessed them (except, perhaps, for some Jehovah Witnesses). If you asked them why they were having trouble in their job or in some relationship, they might mention some unresolved problem; they probably

wouldn't say that Satan was working against them (except, perhaps, for some crazed "Born Again" Christians). And so on. And yet, if you asked them what happens when they die, the majority of Americans (and essentially all Muslims) will prattle off some pre-school stuff about living forever in paradise with an imaginary god!

Such schizophrenia has been rampant for thousands of years. For example, ~1800 years ago the "Christian father" Tertullian [Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus (c.160 – c.220)] made the "enlightened" statement:

It is a fundamental human right, a privilege of nature, that every man should worship according to his own convictions.

And yet, he also blurted out (and apparently "believed"):

The Son of God died; it is by all means to be believed because it is absurd. And he was buried and rose again; the fact is certain, because it is impossible.

Surely those who are still sane would say something similar to: "Man, if it's absurd, if it's impossible, then toss it; it's trash; it's nothing but mental pollution!"

In sum, it's strange – and it's scary to think how the "thinking" of so many people is distorted by their "wishes". It's called "motivational thinking", a subject that I'll leave for you to explore on your own, and a subject that returns to the question of why people "believe" what others evaluate to be nonsense. Thus, rather than dig deeper into that topic, I want to move on to another topic dealing with how people change.

Although Piaget's observations support an idea that I've been promoting in this book (namely, that you've been a "budding scientist" ever since you were born!), yet trained as a "natural scientist", perhaps Piaget overemphasized human "cognitive development" (with 'cognition' meaning "the mental action or process of acquiring knowledge and understanding through thought, experience, and the senses"). In contrast, the observations of Erik Erikson (1902–1994) led him to develop ideas about the development of our emotions, or personality, or what he called our "psychosocial development".

As you might expect, this is another huge area of knowledge and research, and as you probably expect, I plan to leave essentially all of it for you to

study on your own (should you be so inclined). Nonetheless, let me at least mention and briefly comment upon Erikson's "eight stages of human psychosocial development", or described more simply, the phases that people commonly encounter as their personality evolves. Erikson emphasized correlations between each phase and a person's age, but as you can well imagine, we grapple with each phase throughout our lives. That said, what follows is a brief summary (for which I relied on many internet sites) of the phases he identified.

In her web article "Developmental Stages of Erik Erikson",⁴ Arlene F. Harder introduced the subject well – reminding me of "the 'interconnectedness' of opposites":

Our personality traits come in opposites. We think of ourselves as optimistic or pessimistic, independent or dependent, emotional or unemotional, adventurous or cautious, leader or follower, aggressive or passive. Many of these are inborn temperament traits, but other characteristics, such as feeling either competent or inferior, appear to be learned, based on the challenges and support we receive in growing up.

As I mentioned, Erikson identified eight such "learning phases", which I'll list as follows.

1. Trust vs. Distrust

This phase starts in infancy, can have life-long consequences, and continuously evolves. In the very readable internet article on Erikson by C. George Boeree,⁵ I found the following remark to be particularly poignant – reminding me of how the mother of certain grandchildren would cater to their every demand:

At first, it might seem obvious that the infant must learn trust and not mistrust. But Erikson made it clear that there it is a balance we must learn: certainly, we need to learn mostly trust, but we also need to learn a little mistrust, so as not to grow up to become gullible fools...

If the proper balance is achieved, the child will develop the virtue **hope**, the strong belief that, even when things are not going well, they will work out well in the end. One of the signs that a child is doing well in the first stage is when the child isn't overly upset by the need to wait a moment for the satisfaction of his or her needs:

⁴ Available at <http://www.learningplaceonline.com/stages/organize/Erikson.htm>.

⁵ Available at <http://www.ship.edu/~cgboeree/erikson.html>.

“Mom or Dad don’t have to be perfect; I trust them enough to believe that, if they can’t be here immediately, they will be here soon; things may be tough now, but they will work out.” This is the same ability that, in later life, gets us through disappointments in love, our careers, and many other domains of life.

For me, that of course brings to mind the wisdom of the Seven Sages (of Ancient Greece), “Nothing too much”, or as Terrance put it, “Moderation in all things.”

2. Autonomy vs. Shame & Doubt

This phase typically start in “toddler-hood”; a two-year old’s desire for autonomy is so notorious that it’s called “the terrible twos”. Again I found the article by Boeree (referenced above, with his name apparently pronounced “Boor-ray”) to be particularly poignant – but this time because of the anguish I still feel over my inadequacies in helping my own children develop:

If mom and dad (and the other care-takers that often come into the picture at this point) permit the child, now a toddler, to explore and manipulate his or her environment, the child will develop a sense of autonomy or independence. The parents should not discourage the child, but neither should they push. A balance is required. People often advise new parents to be “firm but tolerant” at this stage, and the advice is good. This way, the child will develop both self-control and self-esteem.

On the other hand, it is rather easy for the child to develop instead a sense of shame and doubt. If... parents come down hard on any attempt to explore and be independent, [children] will soon give up with the assumption that [they] cannot and should not act on their own. We should keep in mind that even something as innocent as laughing at the toddler’s efforts can lead the child to feel deeply ashamed, and to doubt his or her abilities.

And there are other ways to lead children to shame and doubt: If you give children unrestricted freedom and no sense of limits, or if you try to help children do what they should learn to do for themselves, you will also give them the impression that they are not good for much. If you aren’t patient enough to wait for your child to tie his or her shoe-laces, your child will never learn to tie them, and will assume that this is too difficult to learn!

Nevertheless, a little “shame and doubt” is not only inevitable, but beneficial. Without it, you will develop the maladaptive tendency Erikson calls **impulsiveness**, a sort of shameless willfulness that leads you, in later childhood and even adulthood, to jump into things without proper consideration of your abilities.

Worse, of course, is too much shame and doubt, which leads to the malignancy Erikson calls **compulsiveness**. The compulsive person feels as if their entire being rides on everything they do, and so everything must be done perfectly. Following all the rules precisely keeps you from mistakes, and mistakes must be avoided at all costs. Many of you know how it feels to always be ashamed and always doubt yourself. A little more patience and tolerance with your own children may help them avoid your path. And give yourself a little slack, too!

If you get the proper, positive balance of autonomy and shame and doubt, you will develop the virtue of **willpower** or determination. One of the most admirable – and frustrating – thing about two- and three-year-olds is their determination. “Can do” is their motto. If we can preserve that “can do” attitude (with appropriate modesty to balance it) we are much better off as adults.

The only complaint I have about Boeree’s assessment is that (based on my experience) it’s not at all clear that it’s beneficial to have a “can do” attitude when it comes to rearing children – at least until one takes some courses in child rearing!

3 – 5. Initiative vs. Guilt, Inferiority vs. Industry, Identity vs. Role Confusion

I’ve compacted these three “childhood” & “adolescence” phases (#’s 3 – 5) into one, in part to speed this review along and in part because (thankfully!) parents aren’t usually so responsible for associated changes as are peers, teachers, and others (as well as, of course, the person experiencing the changes). In my totally unbiased opinion (☺), certain grandchildren have steered a sturdy course between the rocks and reefs of guilt and inferiority, toward the open waters of initiative and industry, but now are probably experiencing the heavy seas (even icebergs?) of defining themselves (identity vs. role confusion): Who am I? Whadda I wanna do? What am I gonna be? I’ll return to those questions later in this chapter and in the next.

Again Boeree’s assessment is penetrating, perhaps especially for understanding how some adolescents seek to weather life’s storms in some religious cult or who just “bail out”:

There is such a thing as too much “ego identity”, where a person is so involved in a particular role in a particular society or subculture that there is no room left for tolerance. Erikson calls this maladaptive tendency **fanaticism**. A fanatic believes that his way is the only way. Adolescents are, of course, known for their idealism, and for their tendency to see things in black-and-white. These people will gather

others around them and promote their beliefs and life-styles without regard to others' rights to disagree.

The lack of identity is perhaps more difficult still, and Erikson refers to the malignant tendency here as **repudiation**. They repudiate their membership in the world of adults and, even more, they repudiate their need for an identity. Some adolescents allow themselves to “fuse” with a group, especially the kind of group that is particularly eager to provide the details of your identity: religious cults, militaristic organizations, groups founded on hatred, groups that have divorced themselves from the painful demands of mainstream society. They may become involved in destructive activities, drugs, or alcohol, or [they] may withdraw into their own psychotic fantasies. After all, being “bad” or being “nobody” is better than not knowing who you are!

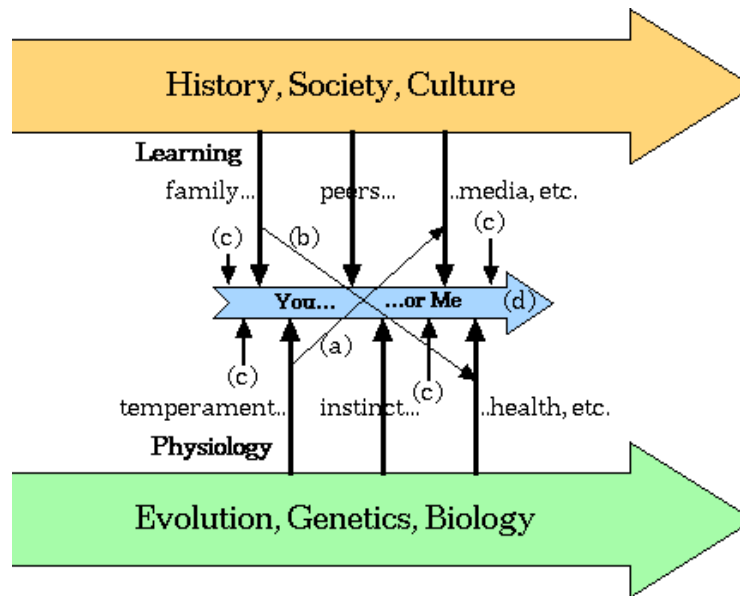
If you successfully negotiate this stage, you will have the virtue Erikson called **fidelity**. Fidelity means loyalty, the ability to live by societies standards despite their imperfections and incompleteness and inconsistencies. We are not talking about blind loyalty, and we are not talking about accepting the imperfections. After all, if you love your community, you will want to see it become the best it can be. But fidelity means that you have found a place in that community, a place that will allow you to contribute.

6 – 8. Intimacy vs. Isolation, Generativity vs. Stagnation, Integrity vs. Despair

I've also compacted these final three phases, kid, mostly because (with a little bit of luck) you don't have to worry too much about negotiating your way through them – “until you're older”! For example, when you're really, really old, then the challenge will be to decide if you'll sit around despairing about all the mistakes you've made (similar to... ah, never mind) or attempt to convey what you've learned from your mistakes to try to help your grandchildren make fewer! Yet, that's not entirely true, and perhaps points to a weakness of Erikson's attempt to correlate “psychosocial development” with age. Teenagers feeling isolated and stagnant can fall into such despair that they commit suicide (or worse). But the potential deficiencies of Erikson's model aside, the main point that I hope you agree with is: people change.

Boeree developed the following simple overview of such changes.⁶

⁶ Sorry, Dear, but earlier I didn't record the web address of the Boeree article from which I copied this figure and now I see that he's updated many of his articles – and I've been unable to find the figure. But it's his figure; not mine!



In this figure, the blue arrow (d) suggests how we change *via* learning from history, society, and culture (i.e., the top, yellowish orange arrow) and *via* physiology from evolution, genetics, and biology (green arrow). Boeree also suggests some of the many interactions; e.g., the faint arrow labeled “a” suggests how our “temperament” might influence our interpretation of, say, some news story, and the arrow labeled “b” suggest how our learning (e.g., at home) can influence, e.g., our health (e.g., with “eat your vegetables and get some exercise, kid.”) In addition, all the little arrows labeled “c” suggests influences on how we change caused by our personal experiences (e.g., a broken leg, a beautiful sunrise, a stupid book written by...).

Meanwhile, my only (minor) complaints about Boeree’s sketch are these.

- 1) Understandably, the figure doesn’t convey any notion of the time scale of changes, e.g., that changes associated with “evolution, genetics, and biology” are so slow. Maybe he could have corrected that by removing the arrowhead from the green line, leaving the impression that this “ground state” is essentially fixed during the duration of an individual’s lifetime.
- 2) Unfortunately, with the lengths of the arrows, the sketch suggests that personal change is slower than changes in “history, society, culture”. In reality, individuals change at different rates: some lead cultural change, e.g., all “the doers (from the first person who learned how to control fire

and the inventor of the wheel through to the person who first conceived the internet), as well as a huge number of “thinkers” (including Heraclitus, the Buddha, Socrates, Epicurus, Jesus [if he existed], Marcus Aurelius, both Bacons, Locke, Hume, Paine, Jefferson, Marx, Freud...), while the majority of people have always lagged cultural change, e.g., most religious people (including, in our culture, essentially all Baptists, Catholics, Evangelicals, Mormons, etc.). Consequently, in a more realistic sketch, there should be many blue arrows, some leading and some lagging the yellow arrow.

I thought a little about depicting such changes in a manner that would be both more stimulating and more revealing. One possible depiction was of birds flying at various speeds and directions (including vultures sitting on “dead branches of knowledge”!) through various weather conditions, with the ground surface representing the slow pace of evolution and the weather representing the force of culture, etc. Another was of fish swimming at various speeds and directions through streams and ponds and lakes and the ocean, etc. But in the end I gave up, because the analogies seemed too strained. My main point was (and still is!) that people change – and now that I’ve given you a thorough review of “cognitive development” and “psychosocial development” [☺, that was a joke, kid!], let me turn to a similarly thorough review of “moral development”. ☺

Actually, though, let me just quote Robert Barger’s summary, which is the best one I found on the web.⁷

A SUMMARY OF LAWRENCE KOHLBERG’S STAGES OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT

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Robert N. Barger, Ph.D.

University of Notre Dame

Lawrence Kohlberg was, for many years, a professor at Harvard University. He became famous for his work there beginning in the early 1970s. He started as a developmental psychologist and then moved to the field of moral education. He was particularly well-known for his theory of moral development which he popularized through research studies conducted at Harvard’s Center for Moral Education.

⁷ Unfortunately, this article seems to have disappeared from the web – although dead links to the article remain!

His theory of moral development was dependent on the thinking of the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget and the American philosopher John Dewey. He was also inspired by James Mark Baldwin. These men had emphasized that human beings develop philosophically and psychologically in a progressive fashion.

Kohlberg believed... and was able to demonstrate through studies... that people progressed in their moral reasoning (i.e., in their bases for ethical behavior) through a series of stages. He believed that there were six identifiable stages which could be more generally classified into three levels.

Kohlberg's classification can be outlined in the following manner:

<i>LEVEL</i>	<i>STAGE</i>	<i>SOCIAL ORIENTATION</i>
Pre-conventional	1	Obedience & Punishment
	2	Individualism, Instrumentalism & Exchange
Conventional	3	“Good boy/girl”
	4	Law & Order
Post-conventional	5	Social Contract
	6	Principled Conscience

The first level of moral thinking is that generally found at the elementary school level. In the first stage of this level, people behave according to socially acceptable norms because they are told to do so by some authority figure (e.g., parent or teacher). This obedience is compelled by the threat or application of punishment. The second stage of this level is characterized by a view that right behavior means acting in one's own best interests.

The second level of moral thinking is that generally found in society, hence the name 'conventional.' The first stage of this level (stage 3) is characterized by an attitude which seeks to do what will gain the approval of others. The second stage is one oriented to abiding by the law and responding to the obligations of duty.

The third level of moral thinking is one that Kohlberg felt is not reached by the majority of adults. Its first stage (stage 5) is an understanding of social mutuality and a genuine interest in the welfare of others. The last stage (stage 6) is based on respect for universal principle and the demands of individual conscience. While Kohlberg always believed in the existence of Stage 6 and had some nominees for it, he could never get enough subjects to define it, much less observe their longitudinal movement to it.

Kohlberg believed that individuals could only progress through these stages one stage at a time. That is, they could not 'jump' stages. They could not, for example, move from an orientation of selfishness to the law and order stage without passing through the "good boy/girl" stage. They could only come to a comprehension of a moral rationale one stage above their own. Thus, according to Kohlberg, it was important to present them with moral dilemmas for discussion which would help them to see the

reasonableness of a “higher stage” morality and encourage their development in that direction.

The last comment refers to Kohlberg’s moral discussion approach. He saw this as one of the ways in which moral development can be promoted through formal education. Note that Kohlberg believed, as did Piaget, that most moral development occurs through social interaction. The discussion approach is based on the insight that individuals develop as a result of cognitive conflicts at their current stage.

I trust, Dear, that Kohlberg’s ideas seem reasonable to you, but then, maybe you thought that his ideas, too, seem to have their limitations.

For example, although you’re probably familiar with cases that would add to Kohlberg’s database, you might agree that a different interpretation of the data is equally justified – or equally unjustified! In particular, in contrast to Kohlberg’s idea of “moral development”, perhaps you’d agree that the observed changes in people represent relatively constant “morality” (i.e., values judged relative to their constant pursuit of their trio of survival goals) but with changes occurring associated with expansions in their worldviews (from the baby’s worldview that only she and her primary care giver exist, through a child’s worldview that usually extends no further than family and a few playmates, through a teenager’s worldview that incorporates peers and additional “authority figures”, and so on). In the fourth column of the table below, I’ve outlined the above idea, which should incorporate a person’s changing abilities to assess consequences of one’s actions.

LEVEL	STAGE	SOCIAL ORIENTATION	WORLDVIEW
Pre-conventional	1	Obedience & Punishment	Care-givers
	2	Individualism... Exchange	+ Playmates
Conventional	3	“Good boy/girl”	+ Peers
	4	Law & Order	+ Authorities
Post-conventional	5	Social Contract	+ Community
	6	Principled Conscience	+ All Humanity

If such a suggestion seems reasonable to you, then it hints at a very big problem, namely, many if not most philosophical, psychological, and sociological theories are interpretations of data (hypotheses, if you will), but most lack predictive power – and those few hypotheses that do yield predictions have not adequately been tested experimentally.

An illustration of the inadequacies of such theories (lacking predictive power and lacking experimental tests of predictions) is the following, from the article by Ian Barbour entitled “Religion in the Age of Science” [to which I’ve added a few notes in brackets]:⁸

James Fowler has identified a series of stages of faith on the basis of extensive interviews with hundreds of people of all ages. Paralleling the work of Jean Piaget on cognitive development, Erik Erikson on stages of life, and Lawrence Kohlberg on moral development, Fowler describes six stages of faith:

1. An Intuitive-Projective stage takes place in early childhood, characterized by imagination and dependence on parents.
2. A Mythic-Literal stage follows in later childhood, during which myths are interpreted literally and other adults are significant. [Typical of religious “fundamentalists”, who thereby are still childish.]
3. In the Synthetic-Conventional stage of adolescence, beliefs are formulated in conformity to peers. Some individuals remain at this stage, dependent on external authority. [Typical of the members of various religious “cults”]
4. In the Individuative-Reflective stage, [people] question, doubt, and assume responsibility for their own commitments. The locus of authority is internal, and they have a stronger sense of individual identity. [Anyone who hasn’t reached this stage is, in my opinion, not yet an adult.]
5. In the Conjunctive stage of mature faith, persons integrate tradition and doubt, recognizing the symbolic character of religious language. They show respect for other traditions along with commitment to their own tradition. [I’m sorry, Dear, but I think that this stage is a ruse, written to placate powerful religious leaders and others mystics, such as Joseph Campbell.]
6. In the Universalizing stage, reached only by rare individuals, persons exhibit a greater inclusiveness and a more radical living out of convictions. Here there is a greater depth of religious experience, a vision of a transformed world, and a love that reaches out to others. [A stage reached, in my opinion, by such people as the Buddha, Confucius, Epicurus, Marcus Aurelius... Freud, Russell, Einstein, Alan Watts, Rolf Edburg, and many others.]

From the notes that I added to the above, you might think that, in the main, I agree with Fowler’s scheme – and I admit that, when I first read it, it seemed to be a fairly perceptive interpretation of data with which I’m familiar. But

⁸ Available at <http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=2237&C=2065>.

upon a little reflection, my reaction was: “Hey, wait a minute, this isn’t reality; it’s a ruse!”

In reality, people start out as natural scientists, experimenting, with no concepts about anything supernatural. Subsequently and extremely unfortunately, most children get duped into “believing” a bunch of stupid myths (about Santa Claus, the Easter bunny, Halloween ghosts and goblins, and various other ghosts and gods), thereby entrapped by their parents and their culture in religious nonsense, they’re shoved into a pit of supernatural stupidity. Subsequently, the “religious development” of people is not as Fowler suggests but is better described as how soon and how far people are able to climb out from their culture’s pit of religious stupidity, to gain a more realistic worldview.

For example, when she was about eight, your grandmother (my wife) got out of the pit into which she was shoved: she saw through the stupidity of it all, even though her father still forced her to continue in a Catholic school; probably she had help, because her mother and her maternal grandfather had rejected religion. I got out of the pit as I’ve described in an earlier chapter – but I never seemed to have fallen into it very deeply. Your father was never pushed into the pit; he fell into it on his own when he was a teenager, but about 20 years later, managed to pull himself out. Your mother and her mother, in contrast, are still deep in the pit. As for you? I don’t know. This book is my lifeline to you; I hope you’ll grab on to it.

But anyway, my goal was not to comment on inadequacies in such theories (for, after all, a first step in the scientific method is to try to make sense of some data, i.e., GUESS, test, and reassess). Instead, I wanted to illustrate what you probably considered to be obvious in the first place: people change! In particular, there are obvious changes in our thinking abilities (e.g., Piaget’s “cognitive development”), our personalities (e.g., Erikson’s “psychosocial development”), and in our values and worldviews (e.g., Kohlberg’s “moral development”). And the reason for my going through all that (“obvious stuff”) is to try to alert you to and (as well as I can) to prepare you for some of the many choices (and associated changes and challenges) that are ahead for you.

In my opinion and as I’ve written before, “by far and away” the most important choice for you is your fundamental premisses, especially the fundamental premiss about how you plan to gain knowledge about the

* Go to other chapters *via*

reality external to your mind. On the one hand, if you accept that knowledge is gained *via* “listening to one’s heart”, *via* “God’s revelation” to some “profit”, or *via* similar nonsense, then you won’t need to meet the many challenges associated with guiding your own life: just obey your clerics (which of course includes paying them 10% of your earnings for their “services”). As someone else said: “pray, pay, and obey!” By accepting your clerics’ claims of knowing the “changeless ways of God”, however, you’ll need to constrain your natural curiosity, you’ll need to abide by their demands that you confine your study only to what they consider to be “faith-building” ideas, you’ll need to learn how to ignore new discoveries and glaring inconsistencies in religious dogma, become proficient at lying to yourself, and therefore, you’ll need to become a proficient hypocrite.

On the other hand, if you decide that new knowledge can be gained by the scientific method, then although it’s inconsistent with what your clerics teach, you’ll need to develop a lot of “faith” – in the scientific method and in yourself! Marilla M. Ricker said it well (in her book *Science Against Creeds; I Am Not Afraid, Are You?*):

If you must believe in anything, believe in yourself, in your senses and in your mind. To accept a religious creed is to accept another’s mind in place of your own, and generally contrary to your own. When religious belief comes in brains go out. Man has asked for the truth and the Church has given him miracles. He has asked for knowledge, and the Church has given him theology. He has asked for facts, and the Church has given him the Bible. This foolishness should stop.

But to develop such faith takes courage, not only to face the unknown but also to accept the uncertainties associated with inevitable change.

Yet, Dear, should you choose to adopt the premiss that new knowledge is gained *via* the scientific method, of course you won’t be entirely alone. Others have blazed paths to help you find successful ways through the many changes that you’ll encounter on your life’s journey. Further, I hope you’ll be emboldened with the thought that, throughout recorded history (and in fact for the entire period of life on Earth), those who have survived and prospered are those who have been able to adapt to change. As Darwin said: “It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the ones most responsive to change.”

Of course, some of these adaptations to change have been difficult, and certainly I agree that not all changes have been “for the better”, but generally

* Go to other chapters *via*

speaking, Dear, I'm certain that you'll be better off if you'll not only "screw your courage to the sticking point" to cope with change, but even welcome change (and sometimes even stimulate it). Nonetheless, to cope with changes in our lives, it usually helps if some aspects remain the same. For example,

- As you head off to university or anywhere with new people, it helps if some of your friends accompany you;
- If you change jobs, it helps if your new job is in the same city;
- If you find a new job in a new location, it helps if you continue to have the same occupation;
- If you find a new job in a new location in a new occupation, it helps if your family is still with you;
- If you're separated from your family and take a new job in a new field in a new location, it helps if you still live in the same culture;
- If you are separated from your family and take a new job in a new field in a different nation, with a different culture, then it helps to hang onto some of your basic ideas (or "beliefs").

Thereby, it's common that most immigrants generally tend to cling strongly to their own ideas about "the gods" and that, in times of large personal change or in times of major social upheavals (e.g., as recently occurred in Russia) interest in religion commonly increases. But meanwhile, and similarly – and much more rewardingly! – if you become a scientist and/or a humanist, then your location in time or space or culture will be essentially irrelevant.

Yet, don't expect changes to be easy. And I know no better way to show you what I mean than to show you the following "essay" by Ali Sina – and urge you to read it.⁹ I hope you recall that I introduced you to Dr. Sina's writings in an earlier chapter (**P3**), with his article "The Purpose of Life". To learn more about him, go to <http://www.faithfreedom.org/index.htm>.

⁹ Copied from <http://www.faithfreedom.org/Articles/sina/frombelief.htm>.

From Belief to Enlightenment: The treacherous and arduous path

by Ali Sina

I was born into a moderately religious family. On my mother's side I have a few relatives who are Ayatollahs. Although my grandfather (whom I never met) was somewhat a skeptic, we were believers. My parents were not fond of the mullahs. In fact, we did not have much to do with our more fundamentalist relatives. We liked to think of ourselves as believing in "true Islam," not the one taught and practiced by the mullahs.

I recall discussing religion with the husband of one of my aunts when I was about 15 years old. He was a fanatical Muslim who was very concerned about the fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence). It prescribes the way Muslims should pray, fast, run their public and private lives, do business, clean themselves, use the toilet, and even copulate. I argued this has nothing to do with true Islam, that it is a fabrication of the Mullahs, that excessive attention to fiqh diminishes the impact and importance of the pure message of Islam, to unite man with his creator. This view is mostly inspired by Sufism. Many Iranians, thanks to Rumi's poems, are to a great degree Sufis in their outlook.

In my early youth I noticed discriminations and cruelties against the members of religious minorities in Iran. This was more noticeable in provincial towns where the level of education was low and the mullahs had a better grip over gullible people. Due to my father's work we spent a few years in small towns out of the capital. I recall one of my teachers who planned to take the class swimming. We were excited and looked forward to it. In the class there were a couple of kids who were Baha'i and Jewish. The teacher did not let them accompany us. He said they are not allowed to swim in the same pool that Muslims swim in. I cannot forget the kids' disappointment as they left school with tears in their eyes, subdued and heartbroken. At that age, maybe nine or ten, I could not make sense of and was saddened by this injustice. I thought it was the kids' fault for not being Muslims.

I believe I was lucky for having open-minded parents who encouraged me to think critically. They tried to instill in me the love of God and his messenger, yet upheld humanistic values like equality of rights between man and woman, and love for all humankind. In a sense, this is how most modern Iranian families were. In fact, the majority of Muslims who have some education believe Islam is a humanistic religion that respects human rights, that elevates the status of women and protects their rights. Most Muslims believe that Islam means peace. Needless to say, few of them have read the Quran.

I spent my early youth in this sweet dream, advocating "true Islam" as I thought it should be, and criticizing the mullahs and their deviations from the real teachings of Islam. I idealized an Islam that conformed to my own humanistic values. Of course my imaginary Islam was a beautiful religion. It was a religion of equality and peace.

It was a religion that encouraged its followers to go after knowledge and be inquisitive. It was a religion that was in harmony with science and reason. In fact, I thought that science got its inspiration from this religion. The Islam I believed was a religion that sparkled with modern science, which eventually bore its fruit in the West and made modern discoveries and inventions possible. Islam, I believed, was the real cause of modern civilization. The reason Muslims were living in such a miserable state of ignorance, I thought, was all the fault of the self-centered mullahs and religious leaders who for their own personal gain had misinterpreted the real teachings of Islam.

Muslims honestly believe that the great Western civilization has its roots in Islam. They recall great Middle Eastern scientific minds whose contributions to science have been crucial in the birth of modern science.

Omar Khayyam was a great mathematician who calculated the length of the year with a precision of 0.74% of a second. Zakaria Razi can very well be regarded as one of the first founders of empirical science who based his knowledge on research and experimentation. Avicenna's (Bu Ali Sina) monumental encyclopedia of medicine was taught in European universities for centuries. There are so many more great luminaries who have "Islamic names" who were the pioneers of modern science when Europe was languishing in the medieval Dark Ages. Like all Muslims, I believed all these great men were Muslims, that they were inspired by the wealth of hidden knowledge in the Quran; and that if today's Muslims could regain the original purity of Islam, the long lost glorious days of Islam would return and Muslims would lead the advancement of World civilization once again.

Iran was a Muslim country but it was also a corrupt country. The chance of getting into a university was slim. Only one in ten applicants could get into the university. Often they were forced to choose subjects that they did not want to study because they could not get enough points for the subjects of their choice. Students with the right connections often got the seats.

The standard of education in Iran was not ideal. Universities were under-funded, as the Shah preferred building a powerful military might to become the gendarme of the Middle East rather than build the infrastructure of the country and invest in people's education. These were reasons why my father thought I would be better off to leave Iran to continue my education elsewhere.

We considered America and Europe, but my father, acting upon the counsel of a few of his religious friends, thought another Islamic country would be better for a 16 year old boy. We were told that the West's morality is too lax, people are perverted, the beaches are full of nudes, and they drink and have licentious lifestyles, all of which are dangers to a young man. So I was sent to Pakistan instead, where people were religious and thus it was safe and moral. A friend of the family told us that Pakistan is just like England, except that it is cheaper.

This, of course, proved to be untrue. I found Pakistanis to be as immoral and corrupt as Iranians. Yes they were very religious. They did not eat pork and I saw no one consuming alcohol in public, but I noticed they had dirty minds, lied, were hypocrites, were cruel to women, and above all, were filled with hatred of the Indians. I did not find them better than Iranians in any way. They were religious but not moral or ethical.

In college, instead of taking Urdu I took Pakistani Culture to complete my A level FSc (Fellow of Science). I learned the reason for Pakistan's partition from India and for the first time heard about Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the man Pakistanis called Qaid-e A'zam, the great leader. He was presented as an intelligent man, the Father of the Nation, while Gandhi was spoken of in a derogatory way. Even then, I could not but side with Gandhi and condemn Jinnah as an arrogant, ambitious man who was the culprit for breaking up a country and causing millions of deaths. You could say I always had a mind of my own and was a maverick in my thinking. No matter what I was taught, I always came to my own conclusion and did not believe what I was told.

I did not see differences of religion as valid reasons for breaking up a country. The very word Pakistan was an insult to the Indians. They called themselves pak (clean) to distinguish themselves from the Indians who were najis (unclean). Ironically I never saw a people dirtier than the Pakistanis both physically and mentally. It was disappointing to see another Islamic nation in such intellectual and moral bankruptcy. In discussions with my friends I failed to convince anyone of "true Islam." I condemned their bigotry and fanaticism while they disapproved of me for my un-Islamic views.

I related all this to my father and decided to go to Italy for my university studies. In Italy people drink wine and eat pork, but they were more hospitable, friendlier, and less hypocritical than Muslims. I noticed people were willing to help without expecting something in return. I met a very hospitable elderly couple, who invited me to have lunch with them on Sundays, so I would not have to stay home alone. They did not want anything from me. They just wanted someone to love. I was almost a grandson to them. Only strangers in a new country, who do not know anyone and cannot speak the language, can truly appreciate the value of the help and hospitality of the locals.

Their house was sparkling clean, with shiny marble floors. This contradicted my idea of Westerners. Although my family was very open towards other people, Islam taught me that non-Muslims are najis (Q.9:28) and one should not befriend them. I still have a copy of the Farsi translation of the Quran I used to often read from. One of the underlined verses is:

O you who believe! Take not the Jews and the Christians as awliya' (friends, protectors, helpers, etc.), they are but awliya' to one another... (Q.5:51)

I had difficulty understanding the wisdom of such a verse. I wondered why I should not befriend this wonderful elderly couple who had no ulterior motives in showing me their hospitality than just making me feel at home. I thought they were “true Muslims” and I tried to raise the subject of religion hoping they would see the truth of Islam and embrace it. But they were not interested and politely changed the subject. I was not stupid enough at anytime in my life to believe that all non-believers would go to hell. I read this in the Quran before but never wanted to think about it. I simply brushed it off or ignored it. Of course, I knew that God would be pleased if someone recognized his messenger but never thought he would actually be cruel enough to burn someone in hell for eternity, even if that person only does good deeds, just because he was not a Muslim. I read the following warning:

If anyone desires a religion other than Islam (submission to Allah), never will it be accepted of him; and in the Hereafter He will be in the ranks of those who have lost (All spiritual good). (Q.3:85)

Yet I paid little heed and tried to convince myself the meaning is something other than what it appears to be. At that moment this was not a subject that I was ready to handle. So I did not think about it.

I hung around with my Muslim friends and noticed that most of them lived a very immoral life of double standards. Most of them found girlfriends and slept with them. That was very un-Islamic, or so I thought at that time. What bothered me most was the fact that they did not value these girls as real human beings who deserved respect. These girls were not Muslim girls and therefore were used just for sex. This attitude was not general. Those who made less show of religiosity were more respectful and sincere towards their western girlfriends and some even loved them and wanted to marry them. Paradoxically, those who were more religious were less faithful towards their girlfriends. I always thought that true Islam is what is right. If something is immoral, unethical, dishonest or cruel, it cannot be Islam. I could not see how the behavior of these immoral and callous Muslims could be the result of what was taught in Islam.

Years later I realized that the truth is exactly the opposite. I found many verses that were disturbing and made me revise my whole opinion of Islam.

As I saw it, the tragedy was that the very same people who lived unethically and immorally were the ones who called themselves Muslims, said their prayers, fasted, and were the first to defend Islam angrily if anyone raised a question about it. They were the ones who would lose their temper and start a fight if someone dared to say a word against Islam.

Once I befriended a young Iranian man at the university restaurant, later introducing him to two other Muslim friends of mine. We were all about the same age. He was an erudite, virtuous, wise, young man. My other two friends and I were captivated by his charm and high moral values. We used to wait for him and sit next to him during

lunch hour, as we always learned something from him. We used to eat a lot of spaghetti and risotto and craved a good Persian *ghorme sabzi* and *chelow*. Our friend said his mother sent him some dried vegetables and invited us to his house the next Sunday for lunch. We found his two-room apartment very clean, unlike the houses of other guys. He made us a delicious *ghorme sabzi* which we ate with great gusto and then sat back chatting and sipping our tea. It was then we noticed his Baha'i books. When we asked about them, he said he was a Baha'i.

That did not bother me at all, but on the way home my two friends said they did not wish to continue their friendship with him. I was surprised and asked why. They said that being a Baha'i makes him najis and had they known he was a Baha'i, they would not have befriended him. I was puzzled and enquired why they thought he was najis if we all were complementing him on his cleanliness. We all agreed he was a morally superior man than all of the Muslim young men we knew, so why this sudden change of attitude? Their response was very disturbing. They said the name itself had something in it that made them dislike this religion. They asked me if I knew why everyone disliked the Baha'is. I told them I didn't know, and that I liked everyone. But since they disliked the Baha'is, perhaps they should explain their reasons. They did not know why! This man was the first Baha'i they knew this well, and he was an exemplary man. I wanted to know the reason for their dislike. There was no particular reason, they said. It's just they know that Baha'is are bad.

I am happy I did not continue my friendship with these two bigots. From them I learned how prejudice is formed and operates.

Later I realized the prejudices and hatred that Muslims harbor against almost all non-Muslims is not the result of any misinterpretation of the teachings of the Quran, but is because this book teaches hate and encourages prejudice. Those Muslims who go to the mosques and listen to the sermons of the mullahs are affected. There are many verses in the Quran that call believers to hate non-believers, fight them, call them najis, subdue and humiliate them, chop off their heads and limbs, crucify them, and kill them wherever they find them.

I Learned the truth from the Quran

I left the religion on the backburner for several years. Not that my views about religion had changed or I didn't consider myself religious any more. I just had so much to do that expending time on religion had become scarce. Meanwhile I learned more about democracy, human rights and other values, like equality of rights between men and women, and I liked what I learned. Did I pray? Whenever I could, but not fanatically. After all, I was living and working in a Western country and did not want to look too different.

One day, I decided that it was time to deepen my knowledge of Islam and read the Quran from cover to cover. I found an Arabic copy of the Quran with an English translation. Previously I read only bits and pieces of the Quran. This time I read all of it. I would read a verse in Arabic, then its English translation, then refer back to

the Arabic, and did not read the next verse until I was completely satisfied I understood the Arabic.

It didn't take long before I came upon verses I found hard to accept. One of these verses was:

Allah forgiveth not that partners should be set up with Him; but He forgiveth anything else, to whom He pleaseth; to set up partners with Allah is to devise a sin Most heinous indeed. (Q.4:48)

I found it hard to accept that Gandhi would burn in hell forever because he was a polytheist with no hope of redemption, while a Muslim murderer could hope to receive Allah's forgiveness. This raised a disturbing question. Why is Allah so desperate to be known as the only God? If there is no other god but him, what is the fuss? Against whom is he competing? Why should he even care whether anyone knows him and praises him or not.

I learned about the size of this universe. Light, which travels at a speed of 300 thousand kilometers per second takes 20 billion years to reach us from the galaxies that are at the edges of the universe. How many galaxies are there? How many stars are there in these galaxies? How many planets are there in this universe? These thoughts were mind-boggling. If Allah is the creator of this vast universe, why he is so concerned about being known as the only god by a bunch of apes living on a small planet down the Milky Way?

Now that I had lived in the West, had many western friends who were kind to me, liked me, opened their hearts and homes to me, and accepted me as their friend, it was really hard to accept that Allah didn't want me to befriend them.

Let not the believers Take for friends or helpers Unbelievers rather than believers: if any do that, in nothing will there be help from Allah. (Q.3:28)

Isn't Allah the creator of the unbelievers too? Isn't he the god of everybody? Why should he be so unkind to the unbelievers? Wouldn't it be better if Muslims befriended unbelievers and taught them Islam by a good example? By keeping ourselves aloof and distant from unbelievers, the gap of misunderstandings will never be bridged. How in the world will unbelievers learn about Islam if we do not associate with them? These were the questions I kept asking myself. The answer to these questions came in a very disconcerting verse. Allah's order was to *...slay them wherever ye catch them. (Q.2:191)*

I thought of my own friends, remembering their kindnesses and love for me, and wondered how in the world a true god would ask anyone to kill another human being just because he does not believe. That seemed absurd, yet this concept was repeated so often in the Quran there was no doubt about it. In verse 8:65, Allah tells his prophet:

O Prophet! rouse the Believers to the fight. If there are twenty amongst you, patient and persevering, they will vanquish two hundred: if a hundred, they will vanquish a thousand of the Unbelievers.

I wondered why would Allah send a messenger to make war? Shouldn't God teach us to love each other and be tolerant towards each other's beliefs? And if Allah is really so concerned about making people believe in him to the extent that he would kill them if they don't believe, why would he not kill them himself? Why does he ask us to do his dirty work? Are we Allah's hit men?

Although I knew of Jihad and never questioned it before, I found it hard to accept that God would resort to imposing such violent measures on people. What was more shocking was the cruelty of Allah in dealing with unbelievers.

I will instill terror into the hearts of the unbelievers: smite ye above their necks and smite all their fingertips off them. (Q.8:12)

It seemed Allah was not just satisfied with killing unbelievers, he enjoyed torturing them before killing them. Smiting people's heads from above their necks and chopping their fingertips were very cruel acts. Would God really give such orders? And yet the worst is what he promised to do with unbelievers in the other world:

These two antagonists dispute with each other about their Lord: But those who deny (their Lord) – for them will be cut out a garment of Fire: over their heads will be poured out boiling water. With it will be scalded what is within their bodies, as well as (their) skins. In addition there will be maces of iron (to punish) them. Every time they wish to get away therefrom, from anguish, they will be forced back therein, and (it will be said), "Taste ye the Penalty of Burning!" (Q.22:19-22)

How could the creator of this universe be so cruel? I was shocked to learn that Quran tells Muslims to:

- kill unbelievers wherever they find them (Q.2:191)
- murder them and treat them harshly (Q.9:123)
- fight them, (Q.8:65), until no other religion than Islam is left (Q.2:193)
- humiliate them and impose on them a penalty tax if they are Christians or Jews, (Q.9:29)
- slay them if they are Pagans (Q.9:5), crucify, or cut off their hands and feet,
- expel them from the land in disgrace. And as if this were not enough, "they shall have a great punishment in world hereafter" (Q.5:34),
- not befriend their own fathers or brothers if they are not believers (Q.9:23), (Q.3:28),
- kill their own family in the battles of Badr and Uhud and asks Muslims to "strive against the unbelievers with great endeavor" (Q.25:52),
- be stern with them because they belong to hell (Q.66:9).

How can any sensible person remain unmoved when he or she finds the Quran saying: “strike off the heads of the unbelievers” then after a “wide slaughter among them, carefully tie up the remaining captives” (Q.47:4)?

I was also shocked to learn the Quran denies freedom of belief for all and clearly states Islam is the only acceptable religion (Q.3:85). Allah relegates those who do not believe in the Quran to hell (Q.5:11) and calls them najis (filthy, untouchable, impure) (Q.9:28). He says unbelievers will go to hell and will drink boiling water (Q.14:17). Further, “As for the unbelievers, for them garments of fire shall be cut and there shall be poured over their heads boiling water whereby whatever is in their bowls and skin shall be dissolved and they will be punished with hooked iron rods.”(Q.22:9) How sadistic!

The book of Allah says women are inferior to men and their husbands have the right to beat them (Q.4:34), and that women will go to hell if they are disobedient to their husbands (Q.66:10). It says men have an advantage over women (Q.2:228). It not only denies women equal right to their inheritance (Q.4:11-12), it also regards them as imbeciles and decrees that their testimony alone is not admissible in court (Q.2:282). This means that a woman who is raped cannot accuse her rapist unless she can produce a male witness, which of course is a joke. Rapists don't rape in the presence of witnesses.

But the most shocking verse is where Allah allows Muslims to rape women captured in wars even if they are married before being captured (Q.4:24, 4:3). The holy prophet raped the prettiest women he captured in his raids on the same day he killed their husbands and loved ones. This is why anytime a Muslim army subdues another nation, they call them kafir and rape their women. Pakistani soldiers raped up to 250,000 Bengali women in 1971 and massacred 3,000,000 unarmed civilians when their religious leader decreed that Bangladeshis are un-Islamic. This is why the prison guards in the Islamic regime of Iran rape the women and then kill them after calling them apostates and the enemies of Allah.

The whole Quran is full of verses that teach killing of unbelievers and how Allah would torture them after they die. There are no lessons on morality, justice, honesty, or love. The only message of the Quran is to believe in Allah and his messenger. The Quran coaxes people with celestial rewards of unlimited sex with fair houris in paradise and threatens them with blazing fires of hell. When the Quran speaks of righteousness, it does not mean righteousness as we understand it, but it means belief in Allah and his messenger. A Muslim can be a killer and murder non-Muslims and yet be a righteous person. Good actions are secondary. Belief in Allah and his messenger are the ultimate purpose of a person's life.

After reading the Quran I became greatly depressed. It was hard to accept it all. At first I denied and searched for esoteric meanings to these cruel verses of the Quran, all in vain. There was no misunderstanding! The Quran was overwhelmingly

inhumane. Of course it contained a lot of scientific heresies and absurdities, but they were not what impacted me the most. It was the violence of this book that really jolted me and shook the foundation of my belief.

The treacherous passage to enlightenment

After my bitter experience with the Quran I found myself traveling on a torturous road riddled with torments. I was kicked out of the blissful garden of ignorance, where all my questions were answered. There I did not have to think. All I had to do was believe. Now, the gates to that garden were closed to me forever. I had committed the unthinkable sin of thinking. I had eaten from the forbidden tree of knowledge, and my eyes had been opened. I could see the fallacy of it all and my own nakedness. I knew I would not be let into that paradise of oblivion again. Once you start thinking, you don't belong there anymore. I had only one way to go and that was forward.

This road to enlightenment proved to be more arduous than I was prepared for. It was slippery. There were mountains of obstacles to climb and precipices of errors to avert. I traveled uncharted territories alone, not knowing what I would find next. It would become my odyssey in the realm of understanding and discovering truth, eventually leading me to the land of enlightenment and freedom.

I will chart these territories for all those who also commit the sin of thinking, find themselves kicked out of the paradise of ignorance and are en route to an unknown destination.

If you doubt, if the mantle of ignorance in which you wrapped yourself is shredded to pieces and you find yourself naked, know that you cannot stay in the paradise of ignorance any longer. You have been cast out forever. Just as a child, once out of the womb, cannot go back, you will not be readmitted into that blissful garden of oblivion again. Listen to one who has been there and done that, and don't cling despondently to the gates. That door is locked.

Instead, look forward. You have a trip ahead of you. You can fly to your destination or you can crawl. I crawled! But because I crawled, I know this path quite well. I will chart the road, so hopefully you don't have to crawl.

The passage from faith to enlightenment consists of seven valleys.

1. Shock

After reading the Quran my perspective of reality was jolted. I found myself standing face to face with the truth and I was scared to look at it. It certainly was not what I was expecting to see. I had no one to blame, to curse and call a liar. I found all the absurdities of Islam and inhumanity of its author by reading the Quran. And I was shocked. Only this shock made me come to my senses and face the truth.

Unfortunately this is a very difficult, painful process. The followers of Muhammad must see the naked truth and they must be shocked. We cannot keep sugarcoating the

truth. The truth is bitter and it must be accepted. Facts are stubborn and refuse to go away. Only then does the process of enlightenment start.

But because each person's sensitivity is different, what shocks one person may not shock the other. Even as a man I was shocked when I read that Muhammad instructed his followers to beat their wives and called women "deficient in intelligence." Yet, I have come to know many Muslim women who have no difficulty accepting these derogatory statements uttered by their prophet. It's not that they agree they are deficient in intelligence or they believe the majority of the inhabitants of hell are women just because the Prophet said so, but they simply block out that information. They read it, but it doesn't sink in. They are in denial. The denial acts as a shield that covers and protects them, that saves them from facing the pain of reality. Once that shield is up, nothing can bring it down. At this point their beliefs must be attacked from other directions. We have to bombard them with other shocking teachings of the Quran. They may have a weak spot for one of them. That is all they need: a good shock. Shocks are painful, but they can be lifesavers. Shocks are used by doctors to bring back to life a dead patient.

For the first time, the Internet has changed the balance of power. Now the brutal force of the guns, prisons, and death squads are helpless and the pen is almighty. For the first time Muslims cannot stop the truth by killing its messenger. Now a great number of them are coming in contact with the truth and they feel helpless. They want to silence this voice, but they cannot. They want to kill the messenger, but they cannot. They try to ban the sites exposing their cherished beliefs, sometimes they succeed momentarily, but most of the time they don't. I created a site to educate Muslims about true Islam. I hosted it at Tripod.com. The Islamists forced Tripod to shut it down and they cowardly complied to appease them Muslims. I got my domain and the site was back again in a couple of weeks. So the old way of killing the apostates, burning their books, and silencing them by terror does not work. They cannot stop people from reading. Even though my site is banned in Saudi Arabia, Emirates and many other Islamic countries, a great number of Muslims who never knew the truth about Islam are being exposed to the truth for the first time, and are shocked.

I met a lady on the net who converted to Islam and started to wear the Islamic veil. She had a web site with her picture completely covered in a black veil along with her story of how she became a Muslim. She was very active and she used to advise others not to read my writings. But when she read the story of Safiyah, the Jewish woman that Muhammad captured and raped after killing her father, husband, and many of her relatives, she was shocked. She questioned other Muslims about this in vain. Then the door was open and she was cast out of the paradise of ignorance. She kept writing to me and asking questions. Finally, she passed through the other stages from blind faith to enlightenment very quickly and wrote thanking me for guiding her through this arduous path. She withdrew from the Yahoo Islamic clubs altogether.

When people learn about the unholy life of Muhammad and the absurdities of the Quran they are shocked. I want to expose Islam, write the truth about Muhammad's unholy life, his hateful words, his senseless assertions, and bombard Muslims with facts. They will be angry. They will curse me, insult me and tell me that after reading my articles their faith in Islam is "strengthened." But that is when I know that I have sown the seed of doubt in their mind. They say all this because they are shocked and have entered the stage of denial. The seed of doubt is planted and it will germinate. In some people it takes years, but given the chance it will eventually germinate.

Doubt is the greatest gift we can give to each other. It is the gift of enlightenment. Doubt will set us free, will advance knowledge, and will unravel the mysteries of this universe. Faith will keep us ignorant.

One of hurdles we have to overcome is the hurdle of tradition and false values imposed on us by thousands of years of religious upbringing. The world still values faith and considers doubt as the sign of weakness. People talk of men of faith with respect and disdain men of little faith. We are screwed up in our values. The word faith means belief without evidence; gullibility also means belief without evidence. Therefore there is no glory in faithfulness. Faithfulness means gullibility, credulity, susceptibility, and easy to fleece. How can one be proud of such qualities?

Doubt on the other hand means the reverse of the above. It means being capable of thinking independently, of questioning, and of being a skeptic. We owe our science and our modern civilization to men and women who doubted, not to those who believed. Those who doubted were the pioneers; they were the leaders of thought. They were philosophers, inventors, and discoverers. Those who believed lived and died as followers, made little or no contribution to the advancement of science and human understanding.

2. Denial

After being shocked, or maybe simultaneously, one denies. The majority of Muslims are trapped in denial. They are unable and unwilling to admit the Quran is a hoax. They desperately try to explain the unexplainable, find miracles in it, and would willingly bend all the rules of logic to prove that the Quran is right. Each time they are exposed to a shocking statement in the Quran or a reprehensible act performed by Muhammad they retreat in denial. This is what I did in the first phase of my journey. Denial is a safe place. It is the unwillingness to admit that you have been kicked out of the paradise of ignorance. You try to go back, reluctant to take the next step forward. In denial you find your comfort zone. In denial you are not going to be hurt, everything is okay; everything is fine.

Truth is extremely painful, especially if one has been accustomed to lies all one's life. It is not easy for a Muslim to see Muhammad for who he was. It is like telling a child that his father is a murderer, a rapist, and a thief. A child who adulates his father will not be able to accept it even if all the proofs in the world are shown to him. The

shock is so great that all he can do is to deny it. He will call you a liar, hate you for hurting him, curse you, consider you his enemy, and may even explode in anger and physically attack you.

This is the stage of denial. It is a self defense mechanism. If pain is too great, denial will take that pain away. If a mother is informed that her child has died in an accident, her first reaction is often denial. At the moment of great catastrophes, one is usually overwhelmed by a weary sense that this is all a bad dream and that eventually you'll wake up and everything will be okay. But unfortunately facts are stubborn and will not go away. One can live in denial for a while, but sooner or later the truth must be accepted.

Muslims are cocooned in lies. Because speaking against Islam is a crime punishable by death, no one dares to tell the truth. Those who do, do not live long. They are quickly silenced. So how would you know the truth if all you hear are lies? On one hand the Quran claims to be a miracle and challenges anyone to produce a Surah like it.

And if you are in doubt as to which We have revealed to Our servant, then produce a sura like it, and call on your helper, besides Allah, if you are truthful. (Q.2:23)

Then it instructs its followers to kill anyone who dares to criticize it or challenge it. If you ever dare to take up the challenge and produce a Surah as poorly written as the Quran you will be accused of mocking Islam for which the punishment is death. In this atmosphere of insincerity and deceit, truth is the casualty.

The pain of coming face to face with the truth and realizing all that we believed were lies is extremely agonizing. The only mechanism and natural way to deal with it is denial. Denial takes away the pain. It is a soothing bliss, even though it is hiding one's head in the sand.

One cannot stay in denial forever. Soon the night will fall and the cold shivering reality freezes your bones and you realize that you are out of the paradise of ignorance. That door is closed and the key has been thrown away. You know too much. You are an outcast. Fearfully you look at the dark and twining road barely visible in the twilight of your uncertainties and gingerly you take your first steps towards an unknown destiny. You grapple and fumble, reluctantly trying to stay focused. But fear overwhelms you and each time you try to run back to the garden you once again face the closed door.

The great majority of Muslims live in denial. They stay behind the closed door. They cannot go back nor do they dare to walk away from it. Those who are inside the garden are those who never left it. This door will only let you out. You cannot get in. That blissful garden is the garden of certitude. It is reserved for the faithful, for those who do not doubt, for those who do not think. They believe anything. They would

believe that night is day and day is night. They would believe that Muhammad climbed the seventh heaven, met with God, split the moon and conversed with jinns.

As Voltaire said, those who believe in absurdities commit atrocities. They also believe that killing infidels is good, bombing is holy, stoning is divine, beating wives is prescribed by God, and hating unbelievers is the will of God. These inhabitants of the paradise of ignorance constitute the majority. Those who doubt are still the minority.

These believers will never see the truth if they are permanently kept cocooned in lies. All they have heard so far is the lie that Islam is good and if only Muslims practiced true Islam, the world would become a paradise, that the problems of Islam are all the fault of Muslims. This is a lie. Most Muslims are good people. They are no worse and no better than others. It's Islam that makes them commit atrocities. Those Muslims who do bad things are those who follow Islam. Islam rears the criminal instinct in people. The more a person is Islamist, the more bloodthirsty, hate mongering, and zombie s/he becomes.

I wanted to deny what I was reading. I wanted to believe that the real meaning of the Quran is something else, but I could not. I could no longer fool myself saying these inhumane verses were taken out of the context. The Quran does not have a context. Verses are jammed together at random often lacking any coherence.

3. Confusion

Those who read my articles and are hurt by what I say about the Quran and Islam are lucky. They have me to blame. They can hate me, curse me, and direct all their anger at me. But when I read the Quran and learned about its content, I could not blame anyone. After going through the stages of shock and denial, I was confused and started to blame myself. I hated myself for thinking, for doubting and finding fault with what I regarded to be the words of God.

Like all other Muslims, I was exposed to and accepted all the many lies, absurdities, and inhumanities. I was brought up as a religious person. I believed in whatever I was told. These lies were given to me in small doses, gradually, since my childhood. I was never given an alternative to compare. It is like vaccination. I was immune to the truth. But when I started to read the Quran seriously from cover to cover and understood what this book is actually saying, I felt nauseated. All those lies suddenly appeared in front of me.

I had heard them all and had accepted them. My rational thinking was numbed. I had become insensitive to the absurdities of the Quran. When I found something that did not make sense, I brushed it off and said to myself that one has to look at the "big picture." That idyllic big picture, however, was nowhere to be found except in my own mind. I pictured a perfect Islam. So all those absurdities did not bother me because I paid no attention to them. When I read the whole Quran I discovered a distinctly different picture than the one in my mind. The new picture of Islam

emerging from the pages of the Quran was violent, intolerant, irrational, arrogant, a far cry from Islam as a religion of peace, equality, and tolerance.

In the face of this much absurdity, I had to deny it, to keep my sanity. But how long could I keep denying the truth when it was out like the sun right in front of me? I was reading the Quran in Arabic so I could not blame a bad translation. Later I read other translations. I realized many translations in English are not entirely reliable. The translators had tried very hard to hide the inhumanity and the violence in the Quran by twisting the words and adding their own words sometimes in parenthesis or brackets to soften its harsh tone. The Arabic Quran is more shocking than its English translations.

I was confused and I did not know where to turn. My faith had been shaken and my world had crumbled. I could no longer deny what I was reading. But I could not accept the possibility that this was all a huge lie. “How could it be,” I kept asking myself, “that so many people have not seen the truth and I could see it?” How could great seers like Jaleddin Rumi not see that Muhammad was an impostor and that the Quran is a hoax, and I see it? It was then that I entered the stage of guilt.

4. Guilt

The guilt lasted for many months. I hated myself for having these thoughts. I felt God was testing my faith. I felt ashamed. I spoke with learned people whom I trusted, people who were not only knowledgeable but whom I thought were wise. I heard very little that could quench the burning fire within me. One of these learned men told me not to read the Quran for a while. He told me to pray and read only books that would strengthen my faith. I did that, but it did not help. The thoughts about the absurd, sometimes ruthless, ridiculous verses of the Quran kept throbbing in my head. Each time I looked at my bookshelf and saw that book, I felt pain. I took it and hid it behind the other books. I thought if I do not think about it for a while my negative thoughts would go away and I would regain my faith once again. But they didn't go away. I denied as much as I could, until I could no longer. I was shocked, confused, felt guilty and it was painful.

This period of guilt lasted too long. One day I decided enough is enough. I told myself that it is not my fault. I am not going to carry this guilt forever thinking about things that make no sense to me. If God gave me a brain, it is because he wants me to use it. If what I perceive as right and wrong is skewed, then it is not my fault. He tells me killing is bad and I know it is bad because I do not want to be killed. Then why did his messenger kill so many innocent people and order his followers to kill those who do not believe? If rape is bad, and I know it is bad because I do not want it to happen to people I love, why did Allah's prophet rape the women he captured in war? If slavery is bad, and I know it is bad because I hate to lose my freedom and become a slave, why has the Prophet of God enslaved so many people and made himself rich by selling them? If imposition of religion is bad, and I know that it is bad because I do not like another person to force on me a religion that I don't want, then why did the Prophet eulogize Jihad and exhort his followers to kill unbelievers,

take their booty, and distribute their women and children as spoils of war? If God tells me something is good, and I know that it is good because it feels good to me, then why did his prophet do the opposite of that thing?

5. Disillusionment

When this guilt was lifted off my shoulders, dismay, disillusionment, or cynicism followed. I felt sorry for having wasted so many years of my life, and for all the Muslims who are still trapped in these foolish beliefs, for all those who lost their lives in the name of these false doctrines, for all the women in virtually all the Islamic countries who suffer all sorts of abuses and oppressions. They do not even know they are being abused.

I thought of all the wars waged in the name of religion, so many people died for nothing. Millions of believers left their homes and families to wage war in the name of God, never to return, thinking they are spreading faith in God. They massacred millions of innocent people. Civilizations were destroyed, libraries were burned, and so much knowledge was lost, for nothing. I recalled my father waking up in the early hours of the morning and in the icy water of the winter performing voodoo. I recalled his coming home hungry and thirsty during the month of fasting, and I thought of the billions of people who torture themselves in this way for nothing. The realization that all that I believed were lies and all that I did was a waste of my life, and the fact that a billion other people are still lost in this arid desert of ignorance chasing a mirage that to them appears to be water was disappointing.

Prior to that, God was always in the back of my mind. I used to talk to him in my imagination and those conversations seemed [real to] me. I thought God was watching and taking account of every good act that I did. The feeling that someone was watching over me, guiding my steps and protecting me was very comforting. It was difficult to accept that there is no such thing as Allah and even if there is a God, it is not Allah. I did not give up the belief in God, but by then I knew for sure that if this universe has a maker, it cannot be the deity that Muhammad had envisioned. Allah was ignorant to the core. The Quran is full of errors. No creator of this universe could be as stupid as the god of the Quran appeared to be. Allah could not have existed anywhere else except in the mind of a sick man. I understood that he was but a figment of Muhammad's imagination and nothing more. How disappointed I was when I realized all these years I had been praying to a fantasy.

6. Depression

This feeling of loss and disappointment was accompanied by a sense of sadness, or some kind of depression. It was as if my whole world had fallen apart. I felt like the ground I was standing on was no longer there and I was falling into a bottomless pit. Without exaggerating, it felt like I was in hell.

I was bewildered, pleading for help and no one could help. I felt ashamed of my thoughts and hating myself for having such thoughts. The guilt was accompanied by a profound sense of loss and depression. As a rule, I am a positive thinker. I see the

good side of everything. I always think tomorrow is going to be better than today. I am not the kind of person who is easily depressed. But this feeling of loss was overwhelming. I still recall that weight in my heart. I thought God has forsaken me and I did not know why. “Is that God’s punishment?” I kept asking myself. I do not remember hurting anyone ever. I went out of my way to help anyone whose life crossed mine and asked me for help. So, why did God want to punish me in this way? Why was He not answering my prayers? Why has He left me to myself and these thoughts I could find no answers to? Does he want to test me? Then where were the answers to my prayers? Would I pass this test if I became stupid and stopped using my brain? If so, why did he give me a brain? Would only dumb people pass the test of faith?

I felt betrayed and violated. I cannot say which feeling was predominant. At times I was disillusioned, sad, or dismayed. Even if faith is false, it is still sweet. It is very comforting to believe.

Juxtaposing my feelings of sadness and loss, I felt liberated. Curiously I no longer felt confused or guilty. I knew for sure the Quran was a hoax and Muhammad was an impostor.

To overcome this sadness I tried to keep myself busy with other activities. I even took dancing lessons and experienced what it means to be alive, to be free of guilt, to enjoy life and to just be normal. I realized how much I had missed out on and how foolishly I deprived myself of the simple pleasures of life. Of course denial is the way cults exert their control over their believers. I denied myself the simplest pleasures of life, was living in constant fear of God, and I thought this was normal. I am talking of pleasures like sleeping in the morning, dancing, dating, or sipping a glass of fine wine.

7. Anger

At this time, I entered another stage of my spiritual journey to enlightenment. I became angry. Angry for having believed those lies for so many years, for wasting so many years of my life chasing a wild goose. Angry at my culture for betraying me, for the wrong values it gave me, with my parents for teaching me a lie, with myself for not thinking before, for believing in lies, trusting an impostor, with God for letting me down, for not intervening and stopping the lies that were being disseminated in His name.

When I saw pictures of millions of Muslims who, with so much devotion, went to Saudi Arabia, many of them spending their life’s savings to perform hajj, I became angry with the lies these people were brought up with. When I read someone had converted to Islam, something Muslims love to advertise and make a big issue of, I became saddened and angry. I was sad for that poor soul and angry with the lies.

I was angry with the whole world that tries to protect this lie, defend it, and even abuse you if you raise your voice to try to tell them what you know. It is not just

Muslims, but even westerners who do not believe in Islam. It's okay to criticize anything but Islam. What amazed me and made me even angrier was the resistance I faced when I tried to tell others that Islam is not the truth.

Fortunately this anger did not last long. I knew that Muhammad was no messenger of God but a charlatan, a demagogue whose only intention was to beguile people and satisfy his own narcissistic ambitions. I knew all those childish stories of a hell with scorching fire and a heaven with rivers of wine, milk and honey, orgies, were the figments of a sick, wild, insecure and bullying mind of a man in desperate need to dominate and affirm his own authority.

I realized I could not be angry with my parents, for they did their best and taught me what they thought to be the best. I could not be angry with my society or culture because my people were just as misinformed as my parents and myself. After some thought, I realized everyone was a victim. There are one billion or more victims. Even those who have become victimizers are victims of Islam too. How could I blame Muslims if they do not know what Islam stands for and honestly, though erroneously, believe that it is a religion of peace?

Muhammad the narcissist

What about Muhammad? Should I be angry with him for lying, deceiving and misleading people? How could I be angry with a dead person? Muhammad was an emotionally sick man who was not in control of himself. He grew up as an orphan in the care of five different foster parents before he reached the age of eight. As soon as he became attached to someone, he was snatched away and given to someone else. This must have been hard on him and was detrimental to his emotional health. As a child, deprived of love and a sense of belonging, he grew with deep feelings of fear and lack of self-confidence. He became a narcissist. A narcissist is a person who has not received enough love in his childhood, who is incapable of loving, but instead craves attention, respect and recognition. He sees his own worth in the way others view him. Without that recognition he is nobody. He becomes manipulative and a pathetic liar.

Narcissists are grandiose dreamers. They want to conquer the world and dominate everyone. Only in their megalomaniac reveries is their narcissism satisfied.

Some famous [or notorious] narcissists are Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, Saddam Hussein, Idi Amin, Pol Pot and Mao. Narcissists are intelligent, yet emotional wrecks. They are deeply disturbed people. They set themselves extremely high goals. Their goals always have to do with domination, power, and respect. They are nobody if they are neglected. Narcissists often seek alibis to impose their control over their unwary victims. For Hitler it was the party and race, for Mussolini it was fascism or the unity of the nation against others, and for Muhammad it was religion. These causes are just tools in their quest for power.

Instead of promoting themselves, the narcissists promote a cause, an ideology, or a religion while presenting themselves as the only authority and the representative of these causes. Hitler did not call the Germans to love him as a person but to love and respect him because he was the Fuhrer. Muhammad could not ask anyone to obey him. But he could easily demand his followers to obey Allah and his messenger. Of course Allah was Muhammad's own alter ego, so all the obedience was for him in the final account. In this way he could wield control over everyone's life by telling them he is the representative of God and what he says is what God has ordained.

Dr. Sam Vaknin, the author of *Malignant Self Love – Narcissism Revisited* explains:

Everyone is a narcissist, to varying degrees. Narcissism is a healthy phenomenon. It helps survival. The difference between healthy and pathological narcissism is, indeed, in measure. Pathological narcissism and its extreme form, NPD (Narcissistic Pathological Disorder), are characterized by extreme lack of empathy. The narcissist regards and treats other people as objects to be exploited. He uses them to obtain narcissistic supply. He believes that he is entitled to special treatment because he harbors these grandiose fantasies about himself. The narcissist is NOT self-aware. His cognition and emotions are distorted.

The above perfectly describes Muhammad. Muhammad was a ruthless man with no feelings. When he decided the Jews were of no use to him, he stopped kowtowing to them and eliminated them all. He massacred all the men of Bani Qurayza and banished or murdered every other Jew and Christian from Arabia. Surely if God wanted to destroy these people he would not have needed the help of his messenger.

So I found there was no reason to be angry with an emotionally sick man who died a long time ago. Muhammad was a victim himself of the stupid culture of his people, of the ignorance of his mother who, instead of keeping him during the first years of his life when he needed her love most, entrusted him to a Bedouin woman to raise him so she could find a new husband.

Muhammad was a man with profound emotional scars. Dr. Vaknin writes that a narcissist “lies to himself and to others, projecting ‘untouchability,’ emotional immunity, and invincibility.” For a narcissist “everything is bigger than life. If he is polite, then he is aggressively so. His promises outlandish, his criticisms violent and ominous, his generosity inane.” Isn't this the image the Prophet projected of himself?

I could not criticize or blame the ignorant Arabs of the 7th Century for not being able to discern that Muhammad was sick and not a prophet, that his outlandish promises, his impressive dreams of conquering and subduing the great nations when he was just a pauper, were caused by his pathological emotional complications and were not due to a divine power. How could I blame those ignorant Arabs for falling prey to a man like Muhammad when only in the last century, millions of Germans fell prey to the charisma of another narcissist who just as Muhammad, made big promises, was as ruthless, as manipulative, and as ambitious as he was?

After serious thought, I realized there is not a single person I could be angry with. I realized we are all victims and victimizers at the same time. The culprit is ignorance. Because of our ignorance we believe in charlatans and their lies, allowing them to disseminate hate among us in the name of false deities, ideologies, or religions. This hate separates us from each other, and prevents us from seeing our oneness and understanding that we are all members of the human race, related to each other and interdependent.

It was then that my anger gave way to a profound feeling of empathy, compassion, and love. I made a promise to myself to fight this ignorance that divides the human race. We paid, and are paying, dearly for our disunity. This disunity is caused by ignorance and the ignorance is the result of false beliefs and pernicious ideologies that are concocted by emotionally unhealthy individuals for self-serving purposes.

Ideologies separate us. Religions cause disunity, hate, fighting, killing, and antagonism. As members of the human race, we need no ideology, cause, or religion to be united.

I realized that the purpose of life is not to believe but to doubt. I realized that no one can teach us the truth because truth cannot be taught. It can only be experienced. In reality, no religion, philosophy or doctrine can teach you the truth. Truth is in the love we have for our fellow human beings, in the laughter of a child, in friendship, in companionship, in the love of a parent and a child, and in our relationships with others. Truth is not in ideologies. The only thing that is real, is love.

Synthesis

The process of going from faith to enlightenment is an arduous and painful process. Let us borrow a term from Sufism and call that the seven “valleys” of enlightenment.

Faith is the state of being confirmed in ignorance. You will continue to stay in that state of blissful ignorance until you are shocked and forced out of it. This shock is the first valley.

The natural first reaction to shock is denial. Denial acts like a shield. It buffers the pain and protects you from the agony of going out of your comfort zone. The comfort zone is where we feel at ease, where we find everything familiar, where we don't face new challenges or the unknown. This is the second valley.

Growth doesn't take place in comfort zones. In order to go forward and evolve we need to get out of our comfort zones. We won't do that unless we are shocked. It is also natural to buffer the pain of shock by denial. At this moment we need another shock, and we may decide to shield ourselves again with another denial. The more a person is exposed to facts and the more he is shocked, the more he tries to protect himself with more denials. But denials do not eliminate the facts. They just shield us momentarily. When we are exposed to facts, at a certain point we will be unable to

continue denying. Suddenly we won't be able to keep our defenses up and the wall of denials will come down. We can't keep hiding our heads in the sand perpetually. Once doubt sets in, it will have a domino effect and we find ourselves hit from all directions by facts that up until now we avoided and denied. Suddenly all those absurdities that we accepted and even defended, are no longer logical and we reject them.

We are then driven into the painful stage of confusion and that is the third valley. The old beliefs seem unreasonable, foolish and unacceptable, yet we have nothing to cling to. This valley, I believe, is the most dreadful stage in the passage from faith to enlightenment. In this valley we lose our faith without having found the enlightenment. We are basically standing in nowhere. We experience a free fall. We ask for help but all we get is a rehashing of some nonsense clichés. It seems that those who try to help us are lost themselves, yet they are so convinced. They believe in what they don't know. The arguments they present are not logical at all. They expect us to believe without questioning. They bring the example of the faith of others. But the intensity of the faith of other people does not prove the truth of what they believe in.

This confusion eventually gives way to the fourth valley, guilt. You feel guilty for thinking. You feel guilty for doubting, for questioning, for not understanding. You feel naked, and ashamed of your thoughts. You think it is your fault if the absurdities mentioned in your holy books make no sense to you. You think that God has abandoned you or that he is testing your faith. In this valley you are torn apart by your emotions and your intellect. Emotions are not rational, but they are extremely powerful. You want to go back to the paradise of ignorance, you desperately want to believe but you simply can't. You have committed the sin of thinking. You have eaten the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge. You have angered the god of your imaginations.

Finally you decide there is no need to feel guilty for the understanding. That guilt does not belong to you. You feel liberated but at the same time dismayed for all those lies that kept you in ignorance and the time wasted. This is the valley of disillusionment. At the same time you are overtaken by sadness. You feel liberated; yet like coming out of prison after spending a lifetime there, you are overtaken by deep sense of depression. You feel lonely and despite your freedom, you miss something. You ponder the time lost. You think of the many people who believe(d) in this nonsense and foolishly sacrifice(d) everything for it, including their lives. The pages of history are written with the blood of people who were killed in the name of Yahweh, Allah, or other gods. All for nothing! All for a lie!

Thereupon you enter the sixth valley, of anger. You become angry at yourself, and at everything else. You realize how much of your precious life you lost believing in so many lies.

But then you realize you are the lucky one for having made it this far and that there are billions of others who are still trying to shield themselves with denials and not venture out of their comfort zone. They are still wading in the quagmire of the first valley. At this stage, when you are completely free from faith, guilt and anger, you are ready to understand the ultimate truth and unravel the mysteries of life. You are filled with empathy and compassion. You are ready to be enlightened. The enlightenment comes when you realize that the truth is in love and in our relationship with our fellow human beings and not in a religion or a cult. You realize that Truth is a pathless land. No prophet or guru can take you there. You are there already.

In this odyssey you are not alone. You have a nagging companion who will not leave you. He will try to hinder your advancement and stop you from going forwards. He is your fear: the fear of punishment, of hell, of after death. It is completely irrational, yet it controls you and acts on your subconscious mind every step of the way. The passage from faith to enlightenment is arduous, and you will not be able to take the first step if you cannot get rid of your fears. You will only get rid of them completely when you arrive at your destiny and you are enlightened. Then you break the chain of fear and acquire wings of enlightenment. This is the true liberation.

Should you choose to make a similar change, Dear, your transition from Mormonism to Humanism almost certainly won't be so traumatic as was Dr. Sina's, since in Western as opposed to Muslim cultures, Humanism is fairly well established; therefore, you'd find support to be quite readily available. Yet, as far as you're concerned, the trauma will undoubtedly feel even more real than his! Therefore, if you do choose to start out on a similar journey, I would recommend that you make sure you work at maintaining your health, e.g., get enough sleep, eat healthful foods, and get plenty of exercise. In fact, while I'm on the subject of exercise...